



# MEMORIES OF ILLNESS, HUNGER AND DEATH: AN ACCOUNT OF OLOKORO WOMEN AND POST-CIVIL WAR NATION BUILDING IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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## Abstract

From the lens of gender studies, this study examines memories of illness, hunger and death: an account of Olokoro women's life stories, personal experiences and healing in the post Biafran war. The central argument of the study is that the physical and psychological injuries inflicted on women during the war still lingers on, and that the inability of the Nigerian state to attend sincerely to these injuries have decapitated the ability of women agency to contribute meaningfully to nation building and national integration of the Nigerian state. The study further investigate the sufferings of the women, impact on their societal relevance and as well the integration of the Nigerian state. The study adopted primary and secondary materials. The primary sources includes 20 key informant interviews with women with lived experiences of the war and who have been decapitated by the war; as well as community leaders, youths and women civil society groups. The study was qualitatively analysed. Findings reveal that many of such women, the civil war period is a dark abyss concealing memories and events they would rather not remember, haunted as they are by events of horrific proportions; and that despite of the carnages and horrible moments brought by the war, the government strategies for reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction have not yielded the expected results. The study concludes that government and civil society groups must partner to ensure that the widows of those slain as well as those women disabled as a result of the war should be given adequate attention in order to enhance peace building and national integration.

**Keywords:** Civil war, Nigeria, Biafran, Igbo, Olokoro, women.

## A Brief Bio.

Ezeogueri- Oyewole, Anne Nnenna is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History and International Studies, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Kogi State. She teaches courses in both History and International Studies. She specializes in International Studies, Gender Studies, Social and Political History. She has some International and National publications to her credit.

**Introduction:** The Nigerian civil war, known all over the world as the “Biafran War”, was fought from 6<sup>th</sup> July 1967 to 15<sup>th</sup> January 1970. The war was between the then Eastern Region of Nigeria and the rest of the country. The war largely resulted from bad leadership, which was compounded by the January 15, 1966 coup led by young junior officers under Major Nzeogwu, a Niger Delta Igbo. The immediate cause of the war itself may be identified as the Coup and 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 of 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 1967<sup>1</sup>.

The former Eastern Region under Lt. Col. Chukwuemeka Odumuegwu Ojukwu saw the creation of states by decrees “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 unify 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 man.<sup>2</sup> The Nigerian civil war was one of the most tragic events in Nigerian history as it brought in its wake a wide range of untoward experiences and consequences to virtually all segments of society, especially in Igboland, the central theatre of the war. Igbo women in particular went through horrific experiences during and after that conflict. What those women faced and how they coped with the challenges have not been adequately captured in existing literature on that national tragedy. The women of Olokoro provide a fitting example of the experiences of the war. This is because Olokoro and Umuahia axis constituted one of the major theatres (zones) of the war from 1968, when the Biafran administrative headquarters was relocated from Enugu to Umuahia. This paper therefore observes that women are important component of any society or home, and the understanding of their plight and traumatic experiences during wars may help to stem incidences of war or conflict that destabilize human society.

Myriads of literature exist on the Nigerian civil war. However, the literature has focused mostly on the horrors, traumas and the battles fought and lost all these basically from men’s point of view. The women’s horrendous experiences, together with that of their children, the mostly affected by the war are left out. The war produced heroes and myths: Odumegwu Ojukwu, who led the Biafran revolt, Olusegun Obasanjo, who accepted Biafran surrender,

Benjamin Adekunle and Theophilus Danjuma's roles, among many others, but never a woman in the picture. As a result, sufficient attention has not been given to the experiences of Igbo women during the war. This neglect is not peculiar to the Nigerian situation. Sayre Sheldon has blamed the general marginalization of women in war accounts to the male definition of war as the state of "being in war" or more precisely about "being in combat". Since women are more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of war, they are rarely the focus of attention in war literature.<sup>3</sup>This is very much true of the Nigerian situation.

Most existing materials and studies on Nigerian civil war have centered largely on the involvement and roles of the soldiers at the war front and pay little attention to the implications it had on the women who were the most vulnerable in the catastrophe. The truth, though, is that the causes, acts and the end-results of the Nigerian civil war affected the women in more telling and critical ways than have been captured in current literature. For a full and balanced account of the war to be achieved, there is absolute need to study the women aspect of it from both the macro and the micro perspectives. In this context, therefore, this paper interrogates the women's personal accounts and horrifying experiences which have not fully been captured by researchers and students of Nigeria Civil War. The study attempts to write a history of the civil war from the perspective of the women who were at the centre of it, principally as targets of aggression and dehumanization. It investigates the experiences which Igbo women passed through during and after the war and how they attempted to grapple with the challenges of the war and its aftermath.

### **Olokoro, the People, Culture and Economy**

Olokoro clan, one of the five clans that comprise the present day Umuahia, is situated in an undulating land south of Umuahia urban centre. It is bounded in the north by Ibeku clan, in the east by Oboro clan, in the south by northern Ngwa and in the west by Ubakala clan. Olokoro clan is short of land for large scale modern commercial agriculture. It however has enough land for subsistence agriculture which sustained traditional Olokoro people. Like most other Igbo political units, traditional Olokoro lacks a centralized leadership system in which authority is vested in an individual with binding decisions over the people. Leadership was diffused and authority exercised collectively by elders, leaders of cultural associations, and the priests of the various deities. Each compound had an elder representing its interest in the wider community. Selection was based on gerontocracy and hereditary considerations. The priest of a deity was selected by the relevant oracle and might even be a child at the time of his selection. Cultural societies selected their leaders according to age, heredity or proven individual abilities<sup>4</sup>

Various compounds made up the hamlet (ama) and the hamlets made up the village. The elders of these various compounds represented them in the hamlets and subsequently, those of the hamlets were influential representatives of the entire village and they constituted the ruling council. The most senior or oldest among the elders of the village became the leader of the elders' council, and coordinated their activities. These elders were believed to be backed by the ancestors of the community and guided in their decisions. Consequently, their decisions were sacrosanct and could not be violated.<sup>5</sup>

Notable among the cultural societies or associations were Okonko, Ekpe and Mboko, which were led by powerful elders. Full initiation into Mboko was open only to elderly men while Okonko and Ekpe could fully initiate younger men of proven character. These cultural societies played and still play law-enforcement roles in the community. Members of these associations prefer death to revealing the secrets of their association.<sup>6</sup> From the foregoing, it is clear that in Olokoru, as in other Igbo communities, the political system was dominated by men. Authority was in the hands of the chief (Eze) and council of elders and titled men (Ndichie). Olokoru women remained basically subservient in the traditional political power arrangement. This is not to suggest that they were totally of no consequence in the entire political arrangement. They did exercise political authority collectively as *Umuada* and *Nwunyedi*.

Agriculture was and still is a central aspect of Igbo economy. There was no household that did not engage in it at least on part-time basis. It was in fact the most prestigious occupation and farmers who were successful in it received appropriate honorific title for their achievement.<sup>7</sup> Crop cultivation was the most important aspect of Igbo agriculture. The leading crops in the Igboland were grouped along gender lines. For instance, yam was regarded as a man's crop while cassava and cocoyam and maize were regarded as woman's crops. According to D. G. Coursey, the Igbo were the most devoted and enthusiastic yam cultivators in the world.<sup>8</sup> But this division was not water-tight. However, women played supportive yet very critical roles in transporting yam seedlings to the farm, and produce from the farm, as well as in its sale in the market. Traditionally, women in Olokoru engaged in a variety of occupations, including trading and farming. These engagements were seen as assistance to their husbands as they help to carry farm products home, process them and sell some of them to earn money. They were engaged in the commercialization of palm produce during the era of legitimate trade which induced men to take interest in its production. Thenceforth, palm oil came to be regarded primarily as a man's product and kernels remained the special preserve of women. It was the responsibility of the wife to collect and process the fruits for commercial, household or family use though extraction of oil was a laborious process. Eastern Nigeria, which had abundance of oil palms, was accounting for over one-third of West Africa's palm oil export, and over one-sixth of its palm kernel exports by the beginning of colonial rule.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the Western concept of a 'house wife' devoted fully to home-care, was unknown in Olokoru, as in other parts of traditional Igbo society.

The oil palm was a very valuable household resource because every part of it served an important economic function. Women fed the goats with the fronds, made brooms, ropes and baskets from the fibre. The trunks were used as plank, could be cut up as fire-wood.<sup>10</sup> and a breeding medium for such edible fungi as the mushroom. Its leaf-ribs were used in building. The oil made from the tree served as a source of vitamins in indigenous diets<sup>11</sup>. Among the Igbo, tender palm fronds (*Omu*) are used as a signal of danger; for attracting or binding some ontological forces and for masquerade displays. Palm kernel oil (*elu aku*) was used for treating boils and other ailments<sup>12</sup>. Though the revenue made from the sale of palm produce was put for family use, proceeds from the sale of the kernel were exclusively owned by women. The shells of the fruit were used for fuel and the fibre extracted during oil processing

was used to make medicinal soap. Palm-wine and manure are also derived from the oil palm. The versatile use to which oil palm was put is a clear evidence of the Igbo woman's economic enterprise and ingenuity<sup>13</sup>.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Sufferings, Adjustments and Adaptation of Olokoro Women during the War

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. Women are vital members of any society, Olokoro inclusive. Their roles in their various families and communities cannot be over emphasized. They see to the daily, general wellbeing of every member of their families both young and old. They are mothers, care givers, home makers among others. The events which precipitated the Nigerian-Biafra War have been exhaustively dealt with in existing literature<sup>14</sup>. Biafra was a nation with great potential 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. During the Nigerian Civil war, these women carried out these functions and even more. Their 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.<sup>15</sup> Most of them became *de facto* household heads and income-earners as their husbands and sons fought in the war. They made sure that their children, elderly relations and other members of their households were protected and well catered for. They also contributed to the upkeep of the Biafran soldiers, maintenance of the refugees that took refuge in Olokoro, worked as volunteers with the Red Cross and Caritas, farmers and were also involved in dangerous war time trade.

As the war progressed, hunger increased because the men were either fighting the war or in hiding. 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. The economic blockade adopted by the Nigerian government also contributed to the food shortage in Biafra. This policy was aimed at forcing Biafra to abandon secession. There had been a near-total sea and air blockade of the Republic of Biafra which was done with the aid of foreign governments<sup>16</sup>. This brought about tremendous hardship, starvation, malnutrition and illnesses like kwashiorkor, malaria and tuberculosis were rife. Pregnant women, growing children, nursing mothers and the aged were mostly affected. A great number of them died in large numbers before the relief organizations began to help with their supplies<sup>17</sup>. Jacob 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 five.<sup>18</sup> Ezeani puts the number of deaths in the war at 3.5 million.<sup>19</sup> Many women in Olokoro lost their children to these illnesses. In the midst of the dangers of war, the women ventured into farming and some of them were involved in "ahia attack" for survival. Olokoro women also levied themselves at village levels some quantities of food items like garri, egusi and palm oil. This was done in order to meet the food needs of the Biafran soldiers. This was done twice a month.<sup>20</sup> The items collected were taken to the Biafran military camps and trenches in Umuahia town by the women who were members of the Food Committee of the War Council. Besides donating the food items and cooking for the soldiers,

Olokoro women also prepared 'dry packs' of *eberebe jigbo*, a kind of snacks usually eaten with coconut or palm kernel.<sup>21</sup>

Olokoro community witnessed an influx of refugees in their hundreds from their neighbours like Ibeku, Oboro, Ubakala, Ogoni and Ngwa. These refugees left their homes in a hurry and arrived with virtually nothing. They found accommodation in public places like schools, churches, camps and peoples' homes. The refugees' situation was so pathetic that they were seen moving around the villages begging for food. They wore torn and tattered clothes, looking haggard, pale, anaemic 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 them who lived in private homes enjoyed the hospitality of their hosts and hostesses.<sup>22</sup>

Some of the Olokoro women enlisted as volunteers with the Red Cross, Caritas and the World Council of Churches. These were international relief organizations that supplied essentially needed foods like salted stock fish, salt, corned beef, powdered milk, egg yolk and corn meal.<sup>23</sup> The volunteers were trained to cater for the sick and numerous starving war refugees. 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 hospitals established during the war, located in several refugee camps in Olokoro. Here, they played vital roles in complimenting the efforts of other trained personnel (ie doctors and other health workers) in caring for the young, the old and other afflicted persons. There were about six sick bays that existed in Olokoro during the war.<sup>24</sup> The efforts of the women 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 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 materials brought in by Red Cross volunteers. As volunteers they were not paid salaries, but often they got food items from the Red Cross stocks.<sup>25</sup>

Prior to the Nigerian civil war, it was unusual for a married woman in Olokoro to take major decisions in the family. The husband remained the head of the family while the wife acted as a help mate whose opinion was not sought before certain decisions were taken by the husband. She remained obedient to the husband always. The husband was the breadwinner of the family. It was his duty to provide food, shelter, clothing, protection and other things the wife and children needed. He decided on any case that arose in his family and his judgment was final. He decided on whom the children married, especially the daughters even against their wish. He played a leading role and set good examples for his children especially the sons to emulate. The more efficient a man was able to play these roles, the greater was his respect in his family and in his community<sup>26</sup>. Thus, the people saw the fulfillment of these roles as what made real men. With the outbreak of the war came a change of traditional roles. As their husbands were conscripted into or voluntarily joined the Biafran army, the women were left to take major decisions and assume

“male responsibilities in their families. Some eventually became both mothers and heads of their families and took decisions in their homes. Major decisions like giving out their daughters in marriages were taken by them and any available male members of their family. Marriages could and did take place with or without the consent of bride’s father.”<sup>27</sup>

For example if the father of the bride was at the war front or dead, any of the male relatives together with her mother could and did give her out in marriage. Some of these women who eventually lost their husbands and sons in the war took up the responsibility of fending for their families. These women were able to do these by engaging in trade, especially the *ahia* attack which was the most risky but profitable economic venture at the time. Others sold their wares or engaged in trade by barter. Yet, others were involved in prostitution, begging for alms, farming and ‘bush combing’. ‘Bush combing’ was a process where the women looked for any edible food in the form of wild edible leaves, mushrooms, tortoises, snails, vegetables, bush meat like rodents which became important food items in Olokoro or whatever they could find in the bush. New food items like *koroto koroto* (a specie of yam), wallgecko and lizards were introduced into Olokoro’s food menu by the refugees during the war. These food items were eaten and used as coping strategies by Olokoro people during the war.”<sup>28</sup>

Olokoro women did not fold their hands and watch their children and other relatives’ die of hunger while their husbands were away either in battle fields, in hiding or dead. To ensure that their dependents did not die of hunger, they engaged in trading. There were two types of trade: the internal trade within Biafra and trade in Nigerian-held Biafran territory or with Nigeria proper, referred to as *ahia attack* (attack trade)<sup>29</sup> conducted across the frontlines. The internal trade was carried on within Olokoro markets or its environs like Ahia-ukwu, Afor-Ibeji, Ahia-ama, Ndioru, Ariam Usaka, Umuodochie, Oriemgbala, Ntigha, Amaoji, Nnenu, Nkwo Egbe, Isiogu and Ahia Mkpuke among others. The main articles of trade were staples like garri, yam, fermented cassava as well as palm oil. The traders had to depend on head portorage to move their goods from one place to the other with the shortage of transport vehicles, most of which had been mobilized for military or other essential services. So daring and strong were some of the women that they literally circumnavigated Biafran territory, avoiding military zones, in order to obtain supplies. In their bid to survive the hard times, the women exposed themselves to several dangers such as being killed by bombs.

“Ahia attack” referred to trade in the active military engagement. It was a trade where traders and goods crossed frontlines. Due to the circumstances surrounding it, bulky foodstuffs like rice and beans could not have featured significantly. Women formed the large majority of the trade.<sup>30</sup> It was so significant to the survival of the Biafran people that the government officials either directly encouraged it. The traders were given special passes for easy identification and monitoring by P.C. Amadi, Commander of 11 Division, Biafran Army. The economy of “ahia attack” was based on Nigerian coins which was unaffected with her currency change in 1967. Nigerian coins continued to circulate unofficially in Biafra throughout the war. Exchange of Nigerian coins for Biafran notes became a booming business in Biafra for most of the war because they commanded higher exchange value than the Biafran

notes. Biafra had not been recognized as an independent Republic then by Nigeria and most other countries. At the peak of the business in 1969, one shilling coin fetched as much as two Biafran pounds, representing a ratio of 40:1. Lower denominations (ie. One, three and six pence coins) attracted less favourable exchange rates because they were bulky and difficult to carry. The coins were the major medium of exchange in the attack trade.<sup>31</sup> The traders sometimes took with them to Nigeria valuable personal effects such as gold trinkets, expensive lace materials, wrappers, dresses bought in Biafra. Traders bartered their wares.<sup>32</sup> Again, almost all the salt consumed in Biafra between its scarcity and 1968 when relief materials became generally available came through “ahia attack”. People even complained that the grains of salt supplied by relief agencies were too big and so did not dissolve quickly, especially if added after food had been cooked- a ploy generally employed by Biafran women to conserve salt. Other items in high demand such as tobacco, cigarettes, bathing soap and matches were also smuggled into Biafra and sold at exorbitant prices by the traders. Thus, the women made huge profits from them.<sup>33</sup>

It should be noted here that “ahia attack” was full of hazards for the traders and carried very high moral risks too as most of them were often indecently assaulted by soldiers. There was an ever-present threat to their lives. Border crossing happened in active military zones where safety was never guaranteed. The fact that they usually carried large sums of Nigerian money and ‘contraband’ served as an excuse for tampering with their money and wares. This normally led to executions either by burying the trader alive or shooting her.<sup>34</sup> There was the issue of sexual violence on women by soldiers on both Biafran and Nigerian sides. These and other hardships were what these women faced during and immediately after the war.

### **Case studies: Life Stories and Personal Accounts:**

The plight of the Igbo men and women during the civil war time and in the immediate post-civil war years was difficult. This was particularly so with regards to Igbo women who shouldered the excruciating pains of war such as horrific and dehumanizing ordeals in the hands of ‘enemy soldiers’, saboteurs and hunger related diseases. Without any regard for the rights of women in Igbo communities, they became objects of exploitation and personal gratification. Chinua Achebe observed: the civil war gave Nigeria a perfect excuse to cast the Igbo in the role of treasonable felony, a wrecker of a nation with women bearing the greater incidence<sup>35</sup>. The stories of these women have remained largely untold, notwithstanding volumes of books written of men’s exploits as well as their humiliations during the Biafran war. But, as usual, women remain an unsung and ‘insignificant’ aspect of the Nigeria/Biafra war experience. This need to redress the imbalance justifies this effort to tell the women’s stories from their point of view.

Yet, women played equally heroic roles and went through severe traumatic experience than their neglect in the civil war literature may seem to suggest. The story of the Igbo experience during that war cannot be complete without adequate representation of the difficult challenges the women faced during and after the war. Olokoro women serve as the central focus of the investigation because Olokoro and Umuahia axis constituted one of the major theatres



of the war from 1968, when the Biafran administrative headquarters was relocated from Enugu to Umuahia, to the end of hostilities.

As earlier observed, human memories are shaped by positive and negative events; sadness and joy, pains and relief. However, while humans most often do forget or may not be able to recount comprehensively joyful moments, the same may not be true of sad and painful moments, particularly extreme sadness or difficult moments. Such it is for many Igbo women to whom the Nigerian civil war brings memories of pains and agonies, deprivation and losses, which cannot be healed by time or space. For many of such women, the civil war period is a dark abyss concealing memories and events they would rather not remember, haunted as they are by events of horrific proportions. However, to conceal the past is to try to forget how Nigeria arrived at those horrible moments of her history. As a popular line has it: “If you know your history, then you will know where you are coming from.”<sup>36</sup> Invariably, if one does not know his/her history, then one may not know where he/she is coming from and he/she may not know where he/she may go. To tell the story of the painful moments, agonizing as this may be, may help to keep the nation in remembrance of a path where she got it wrong and everything went wrong.

It is germane at this point to further substantiate the discussion with specific case studies in order to draw this lesson home. Some women’s situations have been used here for this purpose. These are Sarah Ogueri (now late) whose experiences during and after the war was of great interest to this study. Another is Mrs. Rose Nzadibe, who was widowed by the war. Her story typifies the industrious and doggedness of Olokoru women specifically as indeed Igbo women in general. The third woman is Caroline Duru, an illiterate who lost her husband to the civil war and was left to train eight children all by herself. Retired Chief Nursing Officer Selinah Ezeogueri is another woman whose war experiences need to be mentioned. Madam Comfort Etizu, Mrs. Cecilia Ekwereonu and Mrs. Comfort Onyegbule’s war experiences are also narrated here.

**Sarah Ogueri:** This is the text of Mr Okezie Ogueri<sup>37</sup>, the next of kin to late Mrs. Sarah Ogueri.

Late Mrs. Sarah Ogueri hailed from Itaja Obohia in Olokoru Umuahia. She was the third child of a family of six and was humble and obedient to both her parents and elders. She was married to my uncle, late Mr. Owoh Ogueri. She was a hardworking, humble, obedient and industrious woman. She gave birth to five children for my uncle - three sons and two daughters. The family was a happy one indeed because she was not quarrelsome and the children were not ill-mannered but respectful to both their parents and other elders. They were Christians and she had a cordial relationship and good neighbourliness with other women before the war. She joined the women in carrying out any work that they were engaged in. These include sweeping and weeding the village square and their surroundings, contributing items like *garri*, ‘*ukpo*’ and melon during traditional marriage ceremonies of their daughters and burial ceremonies. She also joined the women in cooking food on such occasions too. The first son was the first “Standard four” graduate with Division 1 pass in *Umuoparaukwu, Umuajata Olokoru*. He was an intelligent and promising young man with a lot of vision for his future.

Then came the civil war which turned everything upside down for my uncle’s family. Like every other

Olokoro family, they tried to survive the harsh war circumstance. Two of her sons were conscripted into the Biafran army and both of them died in the war. The husband also died during the war. The remaining son, Chukwuma, fell very ill immediately after the war and died as well and she was left with her two daughters. The trauma that Da Sarah went through cannot be quantified. She realized that her pride had been ruined and that she had become then the topic of gossip among her fellow women in the village. This stemmed from the fact that in Igbo land high value is placed more on the male child than on the female child. Any married woman that does not bear any male child is seen as having a shaky marriage because this is the major reason why Igbo men become polygamous. Thus, the loss of her three cherished male children and her husband devastated Da Sarah tremendously. Her situation was a pathetic one because she could not bear more children with the demise of the husband.

She was not a happy woman any more. In fact, at the slightest provocation, she quarreled with any and everybody, mistaking them for the source of her predicament in life. She became spiteful and aggressive, suspecting her brothers-in-law as though they were trying to inherit the husband's property. She cut off every association and interaction with her fellow women, and concentrated her attention on religious activities in her church assembly. Her daughters –both married- helped her out in trying to overcome her grief through constant visits and letting her grandchildren to live with her. Though she took solace in her church assembly, eventually, out of frustration and heartbreak she died. The two daughters are now grandmothers.

Thus, there was no surviving male child to inherit my uncle. The family mud house has since collapsed and is now a farmland. I, being her husband's next of kin, inherited my uncle's landed property after her death. This is in line with Olokoro cultural practices whereby the next of kin (male) inherits the property of any uncle without a surviving male child. When a household is obliterated, another person (male) inherits the land for his purpose.

Mr Okezie Ogueri is from Umuajata Olokoro. His parents are Mr. and Mrs. Inworonye Ogueri. Mr. Inworonye Ogueri was Mr. Owoh Ogueri's (late Mrs. Sarah Ogueri's husband) brother. It was Mr. and Mrs. Inworonye Ogueri that helped to establish a branch of the Assemblies of God Church in Umuajata Olokoro in 1973. They were humble, very fervent Christians and brought up their children in the way of the Lord. Not surprisingly, their children have not derailed from their faith in God till today. They had six children, five females and one male. Mr. Okezie Ogueri happens to be the only male child of his parents and the next of kin to late Mrs. Sarah Ogueri's husband.

### **Rose Nzadibe<sup>38</sup> (Widow)**

I am Mrs. Rose. Nzadibe a native of Umuigba Umuajata Olokoro. My parents were late Mr. and Mrs. Enock Igbojionu. I am the second child in a family of eight. My parents brought us up well to respect our elders. I was married to Mr Nzadibe before the civil war. We had five children and we were a very happy family. Ours was a peaceful family, though I cannot say that we were a wealthy family. We managed what we could afford for the upkeep of our family. My husband loved me because I was very beautiful and jovial. He used to say that I made him happy with my jokes. We were living in Olokoro when the war started. My relationship with my neighbours before the war was very cordial. I was not the quarrelsome type of woman; so I got on well with the other women. I joined my fellow

women to accomplish any community assignment together. It was one Sunday morning that we heard a bomb blast around Ahiaukwu Olokoro. We were told later that the civil war had started. The Biafran soldiers came to Olokoro to recruit able-bodied men into the Biafran army. The elders and chiefs were told to bring out able bodied adult males who were to be trained as soldiers.

My husband was among those conscripted into the Biafran army. The recruits trained with sticks as guns and calabashes as shields for some weeks at Atta Amizi Primary School compound. After the training, they were taken to their stations at night. I cried very much on the eve of their departure with other women whose husbands were also recruited into the army. We were apprehensive that that could be our last time of seeing each other again. While our husbands were at war fronts, we were drawing allotment from the designated centers because of them. In spite of this, it was not easy taking care of the children alone. Like many other people, we ate lizards, rats and other food items we never contemplated eating before the war. Refugees poured into Olokoro from Oboro, Ogoni, Ibeku, Ohuhu, Ngwa, and many other places. At the end of the war, I discovered that my husband did not return home. Gradually, it dawned on me that he had perished in battle. This changed my life completely into a nightmare.

The burden of caring for my family fell solely on my shoulders. As a housewife without western education, I was confused as to where and how to start a new life. One of my brothers, De Ekpuru, was then a butcher. I approached him to teach me the trade and he gladly did. I went through the training and became a butcher, a field hitherto dominated by men. It was not easy competing with men in a profession seen as their preserve. During my apprenticeship, some men watched me with surprise others asked my brother what I was doing in such a profession. Some tried to discourage me, saying that I should go and train as a tailor or other professions meant for women. I would have been discouraged but thanks to my brother and a few other butchers who assured me that the job was not all that difficult.

After my apprenticeship, I started with two shillings that I borrowed from my brother. At first, the customers were surprised to see me selling meat. At times some took me to be one of the buyers. But as time went by, I got customers that were intrigued at buying meat from a female butcher. Like any other business, it had its ups and downs. For instance, at the end of the war, many people did not have money to purchase food let alone meat. As things got better, the business boomed. I did very well in it because it was through this trade that I trained my five children. In fact, one of my sons is a lecturer at the Federal University of Agriculture, Umudike.

Honestly, words cannot describe what I and my children went through after the death of my husband. The civil war had rendered me a widow. Had the terrible war not been fought, I would probably still have had my husband with me. This is an example of a woman who went above all odds to train her children and today has a University lecturer as a son.

The above narrative shows the industrious and courageous nature of Olokoro women. Mrs. Nzadibe had to fend for her family after the demise of her husband during and after the war. This is one of the astounding successes of the women in coping with the challenges of the war.

Speaking further Lady Emily Ogbonna<sup>39</sup>, Chairlady, Amizi Women's Association said that in order to survive the

war, some of these women adopted different strategies ranging from giving out their daughters into marriage to Nigerian soldiers, stealing, prostitution and petty trading. All these engagements were means for survival. Some of those that married soldiers for survival paid dearly for their efforts. For example, some women who came back after getting married to Nigerian soldiers were divorced by their husbands after the war. There were some women who re-married after they were divorced by their husbands. They were regarded as *Nwaeke*- those that followed the Nigerian soldiers because of money. In fact, such women were so much ashamed of themselves that they were not allowed to contribute to any meaningful or serious discussions among their fellow women in the community.

### **Caroline Duru<sup>40</sup> (Widow)**

My husband was among those conscripted into the Biafran army at the early stages of the war. Before the war, we have had eight children (two girls and six boys). Our first son, Christian, was in form four, while our second son was in form two. My husband died early in the war, but the body was never recovered. It was painful not being able to give him a decent burial. While alive, my husband was the bread winner to both his immediate and extended families, who depended heavily on him for most things.

I could not cope with maintaining eight children; so Christian had to leave school, moved to Kaduna with Victor, Emma and Alex, his younger brothers. They survived from the little money Christian and Victor made from loading bricks on building sites, selling kerosene and doing other menial jobs. Life was difficult for them initially, but God was faithful. Most of my children could not return to school to complete their education after the war. Christian went into business; Victor also did, but strayed into crime. He was eventually killed during an armed robbery operation he led. I think he never got over his father's death. Christian never did also, but coped well, hiding his grief. I saw my children suffer and I could do little about it. The war brought a lot of pains and sorrows, a lot of pains and sorrows indeed. My daughter, it was a lot of pains. Thank God, my children made it through. But I still miss their father (she began to weep). Sorry, I cannot go on further; there are many things I don't want to remember.

Mrs. Caroline Duru's narrative lays bare the agonizing and traumatic experiences of Olokoro women during and after the war. One of her children became an armed robber and was eventually killed during one of their armed robbery operations. Had the father been alive, he would not have derailed. This is one of the aftermaths of the civil war in Olokoro.

### **Mrs. Comfort Onyegbule<sup>41</sup> (Widow)**

I and my husband were both natives of Olokoro. I married my husband and we had six children. Ours was a happy family. I was a trader and my husband was a civil servant. We lived in Maiduguri, Bornu State before the war. When the northerners (Hausa) started killing the Igbo, we had to run back home. Life at home was not easy as we had to make do with what we could get for the survival of the family. Then the Biafran soldiers came to conscript able bodied men for war. My husband was among those conscripted for this purpose. Life became unbearable for us his

family members. I had to support the family somehow. In order not to die of starvation like many others, I resorted to selling my personal effects at give-away prices for the feeding of my family.

I sold my jewelries, plates, shoes and even my wrappers till I had nothing to sell. I was forced to wear rags around even as a married woman and given my size. This was the highest form of humiliation any woman could face in Olokoro, she said. At a time, there was nothing I could do any longer so we had to depend on charity. My husband died in the war and I became a widow. My daughter, I don't wish that my enemies should go through what we went through.

For many Olokoro women, the bitter taste and ravages of war came in the form of tremendous challenges that they faced during and after the Nigerian civil war. The challenges began with the loss of the bread winners of some families early in the war. This forced the wives of such men to play the husband's role without adequate preparation and means to do so. This is typified in Mrs. Comfort Onyegbule's narrative.

### **Selinah Ezeogueri <sup>42</sup> (Retired Chief Nursing Officer)**

I am Mrs. Selinah Ezeogueri, a native of Mbaise in Imo State. I married Mr. Paul Ogueri of Umuajata, Olokoro Umuahia, Abia State. We have three children. We were residing in Ikom, in present day Cross River State of Nigeria. I am a trained nurse and my husband was an Agricultural officer. We were both civil servants in Ikom and doing well before the war. When the civil war broke out, we had to hurriedly pack the little belongings we could take along with us as we ran back to the village. We did not have where to keep them then as we did not envisage the emergence of the war. As such, we lost most of them. I enlisted as a volunteer with the Caritas International which was one of the three major relief organizations active in Biafra during the civil war. The Caritas represented the Catholic Church. The others were the International Committee of the Red Cross (I.C.R.C.) and the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.), 'representing some twenty-eight groups and seventeen industrial nations.' We helped in the distribution of relief materials in Olokoro. Indeed, many people in Olokoro owed their survival largely to the international relief organizations. Young men and women who voluntarily joined these organizations got emergency training in order to help the sick and many starving war refugees. 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 like me. 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. We 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, we played vital roles in complimenting the efforts of other trained personnel (that is doctors, and other health workers) in caring for the young, the old and other afflicted persons. About seven sick bays existed in Olokoro during the war. They were located in ahia ama in Umuajata, ahia ebo in Amizi, Okwu, Umuoparaozara, Mgarigba in Umuajata, Itaja Obohia and Amuzu, all in Olokoro. With the assistance and supplies from these two international organizations, we 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. We worked together and kept reliable records of relief items brought in by Red Cross volunteers. These included corn meal, stock fish, corn flour and egg yolk. As volunteers we were not paid salaries, but often got food items from the Red Cross stocks. 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 of immense help in the distribution of relief materials in Olokoro. Some men did this to evade conscription into the army. It should be observed that Olokoro served as a refugee camp as the other Olokoro neighbours like Ibeku, Oboro, Ubakala and Ngwa sought refuge in the community.

The medical needs of Olokoro people after the war were quite high and urgent. There were many war-wounded soldiers and civilians who needed urgent medical attention. There was only one maternity home at Ahiaukwu Olokoro at the end of the war. It was owned by the Anglican Church but lacked essential drugs and adequate equipment. I had to open a second private maternity home - Lucky Maternity Home, Umuajata Olokoro in 1970 to provide an alternative to the one in Ahiaukwu. Pregnant women in Umuajata and its environs had the services of trained nurses at their doorsteps. Even pregnant women from Ikputu in Aba Ngwa -a neighbouring community- patronized this maternity home.

It could be recalled that the three major relief organizations mentioned above were active in Biafra. Thanks to the combined efforts of these organizations, in the late spring of 1969, an average of 300 to 350 tons of essentially needed 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 stock-fish, salt and corned beef. Others such as salted stock-fish, powdered milk, egg yolk and corn meal (commonly referred to as 'Formula Two' and 'Garri Gabon' also called Formula One)<sup>43</sup>, 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 programme" 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 activities<sup>44</sup>.

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. The industrious and humanitarian nature of a typical Igbo woman is exemplified in Mrs Selinah Ezeogueri's narrative. Even in the midst of war, these women volunteered to help ameliorate the suffering of Olokoro people through their services.

**Cecilia Ekweronu**<sup>45</sup>

My name is Mrs. Cecilia Ekweronu. I am a native of Olokoro in Umuahia, Abia State. I am from Itaja, Olokoro and my husband is from Umuajata Olokoro Umuahia. I was heavily pregnant during the war. We heard one Sunday morning that the war had started. Before then, the Biafran soldiers had come to conscript some Olokoro able bodied men for the war. When the Nigerian soldiers entered Olokoro, there was confusion everywhere. The sound of their gun shots brought fear and anguish on all of us. In the midst of that, I entered into sudden labor and ran into the bush to give birth to a premature baby girl. It was the grace of God that both of us survived. Many of us ate lizards, wall gecko and any available thing we could get in bush combing. We really suffered because there was no food anywhere as the Federal Government Food Blockade policy affected us badly. Our young girls and women disguised themselves to avoid forceful adoption by the soldiers for marriage. Even at that some were still adopted. For example, two of my sisters-in-laws were forcefully married by Nigerian soldiers from Benue and Oyo states.

**Madam Comfort Etizu**<sup>46</sup>

I and my husband are from Olokoro Umuahia. During the war, there was starvation everywhere. The food available was very expensive. There was scarcity of salt and other essential food items. It was only the women that were engaged in ahia attack that could buy and sell such items. It was a highly risky trade to engage in as it entailed both traders and goods crossed front lines. When they were caught by the Nigerian soldiers, they were sexually molested and executed either by being buried alive or shooting them. Our children suffered from kwashiorkor. In fact, three of my children suffered from it. This was because we could not afford to eat well during the war. They were taken to Gabon for treatment. After the war, we were told to go to Port Harcourt for our children. I was glad to be re-united with my children because some other women were not that lucky as their children could not make it home alive. Some of such women had to take home other women's children in exchange for theirs. My daughter, terrible things happened during the war that we cannot talk about.

**IMPACTS OF THE WAR ON WOMEN AND NIGERIA'S NATIONAL INTEGRATION**

Women play indispensable role in the development of any nation. In many developed parts of the world women play commendable role in economic, political and socio-cultural development.<sup>47</sup> This is why women who have been shattered by war needed to be catered for, in order for them to contribute maximally to their nation's development. While the government of Nigeria have taken commendable steps to ensure that women decapitated by the war receives adequate attention, it is short of what the women truly need, as it is yet to alleviate their sufferings after many years of the war.<sup>48</sup> According to oral sources:

Selina Ezeogueri<sup>49</sup> noted that the tales of the women widowed and disabled due to the civil war has been that of woes, especially the way the government handled it. There were no compensations for women whose husbands were killed,

those whose limbs were destroyed and also those who are suffering one form of disability or the other because of the war; and that these difficulties makes it impossible for them to contribute to national development. Another respondent<sup>50</sup> further corroborated the views of Selina; who also reported that her husband and five children were killed during war, and that nobody or government up till is concerned about reconciliation, reconstruction and rehabilitation of all of them that were affected, they were left to either die or survive on their own.

The above clearly illustrates the frustration of those decapitated by the war after several years, and this decapitation ostracizes them in a way that they are not able to contribute to nation growth and development. This study brings to bear that fact that government of states devastated by war must do all it can to carry out reconciliation, reconstruction and rehabilitations in order to win the trust of the regions they were formally at loggerheads with.

**LIMITATION OF THE STUDY:** This study is limited to the sufferings women went through during and after the Nigerian civil war of 1967-70. The study of the women who are the most vulnerable during conflict is important to ensuring that the right structures are put in place by the Nigerian government to enhance reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This study examined Memories of illness, hunger and death: an account of women's life stories, personal experiences and healing in the post Biafran war. The central argument of the study is that the injuries inflicted on women during the war still lingers on, and that the inability of the Nigerian state to attend sincerely to these injuries have decapitated the ability of these women to contribute meaningfully to nation building and national integration of the Nigerian state. The study further investigate the sufferings of the women, impact on their societal relevance and as well the national integration of the Nigerian state. As hinted earlier, most existing materials and studies on Nigerian civil war have centered largely on the involvement and roles of the soldiers at the war front and pay little attention to the impact the war had on the women who were the most vulnerable in the catastrophe. The truth, though, is that the causes and the end-results of the Nigerian civil war affected the women in more telling and critical ways than have been captured in current literature. For a full or balanced account of the war to be achieved, there is absolute need to study the women aspect of it from both the macro and the micro perspectives. A macro study has the advantage of providing a smooth and broad picture of issues in discourse. But this advantage creates the problem of smothering a more complex reality. Such complex reality becomes manifest in micro studies.

This study derives its significance from the following considerations: information on the civil war has been principally male-focused and this presents a partial and incomplete presentation of the events of the period considering that women and children are usually most affected by wars. Again, the work has attempted to lay bare the agonizing and traumatic experiences of Igbo women in general, and Olokoro women in particular during and after the Nigerian civil war. By bringing the women's dimension of the war into focus, a balanced picture of that tragic



aspect of the Nigerian civil war will be achieved. In particular the capacity of the women to cope with the intimidating challenges of the time will be better appreciated than had been the case. It is not generally recognized that the trauma of the war did not end with the shooting war itself. Post-war challenges were in certain respects even more traumatic. Hopefully this work should add to the existing literature on the Nigerian civil war with emphasis on Olokoru women.

In conducting this research, it was discovered that it is the first of its kind. In other words, there has not been any research on the impact of the Nigerian civil war on Olokoru women before. Again, it was observed that Olokoru women were directly affected by the civil war. Many of them lost either their husbands, brothers, uncles, brothers-in-law or children to the war. This had rendered some of them childless and some that were psychologically traumatized died out of grief. Mrs Sarah Ogueri is one of such women who lost two of her sons to the war and both the husband and the third son immediately after the war. Presently, the land that used to house the family has been inherited by her husband's next of kin. In order to survive the war, some of these women adopted different strategies ranging from giving out their daughters into marriage to Nigerian soldiers, stealing, prostitution and petty trading. All these engagements were means for survival. Some paid dearly for their efforts. For example, some women who came back after getting married to Nigerian soldiers were divorced by their husbands after the war. There were some women who re-married after they were divorced by their husbands. They were regarded as *Nwaekwe*- those that followed the Nigerian soldiers because of money. In fact, such women were so much ashamed of themselves that they were not allowed to contribute to any meaningful or serious discussions among their fellow women in the community.

Again, it was observed that Olokoru served as a refugee camp as the other Olokoru neighbours like Ibeku, Oboro, Ubakala and Ngwa sought refuge in the community. Through the efforts of Olokoru volunteers, like Mrs Selinah Ezeogueri and Dr Umeh, the death toll in Olokoru community was reduced. Some Olokoru children who were kwashiorkor-ridden were taken to Gabon and were accompanied by Mrs Umezurumba through the Red Cross. After the war, most of the children were brought back to Port Harcourt. Their mothers went there for identification and collection of their children. Many that lost their children claimed other women's children. The war forced some women to become (breadwinners) of their families. In order to properly take up the new roles, some of them ventured into professions hitherto considered exclusively for males. Mrs Rose Nzadibe is an example of such women. Also, in the course of interviewing these women, it was observed that most of them could not express fully in words their horrors of the war. The researcher however observed their anguish and sadness at the mention of that war.

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