

Of Narratives and Memories: The Nigeria-Biafra War in Mbanjo of Igboland, 1967-1970

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Abstract

The violence that accompanied the Nigeria-Biafra War in the years 1967-1970 and the mindless annihilation of millions of Igbo lives remain traumatic. The Nigerian government claimed they set out to quell a rebellion which was perceived as a “conflict between brothers.” The situation appeared to be a war of large magnitude as it exhibited a propensity to exterminate the Igbo race. It was a ruthless and bloody war by the rest of Nigeria against Biafra and the Igbo in particular. The fierce nature of the attacks against a poorly equipped and ill-prepared Igbo by a well-armed Nigeria army with its international support reached Mbanjo. The people felt the heat of the war and many able-bodied young men participated in the war. Most of the men from Mbanjo communities who fought in the war never returned. Those who returned had very ugly experiences and are filled with bitterness. The narratives and memories of these war veterans have remained with them as they lived and others have died with their bitter experiences. Indeed, as time passes the experiences of many have been interred. Women lost their husbands, mothers lost their sons, many families lost their loved ones and these experiences deserve to be known and exposed and added to extant literature on the war. This *exposé* which adopts the orthodox historical narrative and analytical method examines how the war was fought in Mbanjo, the experiences as well as the impact of the war on the people. The paper posits that the brutality and highhandedness exhibited against the Igbo smacks of a calculated plan to exterminate the Igbo race perceived as obstacles to economic exploitation of the numerous natural resources domiciled in Igbo area -Biafra. The study adopts qualitative approach and the presentation is chronological.

Keywords: Nigeria-Biafra, Mbanjo, Igboland, Southeast, Nigeria

Introduction

Mbanjo as part of the defunct Biafra, no doubt, felt the pains, hardship, disorganizations and the cries that accompanied the Nigeria-Biafra War-1967-1970. Scholars have published many accounts of the Nigeria-Biafra. There is dearth of literature on the study area. Hence, this effort to examine the war in Mbanjo and its neighbours, its impact on group relations through individual narratives, memories and common experiences of the people during the war period using oral evidence. Post-independence Nigeria was trailed by political developments that occurred on the eve of 1960 as contained in popular literature, Madiebo 1980¹. Before independence, there were constitutional developments and the formation of political parties along ethnic lines. The constitutions, especially the 1946 and 1951 constitutions, introduced regionalism and ethnic politics in Nigeria. The foundation for Nigeria’s independence was laid on the principles of division and ethnic politics by the constitutions.

Hence, it was not surprising the young nation state, Nigeria, went into crisis shortly after her independence. Elizabeth Isichei has noted that “Nigeria attained her independence in what has been called a conspiracy of optimism.”¹ Consequently, the struggle for dominance amongst the different regions, West, North and East continued. As Isichei further, noted “Azikiwe, doubtless reluctantly, accepted the gilded cage of Governor-General (after 1963 President). Dr. Michael Okpara, a Doctor from Umuahia, who had entered politics in 1949 at the time of the colliery shootings, became the Eastern Region Premier. In 1964 the Mid-West with NCNC backing, became a separate region, under a Western Igbo Premier, Dennis Osadebey. The region, in its ethnic diversity, was a microcosm of Nigeria itself, a diversity which could enrich the society, or divide it.”²

¹Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1976, p.241

²Isichei, p. 241

Before the crisis of 1966, Mbandia and its neighbours like most other rural communities in Igboland were still recovering from the impact of colonial disruptions and disturbances. People were their brother's keeper despite colonial divisions and conflicts of interest. The level of cooperation and group relations was improving. S.B.C. Onwuka, told the writer that,

Before the civil war started, Mbandia and in fact, Igboland was quite peaceful, the people were mainly farmers and traders. They went on doing their things and living their lives without much complaint. In fact, relations between one another, communities and towns were quite cordial. People helped one another and lived in peace until the crisis began in 1966 and later led to the destructive and devastating war between Nigeria and the defunct Biafra, "our Biafra". That war came to disturb the peace and love of the people of this area, who were resting from colonial rule.³

Mbandia and its neighbours as integral part of the Isuama sub-cultural group, which as N.T. Nwaezeigwe observes "apart from being the most widely dispersed single Igbo sub-group, were well-known long-distance traders and travelers, became apprehensive. The safety of their kiths and kin was of utmost importance to those at home. The situation was one of perplexity."⁴

Like in most Igbo communities, Mbandia towns were very anxious because they heard what was happening in Nigeria, the killing of their brothers and sisters in the North and the torture they were giving to their people also in the West. So, the people became apprehensive to know how to save their brothers in the North. That was how the war followed these killings to Igboland.

The War in Igbo Communities

Following the declaration by Lieutenant Colonel Emeka Ojukwu, the then Military Governor of Eastern Region, on May 30, 1967, the Republic of Biafra was created.

Consequent upon this declaration of the Republic of Biafra, Nigeria's Head of State, Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, in response, declared war on Biafra. The shooting started on 6th July 1967. It was allegedly a war to keep Nigeria as one.⁵ It started as a police action to arrest a rebellion with a short, sharp surgical operation. This was a conflict between brothers,⁶Ozigbo asserted.

At the early stages of the war, recruitment into the Biafra army was on voluntary terms. Many people reportedly rushed to join the Biafra army. Initially, as Herneit-Sievers, Ahazuem and Emezue contended "enlistment was attractive to younger men, especially those who had returned from other parts of Nigeria after the killings of 1966."⁷ However, young ladies later volunteered to join the army. Many people also enrolled into different militias to contribute in their small ways to the war efforts. Core rationale behind this was mainly to defend their fatherland, Biafra from perceived injustice. There were other rationales. For instance, Mbalisi mentioned the decision to join the Biafran army was because "at the onset of the war, many schools closed, the young boys joined the Biafra army as that appeared to be the only employment available."⁸ He, alongside his friends joined the Biafra army because the closure of schools affected him as a teacher. People enrolled in the army to eke out a living and take care of their families. The war caused the closure of many local trade routes, and prevented people from having access to foodstuffs such as salt, fish, rice and other food items. In this regard, S.E. Mbalisi revealed that;

"When the war came closer to Mbandia, specially, to Owerri, Umuahia, Okigwe and Mbaise, trade routes became closed. The route to Aboa in Rivers State where we bought fish was cut off. Abakaliki fell and the production of salt and rice stopped. I did not know what next to do for a living, salaries for teachers and civil servants and other workers were not mentioned any more. The only alternative job open was to join the Red Cross. Principally, I joined the Red Cross to save my head as the only son of my parents because

³ S.B.C Onwuka, c.72 years, civil servant interviewed at Umuelemai, 20/27/011.

⁴ N.T Nwaezeigwe, *The Igbo and their Nri Neighbours: A Study in the Politics of Igbo Culture and Origins*, Enugu: Snap Press, Ltd, 2007, p.35.

⁵ Ikenga. R.A Ozigbo, *A History of Igboland in the 20th Century*, Enugu: Snap Press Ltd., 1999, p 155

⁶ Ozigbo, p.155

⁷ Axel Herneit- Sievers, "The people, the Solders and the State," in Herneit- Sievers, J.O. Ahazuem and Emezue, *A Social History of the Nigeria Civil Wars; Perspective from Below*, Enugu: Jemezie Associates, 1997, p.76

⁸ Samuel. E. Mbalisi, 72 years, civil servant and community leader, interviewed at Amaukwu Obollo, 20/08/2012

members of the Red Cross were not taken to the war front. I felt secure to join at the time.”⁹

As the war raged on, it came much closer to Mbano area. In fact, when Owerri fell to the Nigerian army, the headquarters was moved to Atta-Ikeduru, (one of the Ugiri Mbano groups of towns transferred to Ikeduru during the British colonial administrative reorganization). This action meant the war had reached Mbano and its neighbours. This assertion was confirmed by Alexander A. Madiebo thus, there was not much anyone could do immediately to strengthen our resistance, as we had practically exhausted our human and material resources in pushing the enemy out of Oguta the previous day. Before long, the enemy was in Ahoada town and was still advancing from there towards Avu and Obinze on the outskirts of Owerri. With resources available to it, which were mainly local science products, the 14 Division managed to delay the entry into Owerri of the enemy until the 18th of September. Colonel Nwajei moved his headquarters to Atta and there a delegation came to see him to find out why he had lost Owerri.¹⁰

The capture of Owerri by the Nigeria army cost Col. Nwajei his job. Subsequently, he was replaced by Col. Kalu from Port Harcourt. During this period the enemy’s brigade advanced to Mbaise another neighbour of Mbano. Mbano appeared to have been drawn into a very difficult situation. As already noted, Atta had become the new headquarters of the Owerri Division following the fall of Owerri. Then the Mbaise area was under the enemy’s siege and Okigwe axis was not free either. Madiebo further explained that “shortly after Kalu took over, Okpuala junction fell into the hands of the enemy, thus exposing the whole of Mbaise to the enemy. ...soon the enemy linked up Aba and Owerri and began a two-pronged advanced into Mbaise.”¹¹

Madiebo expressed his concern in the absence of ammunition and reinforcements and with little or no prospects of getting them in the immediate future. The situation was very grave and almost too hopeless to be described properly. If the enemy got to Enyiogwugwu, not only would the bulk of 14 Division around Owerri town be rendered useless and disorganized, there would not have been a single soldier available to stop him from moving from Inyiogwugwu to Umuahia, the then capital of Biafra.¹²

Alarmed at the situation, Col. Ojukwu sent the following signal to Kalu, your role in Port Harcourt disaster is still fresh in the minds of the people. You cannot, repeat, cannot therefore afford to disappoint the nation a second time. You will clear the enemy completely from Mbaise within 24 hours or submit to me your resignation from the Biafra Army.¹³

This preemptive distress call from Col. Ojukwu to Kalu suggests the Biafra Army at the time was in danger. Hence, the fear of the advancing enemy army, sent jitters into the spine of Mbano people who expected the worst as the area was surrounded by Nigerian soldiers on all sides. At this time too, recruitment into the Biafra Army was no long voluntary. The need to strengthen the human and material resources of the Biafran Army caused voluntary recruitment to be replaced by conscription. Mbano become not just a recruitment centre, but also saw the establishment of military training posts in the schools in the area.

According to C.E. Okoroike, a former Air Force Officer with the Biafran Air Force, Because of the harsh conditions at the time, people were forced into the Biafra Army. A random picking was made despite age and they were given two days training before they were sent to the war front. A time arose when there was no need to train any person. It was a situation of a person being caught, armed with a gun and taken to the war front. There were some army camps in and around Mbano. One was at Umuneke Primary School, and another was at St. Dominic’s Secondary School. The training camp at Umuneke was known as “Battalion-Four”, the one at Nkwo Mbaa was “Battalion-Ten” and the one at Ibeme, was “Battalion-Six”. A good number of soldiers were trained and sent to the war front. A lot of them died due

⁹ S.E Mbalisi interview cited

¹⁰ Alexander A Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafra War*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980, p.280

¹¹ Madiebo, p. 281

¹² Madiebo, 281

¹³ Madiebo, 281

to improper training, hunger and stamina related problems.¹⁴

The war situation had its implications following the establishment of military camps in Mbano and neighbouring communities. First, the war reached communities in the interior and closer to the people. Forceful recruitment into the Biafra army compelled many young men to go into hiding. In fact, the issue of refugees in Mbano during the war took the centre stage and brought changes in some aspects of inter-group relations in the area. The loss of jobs and closure of trade routes and military blockade to the importation of food and materials into Biafra, by Nigerian army, worsened the situation. This brought hunger and starvation amid other sufferings. Chinua Achebe noted that with the economic blockade and starvation, “the Biafrans paid a great humanitarian price by ceding a great deal of territory to the Nigerians. The famine worsened as the war raged, as the traditional Igbo society of farmers could not plant their crops. Gowon has succeeded in cutting Biafra off from the sea, robbing its inhabitants of shipping parts to receive military and humanitarian supplies. The afflictions of marasmus and kwashiorkor began to spread further...”¹⁵ However, with time, the international agencies came to remedy this situation as much as they could. Notable among these agencies that came to Mbano were the Red Cross, the Caritas Organisation and World Council of Churches (W.C.C.). The war time relations, especially, the refugee problem was quite disheartening at the time.

War Time Relations and the Refugee Challenges

The war actually began with shooting, forcing several Biafra cities one after the other to bow to the military might of the well-equipped Nigerian troops. Biafra has conceded Ogoja, Nsukka, Enugu and Bonny to Nigeria by the end of 1967.¹⁶ And by the close of 1968, all minority areas of Biafra and one-third of Igboland were in Nigeria hands.¹⁷ Closer to Mbano and its neighbours, Owerri, Mbaise, Okigwe and Orlu also fell, pushing refugees into Mbano, especially Ehime, Ugiri, and Inyishi areas. The fall of the major cities triggered the mass migration and flight from the war affected areas to calm and quiet rural communities partly for safety and partly for greener pastures. Migrations and flight were both from near and far. C. E. Okoroike in an interview observed,

The war made us to understand Mbano and these neighbouring towns are at the heart of the then Biafra or Igboland. This was because Mbano as an integral part of Biafra, though witnessed the war, were not heavily affected as it did to Enugu. It mainly affected Owerri urban area, Umuahia, Mbaise and Okigwe and other sub-urban of Owerri like Ngor-Okpuala, Ikeduru, Nkwere, Mbieri, and Igirinta and so on. All these places were badly affected, the war ravished them. People from these areas came into Mbano and were quartered in schools, churches and private homes. They were all accommodated amidst fear of the unknown.¹⁸

The fall of these cities, was to a large extent responsible for the identical pattern of inward movements, a situation where a whole population fled into smaller sub-urban villages as the bigger ones crumbled. Migrations continued into the rural and safer communities as the war drew closer and air raids increasingly caused fear and terror. Most refugees moved alongside their live stocks. Okoroike observed that “most people who came from Mbaise, Ikeduru, Igirinta, Obowo and Okigwe area came with their goats and fowl. Some came with ram and other movable property. These livestock were eaten when hunger increased.”¹⁹

Though some parts of Mbano witnessed sporadic shootings, it remains one Igbo area in whose communities were disposed to housing many refugees from all around Igboland during the war. The number of refugees that were housed in people’s homes, schools and churches is not known. The number could run into thousands. Mbano and its neighbouring communities constituted a safe environment for

¹⁴H.R.H Eze, C.E Okoroike c.72 years, retired teacher/ traditional ruler and ex-Biafra Air-Force Office, interviewed at Ibeme Ugiri, 17/07/ 2011.

¹⁵ Chinua Achebe, *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, New York: Penguin Books, 2012, pp.209-210

¹⁶ . Ozigbo, A History of Igboland..., p.157

¹⁷Ozigbo, p.159

¹⁸ C.E. Okoroike interview cited.

¹⁹ C.E. Okoroike interview cited

refugees from all places. Emmanuel Onyenze, who served with the Red Cross said

I saw them. Many of the refugees came from Port Harcourt, Cross River and Akwa-Ibom. They moved into this place especially after Umuahia fell, they came to Obowo and through Etiti and Ehime-Umueze II many came into Obollo, Ibeme, Ogor and other communities here. Many people especially, women contributed cassava at the initial stage to feed them. Most of our leaders like Chief Christian Nwachukwu, Chief Michael Mbalisi, and Ven. Dr. E.E Obilor among many others, accommodated refugees in their private homes.²⁰

Those who were not accommodated found refuge in churches and schools. Most prominent personalities from the ministries were housed in the schools. Some of the refugees came with bullet wounds from air raids; others sustained different degrees of injury while escaping for their dear lives. Those who managed to return from the north and west were devastated. It was a disheartening experience for most returnees and refugees in Igboland. Describing the refugee situation, Colin Legume in Isichei stated, only the Igbo know the whole terrible story from the 600, 000 or so refugees who have fled to the safety of Eastern region-hacked, slashed, mangled, stripped naked and robbed of all their possession; the orphans, the widows, the traumatized. A woman, mute and dazed, arrived back in her village after travelling for five days with only a bowl in her lap. She held her child's head, which was severed before her eyes. Men, women and children arrived with arms and legs broken hands hacked off, mouths split open. Pregnant women were cut open and the unborn children killed the total casualties unknown.²¹ Many returnees to Mbanjo had lost their lives on their way to safety.

Despite the influx of people into the area, Mbanjo and its neighbours were not hostile to refugees. They lived and co-existed with the refugees as one people till the end of the war, when they retired back to their homes. The refugee situation was not without implications. Ozigbo noted that, the refugees had their own accompanying problems. Biafra engaged in defensive warfare. The population flight from the areas under federal control created ever increasing refugee problems.²² There were people from Calabar area, Akwa-Ibom, Rivers and many others. People were overstretched in accommodating and feeding the refugees. Most houses were at the time made of thatch and red mud and most families were rendered homeless in sheltering refugees from afar. This refugee situation also brought with it, persistent scarcity. But this appeared not to have deterred Mbanjo and its immediate neighbouring communities in the interior from receiving, sheltering and feeding refugees under the war situation.

Mr. Chidi Onwubuariri expresses his delight on how the war situation helped Inyishi to show their age-long relations with refugees from Igirinta. According him, many people came into Inyishi during the war to save their lives. People from Igirinta came to Inyishi in their numbers.

We in Inyishi have a lot of affiliation with Igirinta. When the war reached their area, they moved in their numbers to Amaudara village. More than a village came here from Igirinta. Amidst the war, relations continued as many people married their wives from amongst the refugees. I am quite sure and can remember that Stephen Onwuka's wife is from Igirinta. They met during the war. Also Madujiweonweya and many others married Igirinta women during the war. The war did not affect the relationship Inyishi had with Igirinta; rather it strengthened our relationship with the people.²³

Apart from refugees from Igirinta who came to Inyishi for safety, some Mbanjo people who lived along the major roads like Amaraku also moved to Inyishi. As Onwubuariri further explained, "when Nigerian soldiers got to Okigwe through Enugu and parts of Atta through Owerri, Amaraku people, Umudim, Atta, Isu people, even people from Okwelle and Mbaise ran into Inyishi because the soldiers would pass through those places. Inyishi people are geographically lucky because they do not live along the major road like Amaraku, Atta and Akabo people. This geographical advantage explains why we were

²⁰ Emmanuel Onyenze, c.81years, retired School Principle/ Ex-Biafra Soldiers, interviewed at Umukam Obollo, on 07/19/2010.

²¹Isichei, A History of the Igbo People, pp.245-246

²²Ozigbo, A History of Igboland..., p.158

²³Chidi Onwubuariri, C. 71 years, Pensioner, interviewed at Amakpaka UmuotiInyishi-Ikeduru, 08/24/2010.

able to provide shelter for those who lived along the major roads. They did this in collaboration with Obollo, Ibeme, Ogbor and Oka Mbano among other communities.”²⁴

Similarly, Chief Marcel Ibe informed on the refugee situation in Okwelle Onuimo, neighbours of Mbano. He noted that Okwelle is part of Igboland that fought in the Nigeria- Biafra War. Biafran soldiers came into the villages for conscription. That was how Okwelle youths got involved because those that were conscripted were taken to Okigwe to fight. The soldiers mainly came through Okigwe, forcing refugees from that area into the villages. Surprisingly, refugees from Udi, Ogwu, Okigwe and Onitsha settled in Okwelle. We embraced them as our brothers. In fact, I could confidently tell you that we treated them well and provided accommodation, food as much as we could under the war situation.”²⁵ There was intense hunger for both the refugees and soldiers. It was common place for people to eat whatever they could to survive the war situation.

Godson Ogu Onyirimba narrated his experience about the refugee situation in Umueze II, in Ehime Mbano. He said “as you know, the war affected every part of Igboland including Umueze II. The refugee problem in Umueze II was alarming. The closeness of Ahiara Mbaise to Umueze II caused Mbaise people to run into Mbano in their numbers to seek refuge. Mbano and parts of Mbaise, especially, Ihiteafoukwu and Eziamu (the whole of Ekwereazu) have common historical ties. They were protected as our brothers when they ran to our villages for safety. Our people fed and gave them our beds to sleep on. For instance, the secretary of Etiti Council, Chief Richard Onyeneho came to my house as a refugee with his wife and four children. Mr. Reginald Nwogu from Mbaise also came to stay in my house. I sheltered them. I served as their watchman at night. My wife cooked their meals. They never stopped visiting me when the war ended.”²⁶

Okoro Peter Ogu of Eziamu Mbaise believes Mbano served as a great refuge and relief area during the war. He thinks their claim to common ancestry and cultural ties united the people during the war. Hence, he said, the war did not really affect our relationship with Mbano people, our brothers and neighbours. You know we are ‘one’ and are all part of Igboland and Biafra. So we fought against those we saw as our common enemies during the war -the Nigerians, that is the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba people. We opposed them the way we opposed the British colonialists. I would say the war united us the more as brothers because we were protecting one another from being killed. When Nigerian soldiers came into Mbaise from Owerri and Okpuala, many of our people moved to Mbano to seek refuge. Because of the location of Mbano in the interior, the place was safer for refugees.²⁷

However, Elder Okoro P. Ogu noted that before the war reached Mbaise, the area served as a refuge for people from Owerri, Rivers and Calabar, but as the war drew closer to Mbaise, people fled to Mbano. The war was very ‘hot’ in those cities, so people ran into Eziamu and other Mbaise communities. When the war came to Ahiara, of course everyone knows how important Ahiara was to Biafra, Eziamu people and their refugees moved into Mbano communities. Some people ran to the *mbara* towards Ugirike, where no one lived to seek refuge in the farms. *Ogba-aghara dara ebe nile, enwekweghi onye mara aka nriyana aka ekpe.*²⁸ (There was confusion everywhere no one knew what to do).

In an interaction with Mr. Innocent Chijioke Obiukwu at Umuezegwu, community in Etiti, on the refugee situation in the area, he said “the people shared the same experience during the war in Ihite-Uboma and Etiti communities. We enjoyed peace till refugees from Calabar, Port-Harcourt and Owerri came into our villages. *Otutu ndi gbatara oso ndu na Etiti mere ka egwu di, onye o bula ebido gaghariwa, na akwa ko ibu ya na umu ya maka ujo* (Many of the refugees who ran into Etiti caused panic and confusion and people began to run around and began parking their loads and children due to fear of the unknown). It was through the refugees that Uboma and Etiti people knew the war was close to our area. When the war

²⁴Onwubuariri interview cited.

²⁵Chief Marcel Ibe, C. 69 years Pensioner/Secretary Eze’s Cabinet, Umuduruodu Okwelle, Onuimo, 08/ 24/2010.

²⁶Ogu Onyirimba interview cited.

²⁷Elder Okoro Peter Ogu, C.85 years, Retired Civil servant/Ex-Biafra Soldier, interviewed at Eziamu-Oparanadim Ahiazu Mbaise, 08/23/2010.

²⁸Okoro P. Ogu interview cited.

reached Ahiara and Umuahia, we moved to Umunumo, Nsu, and Agbaja. Many people moved to their maternal homes in Mbanjo for safety. We were a bit lucky because the type of muddy soil we have in Etiti hindered the soldiers from moving into the interior—(*potopoto na aja-uro ekweghi ndi agha bata na ime Obodo*).²⁹ This movement into the interior especially into Etiti was confirmed by Madiebo as he writes that,

After the fall of Umuahia the seat of Biafra Government and all administrative Directorates moved across the Imo River to the areas of Etiti and Owerri. The rest of civil population also moved with the government and the Directorates. The first major problem that confronted the 12 Division was acute shortage of manpower because each Division recruited its men from local civilians within its operational area.³⁰

Refugee Experiences

Mbanjo and its neighbours hosted many refugees during the war. As stated earlier, geographical location of some communities in Mbanjo further afar from the major cities and war concentrated areas, helped make the area largely safe. There was so much population explosion in the area that it imposed astronomical and unprecedented increase in hardship. Crime rate increased as many people obviously resorted to stealing for survival. Chidi Onwubuariri said “the situation was one, and the same. Not many people dared plant anything. Those who did had their crops stolen. Under the war situation, anything was possible. So, we may not call that “real stealing”. Let us say people “took” whatever they saw to survive the hunger brought by the war. Cassava was the major food that was produced in Inyishi. The Umu-uri and Amaimo people produced yam. They were harvested at night by hungry people. Soldiers climbed palm/raffia trees (*ngwo*) to collect palm wine of the *diochi* or wine tapper.”³¹ Onwubuariri stated that most people did not see as stealing by people to survive during the war as a crime. He perceived it as part of abnormal conditions associated with conflict and war situations. But he decried what he called the atrocities of the soldiers when he said, “the atrocities the soldiers committed were the raping of many young girls. Some were forcefully taken by the soldiers. Others were forced into early and unwanted marriages. Yet many others voluntarily followed the Nigerian soldiers for the protection they were promised.”³²

Mbaa River in Oka and Inyishi communities attracted many refugees and provided them with comfort. According to Onwubuariri,

The “*Mbaa* Inyishi and “*Mbaa* Oka’ river attracted so many refugees to Inyishi and Oka. Many people depended and survived by fishing from the rivers. It was a source of protein at the time. Inyishi and Oka Mbanjo are like brothers. All those who came into our communities as refugees were protected and the relationship was mostly cordial until the war ended. The name Biafra bound us together as brothers to assist one another, unlike the rabid Nigerian soldiers who moved around killing people. The *Mbaa* was God’s gift to our people especially, during the war. Even the soldiers used the river.³³ Nonetheless, it was common place that people ate whatever they saw during the war to survive, yam, cassava, plantain, goat, and fowl were stolen. It was even said that people ate rats, lizards, bats, locusts, snakes and frogs. It was indeed a disheartening period for the Igbo.

In some communities, people caught stealing were punished. Peter Ogu recounted one incident in Ezizama. This is what he said,

A particular man named Ogaraku from Umunumo was very notorious for stealing farm produce, people’s property and livestock mainly goat and fowl. He was caught when he stole clothes from the C.M.S. church in Ezizama. Many people knew about it and I know no body would say it’s a lie. I would challenge any one who says it is not true. He was taken to the Eke Ezizama market where he was subjected to *iri Mbube* and he confessed. Within a short period, his stomach got swollen and he died of it. One Iheonunekwu Emegbulem was another notorious thief in Ezizama who was captured. He was heavily fined by Ezizama for stealing plantain and yam from a farm belonging to *Mazi* Ignatius Okoro. He was lucky because he

²⁹ Mr. Chijioke Innocent Obiukwu, c. 65 Years, security man, interviewed at Umuezegwu Ihite-Uboma-Etiti, 25/08/2010

³⁰ Madiebo, *The Nigeria Revolt and the Biafra War*...p. 335

³¹ Chidi Onwubuariri interview cited.

³² Onwubuariri interview cited.

³³ Onwubuariri interview cited.

was later set free. These measures were taken to discourage people from stealing. But under the war situation, that was almost impossible.³⁴ Ogu Onyirimba confirmed the Eziamma incident when he said, “I witnessed the *iri Mbube* in Eziamma during the war when one notorious thief, (though I cannot remember his name right now) who was terrorizing both the people and refugees was caught. Luck ran out on him when he stole from the C.M.S church. When we heard the *Ikoro* we moved to Eziamma only to discover it was the criminal that was caught. He did not survive the ordeal”.³⁵

Despite measures undertaken by most communities to curb crime, it continued because of the resolve to survive hunger occasioned by the economic blockade and starvation war strategy imposed on Biafra by the Gowon-led Nigerian government. The social, economic and cultural life of the people suffered greatly. There were socio-cultural alterations by the stranger- refugees in the area. The stage of competition in inter-group relations was exemplified in the struggle for power between the Biafrans and Nigeria. This resulted in the conflict and the eventual war that followed. The war unsettled the relative peace in Mbano area and brought with it, the challenge of refugees into the people’s relations. The war time relations between Mbano and its neighbours showed this. There were mutual cooperation and relations under the war situation. Adiele Afigbo avowed that “different communities in their actual day to day experiences have had to co-exist and interact in peace and in war.”³⁶ This statement also applied to the people. Relations between Mbano and its neighbours depended neither on peaceful nor war situations. The war itself was a factor of contact and interaction between the people on one hand, and the refugees that ran into the area on another. However, the war made people to mutually aid one another.

The age-long mutual relations between the people were factored by their claim to a common ancestry as exemplified in the numerous cultural festivals celebrated to mark their brotherhood. Therefore, the belief in common ancestry played out in the way the people cooperated during the Nigeria-Biafra war. Ogu Onyirimba said

Our people understood their neighbours were also their brothers, so people from different communities continued to cross boundaries to trade with their neighbours in the area. Movements between communities were safe through the bush paths that linked different communities. The war affected the peaceful relations prevalent in the area by bringing fear and tension. But I will tell you one thing; the war strengthened relations between the people because our people showed kindness and assisted each other throughout the war. Such kindness was extended to refugees from distant Igbo areas.³⁷

Town criers and spies (*ndiozi na-ogbama*) were said to have moved round the communities to alert the people on information received about happenings in other communities. This was to ensure the people were not caught unawares by the marauding soldiers for the purpose of conscription.

Community leaders were also said to have used age-grades and able-bodied men to ensure that inter-community movements were safe between neighbours. Especially, traders, and people that went to fetch water from the stream located in neighbouring communities. For instance, this situation existed between Ogbor and Inyishi, Amaimo Ikeduru and Umuozu Ugiri, and between Umueze 11 in Ehime and Ugirike in Ikeduru. The mutual relations that existed between the people probably made it possible for refugees to find Mbano and some of their neighbouring communities safer during the war. If Mbano and their neighbouring communities were hostile to one another, refugees would have avoided the area. To say the least, it would have been difficult for a restive Mbano, Mbaise or Ikeduru to have been receptive to strangers. Nonetheless, in spite of the challenges of over population, shortage of food, increased hunger, outbreak of diseases and discomfort associated with refugees, they were accommodated by the people and the communities in the area. Those refugees who were safeguarded in Mbano will never erode their experience and the hospitality accorded them. Those who lost their loved ones still live with the grievous experience.

³⁴ Okoro Peter Ogu interview cited.

³⁵ Ogu Onyirimba interview cited

³⁶ Afigbo, *The Igbo and their Neighbours...*, p.24

³⁷ Ogu Onyirimba interview cited.

Mbano Biafran Veterans' Experiences, Biafra made Weapons and Relief Agencies

Some individuals that took part in the war had some disturbing experiences. Some who joined the Biafra army experienced hard times during training, especially, those conscripted. Narrating his experience and what he saw at St. Dominic's Secondary School, which served as an army camp-Tenth Battalion, C.E. Okoroike said "many young boys were conscripted in communities in Mbano area and brought to the Tenth Battalion camp at St. Dominic's. They were poorly trained and sent the war front. A lot of them died because of lack of food and lack of stamina. Things did not go well. Those who were seen to be weak during conscription were killed by other soldiers. The strong ones who stood the harsh training were taken to the war front. A good number of them went to the war front, but few returned. Many were maimed. Some were shot and were amputated; some lost their eyes; some lost their limbs; while others sustained various degrees of injuries. Those who received limited medication survived and returned were known as war amputees."³⁸ Many able-bodied young men who voluntarily joined the Biafran Army were said to have deserted the war front as they were faced with the stark realities of the war. Many parents hid their young male children in the bush or on the *uko* (*uko* was a wooden hanger in the kitchen where food was stored) to evade conscription. The brutal way the soldiers went about the conscription brought fear in the communities and made movement of people difficult during the closing stages of the war. Towards the end of the war, relations were no longer peaceful but chaotic because Nigerian soldiers entered the interior parts of the villages. There was pandemonium and confusion as people struggled to avoid being killed or captured. Relating with people from different communities became difficult; markets were deserted, people feared and refrained from going to churches because church buildings were attacked. In fact, interactions reduced as movements were almost impossible because to do so was almost suicidal.

Chidi Onwubuariri, because of his horrendous experience was reluctant to speak on the war during my interaction with him. But when he finally put his emotions behind to share his personal experiences, he stated thus,

The Nigeria-Biafra war was a bad omen that I do not want to remember again. It disorganized everybody in Igboland. Personally, I hate to hear or talk about it because the poverty I am faced with today is as result of that evil war. It stopped me from doing my Teacher Training College (TTC) programme. I was drafted into the Biafra Army to go and die, but only sustained injuries. I fought at Oguta when the Nigerian war machine later nick named "Oguta Boy" was captured. Many people from here were wounded and many died. Many families closed as their only sons were killed in the war front. People like James Iwuoha, my friend Onyeka, Mr. Osuagwu a fellow T.T.C mate, many of them that I am saddened about died. The issue of kwashiorkor, hunger and disease killed many children. People were mal-nourished. To be honest with you *nnaa!* (referring to me), I hate talking about the war because I lost my brother to the war. It was an omen. I was at Owerri-Shell Camp when the war ended. Wait! You are talking about relations! How could people have related peacefully, attend the celebration of our festivals and trade with others in such condition? Communities and people were almost cut off and found it difficult to visit each other except through bush paths or as refugees.³⁹

Such are the sad moments that accompany wars. Many people had similar experiences in Mbano and Igboland at large.

In a similar vein, Peter Ogu told the writer that "one of my sons, Ogu Jr., ran to Mbano through Ezealapakpa stream when I was conscripted. I thought he got drowned in the stream when we could not find him. I had escaped narrowly before we reached Ahiara. The soldiers were on the chase for a young man that tried to escape. That was how God saved me. For my son, it was an Mbano man that saw him and saved him because he could not find his way. I will not forget that man, Iheanacho Iwuoha from Umudimodu Mbano who brought Ogu jr., my son, back to me. He saved my son because he saw the boy as his son too. Mbano and Mbaise are really good brothers and neighbours. Signs of our good relations manifested in the way they accommodated and assisted refugees from Mbaise and other communities."⁴⁰

³⁸ C.E Okoroike interviewed cited

³⁹Chidi Onwubuariri interview cited

⁴⁰ Peter Ogu interview cited

In the writer's interactions with the father, he has always narrated how he abandoned his *fiancée*, one Miss Elizabeth from Inyishi-Ikeduru. He said

"I was almost conscripted a second time after I was saved by Ven. E. Obilor. I went to see off Elizabeth when I heard the noise from the soldiers. It was by God's grace that I ran into my cousin's house -Godwin Mbalisi, who was a police officer. He refused them entry into his house. It was that day that I canceled that marriage. Subsequently, when the soldiers came, my mother would hide me at the plantain and cover me with the dry leaves."⁴¹

C.E. Okoroike informed that as an Air-Force Officer, he was at Ikenanzizi-Obowo while Ojukwu was at Ahiara Mbaise. At the time, the war was nearing its end in the late 1969. As a mobile officer, we were disposed to the local weapons produced by Biafra scientists. "Nigeria soldiers had everything to ensure they subdued Biafra. We made use of locally made guns, double barrels and other make-shift weapons. This was in contrast to the sophisticated weapons used by the Nigerian forces. Nevertheless, we stood our ground. We were resilient; we were defiant: we defeated Nigerian army in so many sectors and seized their weapons. People devised different means of staging a resistant front when trouble situations arose and that was a bit of what happened."⁴²

The challenges faced by Biafra soldiers in terms of inadequate weapon forced Biafrans to manufacture their own. They must salvage the situation if Biafra must survive the onslaught of the well-armed Nigerian army. Ozigbo observed that as Biafrans came increasingly under pressure, they racked their brains for solutions to their problems. Consequently, a number of directorates were constituted to cater for the various aspects of national need. There were directorates for food supply, transport, fuel, housing, manpower, utilities, and propaganda etc... the greatest technological impact was made by the Research and Production Group (RAP). Constituting this group were Biafran scientists, technologists, technicians, craftsmen drawn from the university, research and technical establishments, Colleges of Technology, the public service and private sector.⁴³ He further stated that, the weapons and equipment produced on array of military hard wares: Guns (automatic rifles, double barrels, and pistols), bullets, cartridges and grenades, mortars, shells, explosives, ground-to-air rockets; landmines and anti-tank weapons (Biafra beer, foot cutter, coffin, Ojukwu bucket, flying Ogbunigwe) shore batteries and anti-aircraft guns. Tanks and armored vehicles (Red Devils, Genocide) often converted from bulldozers and harvesters, Battery reactions.⁴⁴ Below are pictures of some of the Biafra made military hard ware found at War Museum at Umuahia.

All these weapons were made by Biafrans during the war. However, Nigeria had the upper hand and with their superior and more sophisticated weapons and ammunition, Biafra was forced to surrender. The horrendous war situation imposed untold hardship, hunger and diseases on the Biafrans. Mbano and their neighbours were not left out the ugly situation. It was said that the Biafran *ogbunigwe* was used at Amaraku in 1969. The *ogbunigwe* created a hole on the road to stop Nigerian soldiers from entering the Ugiri area where most refugees were accommodated. The influx of refugees into the area caused increased hunger and hardship.

However, the presence of some international relief agencies provided hope and helped alleviate the plight of those who managed to survive. L.E. Opara who served as World Council of Churches (W.C.C.) agent at Umueze I and Mbano Joint Hospital explained that,

During the war, the World Council of Churches which I represented operated in Umueze I and that was a source of help to many who survived. It was from my office that I left for military training. I was a teacher before the war. These bodies helped; the Caritas of the Roman Catholic rendered help to people. These bodies and the Red Cross were very helpful to those who could get to them to survive. As agents, we did

⁴¹Mbalisi interview cited in Mbalisi, Chinedu N. "Inter-Group Relations of Mbano in Imo State, Nigeria and Its Neighbours, 1906 – 2006." A PhD Dissertation defended at the Department of History and International Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2016.

⁴² C.E. Okoroike interview cited

⁴³Ozigbo, A History of Igboland...pp.168

⁴⁴Ozigbo, pp. 169-170

not discriminate in the distribution of relief materials to people.⁴⁵ Such items like salted fish, corn meal, milk, egg yolk were supplied to those affected and many people survived through their help. Those with kwashiorkor were taken to the sick bays situated in schools and churches. Even some healthy people were attended to and assisted with some quantity of corn-meal to curb their suffering and hunger.⁴⁶ Indeed, survival of many people, especially refugees depended much on the relief materials brought in by the international relief agencies stationed in most primary schools in Mbano communities, Inyishi Ikeduru, Umuezeala, Ezeoke, St. Theresa's church and many other places. The war experience of Mbano people and the Igbo at large is of a truth, devastating.

By the closing years of 1969, there were serious pointers that an end to the war was imminent. People were disillusioned with the war. Biafrans ran out of ammunition and manpower. The Nigerian Army bombarded every possible place in Igboland, including hospitals, schools, churches and private homes towards the end of the war. The number of casualties increased. According to Achebe, February 1969 alone nearly eight hundred civilians were massacred by targeted Nigerian Air-Force strikes on open markets near Owerri- Umuohiagu and Ozu-abam. The Nigerian Air-Force pilots were particularly noteworthy for not respecting Geneva Convention resolutions described civilian safe heavens such as hospitals, refugee and food distribution camps, and centres of religious worship.⁴⁷

Achebe writes that in October 1969, Ojukwu reached out desperately to the United Nations to "mediate a cease-fire as a prelude to peace negotiations, his pleas were met with a deafening silence"⁴⁸. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe had outlined a fourteen-point peace plan to be implemented by a proposed "UN Peace-Keeping force made up of international and local peace keeping forces". Azikiwe's proposal which was submitted to both United Nations officials and the Federal Government of Nigeria was rejected as "unworkable"⁴⁹. Consequently, six months from February, Nnamdi Azikiwe decided to discontinue any public support for the secessionist aspiration of Biafra and turned in his diplomatic credentials. There was general dissatisfaction over the escalating number of casualties. People became increasingly impatient to what would appear an endless conflict that had reached its thirtieth month.

For Mbano and proximate communities, the situation disrupted the peaceful socio-cultural, political and economic aspects of the people's relations. The desertion of markets during the war hindered effective trade relations between the peoples. The big markets in the area such as the Orié Amaraku, Nkwo Umuezeala and Eke Atta that served as a point of contact and interaction between the people from different communities could not function. Trade articles such as palm oil, salt, fish and rice were in short supply. Hunger and diseases destroyed many lives and kept many on the fringes of death. Mbano Joint Hospital and some sick bays were attacked and health workers ran for safety. Many families were devastated towards the end of the war. At this point the centre could no longer hold, Mbano people and their neighbours were said to have joined the clamor for an end to the war. The Biafrans could no longer afford to continue their course.

What was more, the news reached the villages that Ojukwu, the resistant Biafran leader had fled to Ivory Coast for safety. Biafra was left in the hands of Sir Louis Mbanefo, the Chief Justice and General Philip Effiong who would eventually surrender Biafra to the Gowon led Nigerian government.

Socio-Economic Effects of the War and Survival Strategies

The story of Biafra surrender to Nigeria began with news of the flight by the Biafra commander Col, Ojukwu. Hearing that Ojukwu had left the country, Biafra troops lost heart and began to massively desert the war fronts. The Nigerian troops closed in as Biafran defenses collapsed. On 12th January, 1970, the acting Head of State, Major General Philip Effiong, yielded to the pressure from Biafran troops to sue for peace. In a broadcast that afternoon, he called on the Biafran forces to lay down their arms and stop fighting. The war thus ended on 12th of January, 1970. Ojukwu got the news of Biafra's surrender in

⁴⁵ L.E. Opara interview cited

⁴⁶ C.E. Okoroike interview cited

⁴⁷ Achebe, *There was a Country...*p.212

⁴⁸ Achebe, p.212

⁴⁹ Achebe, p.215

Abidjan, Ivory Coast. It has been claimed that Gowon ordered the federal troops in Biafra to stop fighting on January 14, 1970.⁵⁰

The attendant hunger, hardship, scarcity, and diseases notwithstanding, people invariably had to contend with the aftermath of the war. People jubilated and heaved sighs of relief as they were informed by returnee Biafran soldiers about the end of the war. Mixed feelings reportedly pervaded the communities, at least, in the then Biafra enclave. One thing was certain, their fears, sleepless nights and sufferings would be reduced. The initial concern was how to survive the hard times at the end of the war. The refugees left Mbano and other communities where they had sought refuge. Many feared uncertainties and stayed longer in their host communities. Emmanuel Onyenze informed that some refugees including Nnanna Odika from Umuahia, Mr. Uche kalu and Mr. Chukwuma Ukaiwe from Ohuhu near Umuahia, were in his house till late February 1970 before they returned home.⁵¹

The end of the war exerted a devastating and overwhelming pressure on the socio-economic and general living conditions of Mbano people, their neighbours and Igboland. The war ended with the declaration made by General Gowon in a national broadcast where he made his “no victor, no vanquished” speech.⁵² It took a while for the meaning of that ending note to manifest. Achebe averred that, At the end of the thirty-month war, Biafra was vast smoldering rubble. The head count at the end of the war was perhaps three million dead, which was approximately 20 percent of the entire population. This high proportion was mostly children. The cost in human lives made it one of the bloodiest civil wars in human history.⁵³

Mbano indigenes at home and in Diaspora were affected by the war. Many private houses, school buildings, markets and bridges among other infrastructure had been destroyed by air raids. The health centres were not spared. Consequently, the people could only but count their losses and pick up their pieces. The socio- economic effects of the war appear unquantifiable. The war destroyed and impeded infrastructural and general developments in Mbano, their neighbours and around Igboland. Ozigbo rightly pointed out that” by the time Nigeria declared war on Biafra in July, 1967, the Igbo had attained a high degree of economic prosperity, modern industrial growth, educational advancement and social sophistication”⁵⁴. These developments in infrastructure were either put on-hold or destroyed. Some of the secondary schools built before the war, were shattered. For instance, Boys Grammar School Ibeme (later Ibeme High School) built in 1963 and the house where the first principal Mr. W. Ekwoanya lived was destroyed by air raids. Others were Boys Grammar School Onicha-Uboma built in 1963, Girls Secondary School Atta 1965 and Teacher Training College (TTC and later Girl’s Secondary School Ezeoke) built in 1967, by the Anglican Church in collaboration with communities were affected. St. Aquinas Secondary School, Anara built by the Catholic Mission in 1962 was not spared.⁵⁵The same happened to majority of the primary schools used as refugee camps. The buildings were equally attacked and shattered by air raids. Following the destructions of houses and schools, many people were rendered homeless. School children who were able to return to school, studied under the trees before the buildings were reconstructed. Economic activities at the Amaraku, NkwoUmuezeala, Eke-Atta and other major markets in the area, was reportedly carried out under the hot and scorching sun. Traders were a times beaten by rain.

Business men and women who lived in urban centres like Owerri, Aba, and Port-Harcourt were forced back to their villages without any property. S.B. Onwuka comments that “the socio- economic effects was really bad for the people because the economy was battered, most of people lost all their property, especially, those that were resident outside Mbano. Many were in Igirinta near Port-Harcourt, Aba, Onitsha, Oru, Ogbaru and Enugu. A few were in the north and some were trapped in those places. The

⁵⁰Ozigbo, *A History of Igboland...*, p.162

⁵¹Onyenze interview cited

⁵² Achebe, p. 226

⁵³ Achebe, p. 227

⁵⁴Ozigbo, p. 172

⁵⁵ For details see, A. O Iwuagwu, *The Foundation of the Anglican Church in Imo State, 1905-2000...*p.185-186. The interviews of with Mr. Orbed Nwachukwu of Ezeoke and Nze Boniface Chukwuma Alagwa of Umuagwu, UmuakaguNsu were cited.

war shattered the economy of the entire Biafra.⁵⁶

At the end of the war, the Biafran currency became worthless. This further heightened the socio-economic hardship of the people. Money saved in banks by Biafrans was seized by the federal government under Gen. Gowon. Obi-Ani writes that initially, General Gowon insisted that nothing would be paid in exchange for the Biafran currency, describing it as worthless and useless. However, Gowon later relented in his stand and the Igbo people who deposited the old Biafran currency, got (£20) each irrespective of the amount of the Biafra money an individual deposited. This token gesture cost the Federal Government about £4 million.⁵⁷

Obviously, the surrender of Biafra and the end of the war had implications for inter-group relations between Mbanjo people and their neighbours. First, the cessation of hostilities enabled refugees to return to their homes and communities. Mbanjo communities were free from the challenge of overpopulation caused by the war. Secondly, schools that were closed because of the war were reopened. School children and teachers resumed learning. Mutual and peaceful interactions between pupils from different communities resumed. Markets were cleared of bush and trade continued. Trade relations between communities which were affected by the war resumed as people went to different markets to get scarce food items. Movements of people from one place to another gradually improved. Interactions between people from different communities in Mbanjo became possible in the course of the resumed movements and trade activities. The bridges destroyed towards the end of the war to prevent armored tanks used by the Nigerian army from reaching the interior villages were repaired. Such bridges at Onuimo, Duruwerre and Mbaa rivers connected one Mbanjo community to another and their neighbours. They served as links for economic and socio-cultural interaction between people. Over time, communities started observing their cultural celebrations that were invaluable factors of contact and interaction between them. Peaceful co-existence gradually returned as tension and fear reduced. However, mutual and peaceful relations continued between people and communities amidst fear and tension at the end of the war.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that violence and destruction of lives and property of the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria was hallmark of Nigeria-Biafra war of over 36 months. The Igbo suffered deaths in millions and property unquantifiable. The socioeconomic and political fabrics of humane living were shattered. Hopes were dashed. The future was bleak. The victors rejoice as they exterminated innocent lives of children even the unborn all in defence of “national interest.” This paper has been able to show the individual and collective experiences of Mbanjo people during the Nigeria- Biafra war of 1967-1970. Indeed, Mbanjo people fully participated in the war and shared in the bitter experience, hardship and the carnage of the era. Many who were drafted into the war lost their lives at the war front. Many others who returned from the war shared their bitter experiences with the writer. Many saw how their friend and brothers were murdered right before them. Yet, some others returned with different degrees of wounds and amputations which left bitter physical scars that keep the unfading memory of the war in them.

Again, many infrastructures such as schools, Churches, markets and hospitals in Mbanjo and other proximate neighbouring communities such as Ogwa, Ata, Amaimo in Ikeduru, Inyishi Ahiazu Mbaise were affected by the war. Some of them though were used by the Caritas and Red Cross organisations they were not spared by the marauding Nigeria soldiers whose intention was to destroy every part of Igboland. The experiences as narrated by eye witnesses and participants in the war in Mbanjo and its environs showed a dislocation of the natural peace that pervaded the area before the war. It was evident that the social security and peace in the area was jeopardized by the war. Most farms were over-taken by bushes and many people lost their yams and cassava to thieves. Soldiers carted away whatever valuable belongings and domestic animals they saw around. The social *status quo* was shaken from its roots. Institutions of social interactions such as festivals, schools and churches ceased to function because of the war. Despite the traumatized experiences of the people as exposed in the research, the people of Mbanjo like other Igbo areas were resilient enough in their survival endeavours.

⁵⁶Onwuka interview cited

⁵⁷ Obi-Ani, p.24