

## **THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA WAR: ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AND QUEST FOR SURVIVAL IN BIAFRA, 1967-1970**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Nigeria was artificially structured and named by the British. This nomenclatural coloration brought different ethnic nationalities together. These ethnic nationalities located in different parts of the country with distinct languages, history and cultural backgrounds and values, were made to coexist together under the same political unit. Little effort was made by the British to achieve political unity among these groups. With the first and second military coups in 1966, ethnicity became a major factor in Nigeria's political lexicon. By 1967, Nigeria experienced a major conflict that almost dismembered the country. The war had serious economic consequences on Biafra as a result of the economic blockade and other stringent policies imposed on them by the Nigerian government. This paper therefore, interrogates issues emanating from the economic blocked and the challenges faced by Biafran citizens during this period. It examines survival strategies adopted by the Biafran government, Biafran citizens and efforts made by international humanitarian organisations to support the people. In the content analysis, this paper made use of both primary and secondary sources. The study identified both positive and negative survival efforts made by the people of Biafra.*

**KEYWORDS:** Nigeria, Biafra, War, economic challenges, survival in Biafra,

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### **INTRODUCTION**

At the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war, the federal government of Nigeria adopted an economic measure popularly referred to as economic blocked. This policy made it difficult for Biafra to receive goods, medicine, food and relief materials from the international community. This was aimed at forcing the Biafran government to surrender and abandon the bid for secession. The blocked had great impact on the people of Biafra as it led to sickness, starvation, malnutrition, economic impoverishment, poor health conditions and massive death. Those who survived the economic blockade suffered diverse hardships. The blockade lasted from 1967-1970 when the war ended. During this period of economic hardship, the people of Biafra devised different means of survival as they were not allowed to import and export goods in and out of Biafra. This paper takes a critical look at the condition in Biafra during the war, its effect on the

life of the people and efforts made by the Biafran people to survive the economic hardship caused by the war and the blockade.

### **Incidents of 1966 and the Nigeria-Biafra War**

Taking a look at Nigeria after independence, ethnic division lingered until the outbreak of Nigeria-Biafra war in 1967. Most Nigerians remained loyal to their ethnic nationalities rather than the nation state, Nigeria. Structural imbalance and ethnic chauvinism during the pre-war period encouraged hatred, suspicion, rivalry and division among these ethnic nationalities instead of unity. Odumegwu Ojukwu considering this imbalance argued that “the Northerners made it clear in unmistakable terms that they did not want people of Eastern Nigeria in the Federation. Since the 1950’s, the people of Eastern Nigeria were expropriated and discriminated against in parts of Nigeria other than their own”.<sup>1</sup>

The division and suspicion were heightened after the first coup and influenced some actions taken by these ethnic nationalities. After the assassination of General Aguiyi Ironsi, the Head of State and Lt. Col. Fajuyi, the Governor of Western region, the rebellious officers were determined to have things their own way to the extent that in their view no Southern officer was worthy enough to be entrusted with the government of the nation. Brigadier Ogundipe and other senior Southern army officers who came next in rank to Gen. A. Ironsi were left in no doubt as to their unsuitability for the leadership of either the country or the army. To these Northern officers, only a Northerner was acceptable and as a result of their desire the mantle of leadership eventually fell on Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, the most senior Northern officer in the Nigerian army. At that time, there were at least six surviving Southern officers including Lt. Col. C. Odumegwu Ojukwu who were Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon’s senior in military seniority.<sup>2</sup> The order of seniority and succession was not followed by the Northern officers who were bent on taking over the leadership of the country. This was not acceptable to some Southern officers and further polarized the military and Nigeria’s political landscape.

Even at this stage of political cross road, many Igbo were grieved by the revengeful nature of the July, 1966 counter coup organized by the Northern military officers, but were still ready to make tolerate them and bring about peace. But the Northern attitude was believed to be a reaction to what many saw as an over-reaction to the perceived “Igbo coup” of January 15, 1966. These Igbo were still prepared to cooperate with the Federal Government to bring about peace and settlement in the country. It was not until the renewed outbreak of violence from September to October 1966 in most parts of Northern Nigeria against civilian population including women and children of Eastern Nigeria but especially of Igbo extraction, that many Easterners began to feel that what was happening was not just a reaction by the Northerners caused by the January coup, but a deliberate attempt to eliminate the Igbo race.<sup>3</sup> In the midst of this confusion, the Federal Government failed to convince the Igbo that this was not the case. It failed for example to make meaningful financial provision for the families and dependants of those who lost their lives or to help resettle the multitude of refugees impoverished by their losses as a result of the massacre. The Federal Government promised to make available the sum of 300,000 pounds an amount that was a far cry from the one million pounds voted by the Eastern Regional Government. While

individuals and various organizations including the Obas and Chiefs of Western Nigeria abundantly demonstrated their concern and their grief, the Federal Government demonstrated what in the mind of many Easterners was callous indifference to the fate of their kinsmen. This attitude on the part of the Federal Government stirred in the minds of many Easterners the feeling that the administration in Lagos was against them. As a result of this it became immaterial to the Igbo what the intention of General Yakubu Gowon and his advisers may have been, just as it had proved immaterial to the Northerners what the intentions of Major Chukwemeka Nzeogwu and his group of January 1996 might have been. The impression was created and embedded in the mind of Easterners that the Easterners as a people were no longer wanted or cared for in Nigeria.<sup>4</sup>

Explaining some of the incidents of 1966 particularly the killings, Wole Soyinka pointed out that “.... then the cyclostyled leaflet I asked a fluent Hausa speaker, to translate for me, was an open, inflammatory call for a jihad against the Igbo ‘*yaminrin*’. It called teachers to keep their schools closed, parents to keep their children at home and all true natives of the soil to stay within doors until they have wreaked their will on the southern infidels”.<sup>5</sup> This incident as described by Soyinka began under the leadership of Aguiyi Ironsi and it was the beginning of the pogrom against the Easterners in the North. This continued in a higher and uncontrolled dimension under General Yakubu Gowon. As a result of the nonchalant attitude of the federal government during this period, the Eastern region under Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu was forced to secede from the rest of the country. In his maiden speech to the people, he said:

....now, therefore, I, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, military Governor of Eastern Nigeria, by virtue of the authority and pursuant to the principles recited, do hereby solemnly proclaim that the territory and region known as and called Eastern Nigeria together with her continental self and territorial waters shall henceforth be an independent sovereign state of the name and title of the Republic of Biafra.<sup>6</sup>

With the events of the period, it was obvious that the Easterners were no longer safe in Nigeria as affirmed by C.O. Ojukwu, at this point it was imperative for the people to establish their own country. Even with little propaganda, many south easterners strongly believed that Biafra was the only answer to their survival. For instance at the Sacred Heart College, Aba, the Biafran *raison d'être* was sacred among students, young and old. Students believed that C. O. Ojukwu stood for justice and they all admired and supported that position. To stand up against the massacre of Easterners in the North was the right thing to do and C. O. Ojukwu to them was a good man for doing just that.<sup>7</sup>

### **Economic Blockade against Biafra**

About ten million Biafrans became refugees in Biafra which also became an extensive refugee camp.<sup>8</sup> After the fall of Port Harcourt, the only airport town and point of contact to the outside

world, a few planes landed on a highway which was converted into airfield, carrying milk, drugs and ammunitions. Through this means, tons of cargos containing essential goods trickled into Biafra. The government at Lagos did not want this aerial bridge as this would mean the recognition of the existence of Biafra. On July 6, 1967, the federal government under Yakubu Gowon warned that planes without proper authorization from Lagos would be shot down<sup>9</sup>

As the war progressed, the head of Nigeria's military government, General Yakubu Gowon vowed to crush the secessionists (Biafra) within three months and imposed ruthless economic blockade on Biafra. It took the federal government of Nigeria three years to achieve this aim as the Biafrans proved tough opponents for the federal troops, despite being outnumbered and under-equipped. Many Biafrans preferred to die rather than to surrender to the Federal Government of Nigeria. The blockade prevented the Biafran nation from acquiring arms, drugs, food and other basic needs. Thousands starved to death each day, photographs of children with bulging eyes and skeletal bodies shocked the world.<sup>10</sup> All proposals put forward by Lieutenant Colonel C. O. Ojukwu and other concerned parties like the international Red Cross, the Roman Catholic Church and some newspapers which contained no built-in military advantage to either side, were completely rejected by the Nigerian government with the full blessing of Whitehall.<sup>11</sup> The economic aspect of the effects of the blocked was heavy. There was no trade going back and forth in Biafra. Ships were not coming in, Biafra depended on little supplies which they managed throughout the course of the war.<sup>12</sup> With the blockade and the war the supply of imported protein was cut off.<sup>13</sup> The Nigerian government blockaded the region from the sea, thus preventing the shipment of critical items and services to (Biafra). The Nigerian government also recaptured Rivers state, cutting off the oil revenue with which Biafra had expected to finance the war, suspended telephone, telegraph, and postal services and cancelled all air flights to the region, except those cleared by Lagos. The enforcement of a comprehensive blockade led to severe shortage of food, medicine and clothing causing heavy casualties among Biafran civilians. Children, women, men and later soldiers were slowly dying in thousands. About three million Biafrans are believed to have lost their lives, an estimated one million of them as a result of severe malnutrition. More than three million Biafrans became internally displaced persons or refugees.<sup>14</sup>

### **Quest for Survival in Biafra during the War**

The commencement of the Nigeria Biafra war in 1967 brought with it a lot of confusion and distraction in governance especially in the Eastern region as the region was not prepared for the war. In an effort to break C. O. Ojukwu's power base in the Eastern region, the Federal Government of Nigeria under the leadership of Yakubu Gowon immediately divided the country into twelve States on May 30, 1967. As a result of this, the core Igbo territory came under the East Central State with Ukpabi Asika as the Sole Administrator. Colonel C. O. Ojukwu refused to recognize this arrangement and continued to be in-charge as the rightful leader of the Eastern region.<sup>15</sup> The Nigerian government did this in order to weaken the strength and unity of the Eastern region and end the secession as quickly as possible. Although this affected the strength of the region to present a common front against their perceived enemy but it did not end the war as anticipated by Yakubu Gowon.

With the declaration of Biafra's sovereignty and war on Biafra by the Federal Government of Nigeria, the level of economic activities obviously declined drastically starting from mid-1967. Export virtually ceased and industries that depended on imports generally closed down and trade with the rest of Nigeria almost vanished. Trade with the Mid-West continued through the creeks and passable borders routes. However, the introduction of separate Nigerian and Biafran currencies early in 1968 reduced such trade to barter levels.<sup>16</sup> As earlier mentioned, imports from overseas were initially confined to occasional flights into Port Harcourt and to coastal smuggling. But airborne traffic was further reduced by the loss of Port Harcourt airfield to Federal Military Government of Nigeria in May 1968. There were also shortage of consumer luxury goods; but supplies of domestically produced food and consumer goods were not immediately affected.

Thousands of Biafran refugees who returned from Northern Nigeria after the September/October 1966 massacres returned mostly to their villages and as a result food production increased. Biafra initially showed remarkable flexibility in meeting the demands posed first by the blockade and then by the war but economic problems later worsened as fighting continued.<sup>17</sup> With the displacement of the Biafrans as a result of the war, the production of food within the region was adversely affected and this led to more death, sicknesses and malnutrition.

As a result of the war, most of the policies and programmes of the post independence administration of Eastern Nigeria were either temporarily or completely abandoned. Plantations, farm settlements and other agricultural establishments that characterized government policies at that time were abandoned. Even the aggressive marketing of fertilizer and other government agricultural extension services suffered severe neglect. More than ever before, food crop production came under sever threat as the outbreak of the war disrupted food production and this led to massive food importation since the peaceful environment required for agricultural production was lacking. Similarly, several agricultural infrastructures were destroyed during this period, while most of the programmes initiated under the Eastern Nigeria Development Plan 1962-1968 were abandoned.<sup>18</sup>

When the war broke out on July 6, 1967, Biafra had perhaps as much as \$40 million in foreign exchange in European banks. It had at least \$100 million in unissued Nigerian currency stored in its bank vaults to replace notes as they wore out. After secession, Biafra began selling these notes overseas at substantial discount to get foreign exchange to pay for arms, other war materials and its essential propaganda activities. But in early January 1968, the Nigerian Government issued new Nigerian notes and this reduced Biafran chances of selling its stock of old notes abroad.<sup>19</sup>

As a result of the devastation and insecurity caused by the war, hunger increased in Biafra, men could not move about freely because they were conscripted into the Biafran army. The economic blockade increased the acute food shortage in Biafra. This resulted in increased malnutrition among Biafrans especially children and pregnant women.<sup>20</sup> Livestock and fowls disappeared from Biafra and protein deficiency and starvation were inconceivable.<sup>21</sup> Women were very active

in meeting the food needs of Biafran soldiers. The acute shortage grew worse as the war progressed. Available supplies were never enough to meet the needs of either the armed forces or the civilian population. The near-total sea to air blockade of the new Republic of Biafra was perfected with the aid of foreign governments. It is believed that former officers of the British Royal Navy supervised the blockading operations of the Nigerian Navy and they did this with full knowledge and support of the British government led by Labour Party Prime Minister, Harold Wilson.<sup>22</sup> Also Lyndon Johnson, and the United States president during the period, were alleged to have backed Nigeria and supported the blockade. This was because Europe and United States of America could not afford to have a Japan in Africa and therefore believed that Biafra must be crushed. As the encirclement of the new republic increased, the food producing areas within Biafra.<sup>23</sup> During this period, people could not farm very well as they had done before the war for fear of being conscripted into the Biafran army or being killed by the war. There was fear everywhere in Biafra, women could not carry on with their local trade and a few ventured into “*ahia* attack” (buying goods from the enemy area) but this was considered a very dangerous undertaking.

The Nigerian government adopted starvation as an instrument of the war against Biafra. In 1968 for example, the Nigerian army set up positions along Aba/Umuahia road and cut off all food supplies to these areas. As a result of the blockade, relief materials were not allowed into Biafra. Few relief materials that came into Biafra came in at night by air and on dirty runways. Many pregnant women died from malnutrition related ailments particularly kwashiorkor.<sup>24</sup> The vultures knew when to descend on the remains of the Biafrans with little or no resistance<sup>25</sup>

Hearts G. A. Ofoeze as cited by Ezeogueri-Oyewole Anne Nnenna, observed that starvation was introduced in the spirit and principle of Igbo annihilation. This was evident in the statement made by Brigadier-General Adekunle, Commander, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Commando Division, Nigerian Army to a French reporter “I want to see no Red Cross, no Caritas, no World Council of Churches, no Pope, no Missionary and no United Nations delegates. I want to prevent even one Igbo from having even one piece to eat before their capitulation, we shoot at anything that moves and when our troops march into the centre of the Igbo territory, we shoot at anything even at things that do not move”.<sup>26</sup> Even the theme song of radio Kaduna affirmed the Nigerian government’s desire to crush the Biafrans “let us go and crush them. We will pillage their property, rape their womenfolk, kill off their men-folk and leave them uselessly weeping. We will complete the pogrom of 1966”<sup>27</sup> Also Obafemi Awolowo, the Minister of Finance in 1968 while supporting the Nigerian government blockade against Biafra agreed that “all is fair in war and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don’t see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight harder”<sup>28</sup> The food crisis in Biafra was caused in part by the Federal military strategy of placing an economic embargo on Biafra. Although the primary motive may have been to starve Biafra of military resources, this policy worsened the food situation in Biafra. Salt mines around *Okposi* and *Uburu* in Biafra fell to Nigeria early in the war; this led to scarcity and a sharp increase in the price of the commodity. Milk and stockfish also became very scarce. The number of those that died of starvation in Biafra during the war was put at more than two million people, 70 per cent of them children under the age of five.<sup>29</sup> Emefiena Ezeani puts the number of death in the war at 3.5 million.<sup>30</sup> Many families lost their children and loved ones

as a result of starvation and malnutrition. Death became a common experience in families in Biafra. The impact of the blockade on Biafra was devastating mainly on the civilians and adversely affected secession bid of Biafra. On the side of the Federal Government of Nigeria, it was a policy that needed to be sustained even with the negative effect on the people of Biafra.

By mid-April 1968, Biafra had lost the Cross River valley along most of its length and part of the Ibibio homeland in the provinces of *Uyo*, *Annang* and *Eket* and land containing the richest earth in the country.<sup>31</sup> During this period, reports from the International Red Cross representatives in Biafra, Swiss businessman Mr. Heinrich Jaggi, the Catholic Caritas leaders, the World Council of Churches, the Biafran Red Cross and the doctors of several nationalities who had stayed on, confirmed the seriousness of problem. There was an increased incidence of kwashiorkor as result of protein deficiency, which mainly affected children.<sup>32</sup> By July 1968, 650 refugee camps had been set up and they contained 700,000 haggard bundles of human waiting hopelessly for a meal. Outside the camps, squatting in the bush, was the remainder of an estimated four and a half to five million displaced persons.<sup>33</sup>

The conscription of able-bodied men into the Biafran military after an initial unsuccessful attempt to encourage voluntary enlistment increased the problem of food scarcity and further impoverished the people of Biafra. This further depleted available hands in agriculture.<sup>34</sup> Agriculture which was the main stay of the people's economy before the war became unattractive to them.<sup>35</sup>

Commenting on the situation in Biafra during the war, C. Odumegwu Ojukwu posited that food shortage was a problem Biafra faced during the war period. It was a challenge to Biafra as a people, to Biafra's physical prowess and to Biafra's own initiative. He affirmed that things were tough in Biafra and depending on relief materials was not the solution as the supplies were inadequate and Biafra's survival could not depend on it, as it was only a bonus. Efforts were encouraged towards agricultural production of various crops and animals that guaranteed the survival of the people.<sup>36</sup> But these efforts were hampered by the war situation and this resulted to serious hunger.

In order to reduce the problem of the blockade, the Biafrans set up intensive chicken and egg farms to boost production of available protein-rich foods. This effort would have paid off but was compounded by the loss of the food-rich provinces and the influx of refugees from those areas.<sup>37</sup> Cut off from everything, Biafra became resourceful, created its own money (the Biafran pound) and made its own weapons. Biafra became creative in order to sustain the war. Lorries were fitted with rusty sheets of metal to make armored vehicles, small tourist planes were remodeled to drop bombs.<sup>38</sup> A research and production department was created, made up of engineers and scientists who made innovative home-made weapons. Such weapons included mines, rifles, grenades and armored vehicles that were dubbed "red devils".<sup>39</sup>

At *Uli* airport, where the aid planes unloaded their consignments, such as rice, stock fish, cornmeal, cod and salted stock fish and salt. These items were lucrative items for disposal. At *Uli*

airport, a sort of early morning market emerged. Here young women brought piles of Biafran currency notes to buy stolen relief goods stolen by air force military personnel for resale. Soldiers made a lot of money from this although such women sometimes did not pay with cash but in kind. Biafran women suffered different forms of humiliation and death during the war. They were the most predominant bread winners throughout the war. The *Uli* airport market went beyond ordinary exchange of food materials. It included the legitimate exchanges of Biafran artworks for foreign cigarettes and alcohol between foreign flight crews and locals<sup>40</sup>

Affirming the role of women during the war, Gloria Chukwu as cited by Ebere Onwudiwe, averred that the dangerous trans-border trade during the Nigerian-Biafran war was dominated by Biafran women. They were involved in the illegal and smuggling exchanges between the former Mid-West and Biafra as well as that between the Benue-Plateau region and Biafra. The Biafran government was forced to aid and abate the food smugglers. Chukwu affirmed that the Biafran government went as far as issuing special passes to some smugglers that sold food to the military barracks. This enabled the women smugglers to go through military check points.<sup>41</sup> These forms of trade helped many starved Biafrans whose lives were endangered by the economic blockade which was Nigeria's effective weapon of mass starvation.

However, those who engaged in this type of trade *ahia ataaki* or *ahia* attack as it was popularly called suffered different forms of humiliation and death. They were sometimes forced to marry the soldiers against their will and some were killed by Nigerian air raids along the way. The dangers involved did not stop these women from continuing to make this kind of dangerous win the war effort.<sup>42</sup>

As the war progressed and became intense, there were no more cats and dogs in Biafra when the Catholic Church decided to put up the notice "eat rats, frog, insects and snakes" on the walls of some communities. Rats became from the beginning of the famine very sought for in the Biafran markets.<sup>43</sup> Due to the blockade by the Nigerian government and the consequent lack of food which became the hallmark of the Biafran society during this period, some people in Biafra resorted to eating of human beings and rodents in order to survive. The victims in most cases were Nigerian soldiers who missed their way and strayed into some Biafran communities such people were killed and their flesh eaten. Dick Nwanosike, underscores the fact that human flesh was a good delicacy for the famished Biafrans and it helped in sustaining the people during the war.<sup>44</sup> As a result of the importance attached to human meat during this period, some Biafran citizens also lost their life as some of them chased armed strayed Nigerian soldiers for meat. An incident happened at *Umuaja* village in the present day *Osisioma Ngwa* Local Government Area where some Nigerian soldiers in 1969 who were dislodged on their movement towards *Ugba* junction in *Isiala Ngwa* South Local Government Area scattered and ran into some *Ngwa* villages were unfortunately eaten by these locals. On this occasion some of these soldiers missed their way and could not speak the local (Igbo) language when they were greeted by the local people and this resulted to a massive hunt for them. One of the Nigerian soldiers (a Major) who was being pursued by the locals fell into an abandoned pit toilet and a particular man from *Umuaja* village who was interested in eating the Nigerian soldier's private part (penis) and



kidney could not wait for Biafran soldiers to arrive from *Umuoba*, rushed to the pit toilet thinking that the Nigerian soldier was already dead but unknown to him, the soldier who was alive, shot and killed the man instantly. The Nigerian soldier was eventually killed, his body shared among the people and his head used in burying the *Umuaja* man that he killed.<sup>45</sup>

Dick Nwanosike affirmed that non-Nigerian soldiers were also killed and eaten, these included Biafrans who were regarded as saboteurs, Nigerian spies, people whose identity were unclear and very sick people from Biafra who they assumed would not survive (sick or injured) the war and were abandoned by their people and those whose identities were not known within the area. In order to avoid death after eating the human flesh, certain roots were used to prepare the meat, key among such roots was pepper fruit root. This was an antidote to charms as it neutralized charms worn or imbedded in the body of these victims. According to Nwanosike, anybody who eats a human flesh without neutralizing it might become sick, blind or die. And human meat is more palatable when dried on fire.<sup>46</sup>

At some point during the war, even soldiers began to eat human flesh in order to survive. According to Jacques Hardwin as cited by Ikechukwu Orjinta, “in a calabash the foot of a dead person was being stewed slowly....”.<sup>47</sup> For fifteen days this was the only delicious meal of the troops. For days soldiers, wretchedly dressed in rags and bare-footed were eating only leaves and roots of trees. So they decided after a prayer to start eating meat so as to withstand the blow. A Nigerian soldier paid the price of this feasting.<sup>48</sup>

During the war when the blockade became so serious and basic needs were not met by the people, pawpaw leaf became a substitute for detergents. People used pawpaw leaf to wash cloths as substitute for soap.<sup>49</sup> People who could no longer afford the daily upkeep of their children or whose children became very sick abandoned them to die, while they moved on with their healthy children. However, some good spirited individuals sometimes adopted such children.<sup>50</sup>

As a result of Nigerian government's efforts to end the war, they engaged in fierce air and land attacks without minding the cost on the people of Biafra. This however devastated the people and Biafra as a nation. But the Biafrans strongly believed that the only thing that will guarantee their survival is the survival of the Biafran nation. Therefore they devised means of survival and movement at the face of this ghastly confrontation. In their movement some people who had bicycle resorted to tying their children (the weak, sick and tender) on bicycle carriers and this became a norm among the Biafrans. Children, who could not walk on their own, were either carried by their mothers or tied at the back of the bicycle with other loads to enable the family walk fast and avoid being killed by the invading Nigerian army.<sup>51</sup> As a result of the hardship faced by the people, most people in Biafra sold their personal belongings in a bid to survive and to have fewer loads to carry about. This left the people with little or no personal belonging during the war but aided their movement from place to place.<sup>52</sup>

Due to consistent bombardment, the people of Biafra began to cover zinc houses with palm fronds and grasses. This prevented the war planes from noticing such houses.<sup>53</sup> When the war

became so sever in 1968 and 1969, food and food condiments became ostentatious. In order to bridge the gap caused by the scarcity of vegetable, Biafrans resorted to the use of cassava leafs and other leafs that were hitherto not considered edible. All these provided the required nutrients for the impoverished people of Biafra. Even soldiers who were fighting in the front lines sometimes used cassava leaf for soup making.<sup>54</sup> During the period it was difficult for Biafrans to find clean water for consumption therefore the people depended on any type of water they could lay their hands on and this sometimes resulted to illnesses. Those that fell ill during the war depended on drugs from aid organisations or made use of herbs.

In Biafra stealing from fellow Biafrans became common. Items abandoned by people in their houses were stolen by others who either sold or made use of them. Therefore in a bid to avoid this, people sometimes buried their belongings in the ground.<sup>55</sup> Stealing from the Nigerian military in 1969 when they fully entered *Aba Ngwa* and communities around *Aba* became another means of survival. For instance, the Nigerian soldiers had a small camp at *Ibeku Ngwa* in *Osioma Ngwa* Local Government Area, this camp was severally raided by the local people who went to the place in search of food not minding the cost. According to Dick Nwanosike, people also stole other valuables from the soldiers such as military rifles and bicycles. These raiders most times retained the bicycles but gave the Biafran military the rifles.<sup>56</sup>

Migration to safe areas and areas where people could get food became visible as people migrated in groups to minimally safe areas.<sup>57</sup> In order to support the Biafrans, Biafran students and friends overseas raised a lot of funds for relief. Wealthy nationals, with foreign accounts, turned them over, in exchange for local currency. Business men such as Chief Nnanna Kanu, Nwosu-Ijeme and J.J. Ogbulafor, used their own money abroad, to procure goods and essentials, which they sold at home, to relieve the acute shortage.<sup>58</sup> Some Biafran women as a result of the scarcity of food, were forced to marry Biafran soldiers who provided food and their other needs for them. However, in order to make themselves happy in the midst of the hardship, suffering and insecurity, Biafrans composed songs that comforted and encouraged them to continue in their struggle believing that God will grant them victory at the end of the war.<sup>59</sup>

## CONCLUSION

With the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1967, the Federal Government of Nigeria blockaded the new Republic of Biafra in order to force them to surrender and abandon the secessionist idea. The blockade adversely affected food supply from outside Biafra and the level of economic activities declined sharply. Imports from overseas were confined to occasional flights into Biafra and exports ceased. Industries dependent on imports generally ceased, production and trade with the rest of Nigeria greatly reduced, however trade with the Mid-West continued through the creeks and remote roads.

Biafra got relief materials from relief agencies but that was not enough to sustain the people. People died in large numbers in Biafra most of the victims of the blockade were mainly women and children. As a result of the scarcity of food and other daily requirements in Biafra, the

dangerous trans-border trade emerged in their quest for survival. This trade was dominated by Biafran women who were involved in the smuggling exchanges. Smuggled items were sold to the military men and the civilians. This helped many starved Biafrans whose lives were endangered by the economic blockade. During the war, Biafrans adopted diverse forms of survival strategies as enumerated in this paper. People ate human beings, rodents, engaged in risky business ventures, used cassava leaf for soup, abandoned their children, sold and abandoned their personal belongings, covered their houses with palm frond and did other things in order to survive bombardment and hunger. The Nigeria-Biafra war and the economic blockade greatly impoverished the people of Biafra, contributed to their defeat and left an inalienable experience in the hearts of Biafrans.

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