RIGHT OF EXISTENCE OF THE IGBO NATION: THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR EXPERIENCE 
(1966-1970)

PROF. BARR. M.O EKWONWA (Ph.D.)
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY /ANTHROPOLOGY
MADONNA UNIVERSITY NIGERIA
OKIJA CAMPUS
ANAMBRA STATE

Abstract
is an attempt to educate the Igbos of the need to avoid any situation that would bring a repeat of their threat
to existence as a people as happened during the Nigerian Civil war (1967-1970), following the 1966 coup. The
article also aims at reminding Igbos, who experienced the war, of their dark day and months and those who
did not witness the war either because they were not yet born or that they were too young to understand or appreciate what actually took place (the tears of the Igbo)to know what happened. Finally it aims at giving the
general reader who many come across this article a greater insight into what he or she may have read
or heard of at one time or the other, or desire to read when opportunity like this offers itself. The essay is
divided into three main sections: section one discusses briefly, the Igbo Nation of Nigeria; Section two, the 1966-1967 pogrom; and section three, the 1967-1970 genocide, all direct to elimination of the Igbo Nation. The essay concludes by both advising and educating, the Igbo Nation on the danger of allowing what took place between 1966 and 1970 to repeat. This is so because the resentment of the Igbo by other ethnic groups in Nigeria is as old as the history of Nigeria itself. The first attempt to eliminate the Igbo Nation out of
existence and to create space for other ethnic groups did not materialise as planned. Who knows what
would happen if any of such opportunities offers its self again:?

Introduction
The topic, “Right of Existence of the Igbo Nation: The Civil war experience (1966-1970)’’ is a very exciting
one. To Igbos who experienced the events, it is a reminder of the dark days and months of the people or days
or months of tears. To others who did not experience the war because they were too young to understand
what want on or that they were not yet born or were born within the period, such story would either be
shocking or incredible or both. But no matter how one may take it, the truth must be told. If not to educate
the people, at least to remind them that they should avoid any situation, no matter how badly received that
would cause a repeat of such unwholesome experience in future.

To make the discussion easy to follow and to be understood, the topic is divided into three sections: (a) who
the Igbos are; (b) 1966-1967 (the days and months of progrom) and (c) 1967- 1970 (the days and month of
genocide). The 1966 days and months of progrom tells a story of how Igbo resident in Northern Nigeria were
brutally slaughtered, maimed, their houses burnt and property looted, and few who managed to escape the
onslaught ran back home empty handed. The story equally shows how the returnees were received by their
kits and kins at home. The other segment 1967-1970 period of genocide tells story of how the Igbo civilian
population were massacred at home when the Nigerian forces invaded Biafra. For example, Asaba, Massacre, Calabar massacre, Warri, Uyo, Okigwe, Oji River, Aba, Owerri Ameke Item and Niger River Delta City of Port Harcourt, to mention but a few (Umozurike 2000).

Within the period under review, more drastic measures were taken by Nigerian military administration to
ensure that no life was left in Eastern Region. Chief Abafomi Awolowo, the then Finance Minister of General
Gowon advised that Biafra be blockaded by sea, land and air, noting that hunger is an instrument of war. Many civilians lost their lives including children and the aged. Many suffered kwashiorkor and died. Schools, hospitals, churches, markets and refugee camps were subjected to systematic daily air raids, which claimed many civilian lives. (Umozurike 200).

At the end of the war in 1970, Chief Owolowo ordered that every Igbo man should deposit any money he
has to the Nigerian banks no matter the quantity for exchange. The people did so only to be rewarded with forty Naira (Twenty pound) per every depositor. People lost hope of survival and more deaths were recorded.
Many turned to begging, while able-bodied ones turned to execution of social vices, which has lingered till today both in Igbo land and in Nigeria as a whole.

The paper concludes by advising Igbos to avoid any situation or event that would cause a repeat of the 1966-1970 Civil war experience. It went further to state that Nigerian’s pathetic attempt to exterminate Igbos instead of celebrating them is one of the fundamental reasons the country has not developed as it should.

To begin with who are the Igbo? Who are the Igbo may mean different thing to different people. Who are the Igbo would mean, how does one identify himself or herself as Igbo? Though the above question is phrased in the present, a satisfactory answer to it must take into account the past otherwise, the impression may be created that the Igbo are recent intrusion into Nigeria demographic landscape (Onwuejiegwu, 1992). This everyone knows, may be incorrect and unfortunate.

To define the Igbo in this paper as a people reference has to be made as to the location of their home land within the territorial space, which, since about 1900, has been known as Nigeria. In this connection, we can say that the Igbo are distinct nationality or ethnic group which inhabits that portion of Nigeria territory bounded by the Igala to the North-east, the Idoma to the North, the Ekoid Bantu to the North-west, the Annang-ibibio to the East. The Ijaw and related people to the West (Afigbo, 2000). Out of the 36 states in Nigeria, the Igbo are found in eight, which is approximately a one fourth of the states of Nigeria. Thus, any discussion of the Igbo in the Nigerian economy and Right of Existence must have the scope of Igbo territorial occupation in mind.

Politically Igbo people have no centralized government manipulated by the feudal lords in the North. Their society is rather republican. Yet the Igbo have socio-political ways of traditional governance (Eteng, 2004). Economically, the Igbo have been the most industrious nationality in Nigeria, and perhaps in the Negro world. Socially, the Igbo are incontestably among the most sociable, receptive, outgoing and adaptive. The Igbo man mirrors the spirit of Nigerian Nationalism to the extent that, while others tend to build immobile tents in their territories, the Igbo find their way into nook and cranny of Nigeria, Africa and indeed the whole world. Characteristically, the Igbo society thrives on the principle of competitiveness and high sense of industrial possessiveness (Ekwonwa, 2008). This is the blessing of the Igbo and in part, the very source of their constituting an object of suspicion, distrust and envy.

The Igbo are gifted with rich cultural traits. They are resourceful, enterprising and resilient. Their courage and industry even in grueling circumstances and in face of all odds set them apart as pace-setters in different theatres of life (Ekwonwa, 2004). They believe in justice and equity. This may explain in part why over the years they have continued to advocate for workable, political, social and economic structure that will promote efficiency, meritocracy, creativity and innovativeness. They cherish all that will give Nigeria citizens the freedom to develop according to their capabilities and possibilities (Ekechi, 1982).

The above virtuous nature of the Igbo notwithstanding, many accuse them of pride and unhealthy rivalry even among themselves. The critics see the average Igbo man as exhibiting a worrisome tendency to receive gratification and become effectively employed against the interest of their brothers and sisters. They equally argue that Igbo man’s presumption about material possession makes him arrogant, boastful and over confident. An Igbo man is said to love money more than anything else. In turn these alleged vices earn him envy, resentment hatred and hostility of his neighbours, usually members of other ethnic groups (Dandley, 1973).


Life is the sum total of human existence. All the recognized human rights inhere on the living and not necessarily on the dead (Obiaraeri, 2001) Sanctity of human life is as such recognized and guaranteed under section 33 of the 1999 constitution as amended. Here provides that, “every person has a right to life, and no one shall be deprived intentionally of his life, save in execution of the sentence of a court of law in respect of a criminal offence of which he has been found guilty in Nigeria (Section 33 of the 1999 constitution).

From the foregoing provision of the constitution, it is evident that extra-judicial killings, that is any killing not permitted or authorized by the constitution or law, whether by government or private agencies, including ethnic militia or vigilante groups are unlawful and unconstitutional. The right to life is sacrosanct. Hence,
Euthanasia or mercy killing is outlawed. A person is as well not authorized to commit suicide or take his life (Section 327 of the Criminal Code).

In a number of occasions, the right of the Igbo to exist as a people have been threatened or violated. Military intervention in 1966 January, though initially welcomed as a necessary reaction to civilian incompetence and corruption was later twisted to be attempt by Igbo military officers to help their own people to dominate other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Thousands of people were massacred in the Northern Nigeria and the survivors had to flee to their home region. The federal government at that time controlled by Northern military officers under General Yakubu Gowon did nothing to prevent the pogroms or to rehabilitate the survivors.

To be precise from 29th, September, 1966, there were wholesale massacres of the Easterners (mainly Igbo people) in the North. The massacres were well organized and carried out by mobs, the Native Administration, Police, and Northern elements in the army. The scene were graphically described by correspondents of the International press thus: ‘crying heathen! And Allah! The mobs and troops invaded the Sabon Gari (strangers; Quarters), ransacking, looting and burning Igbo homes and stores and murdering their owners (Times Magazine of USA, 7 October, 1966). Colin Legum of the London observer wrote:

After a fortnight, the scene in the Eastern Region continues to be reminiscent of the in-gathering of the exiles into Israel after the end of the war. The parallel is not fanciful men, women and children who arrived, but people with arms, legs broken, hands hacked off, mouths split open. Pregnant women were cut open and the unborn children killed (the Observer London, 16th October, 1966).

Often the perpetrators of the atrocities were said to be neighbours well known to the victims. A good number were beggars who hitherto had frequently received alms from their victims. To the victims especially women, this was betrayal and ingratitude of the worst type. Many women went through the trauma of watching their husbands and children, relatives or neighbours massacred. As members of the weaker sex that are not used to such horrendous sights, this was too much for them to bear. Many suffered severe psychological effects which took a lot of time, treatment and counselling to recover from. These were the lucky ones. Some never recovered at all.

Chief Akpan,(1966), secretary to the Government of Biafra reporting his experience at the Enugu railway station in October 1966 said, he has never been able to forget the shock he received when he went down to the railway station one evening, early in October, 1966 to meet a friend coming from Port Harcourt. Before he arrived a train from the North carrying refugees had pulled into the station. What came out of the train he said, was beyond his description. He narrated that some of the passengers came out with severed limbs, others with broken heads etc. According to him the most chilling sight was that of a woman who came out completely naked clutching in her hand the head of her child killed in the North. This particular sight he reported aroused the crowds standing in the station (Akpan, 1967).

For many of the women the events marked a watershed of a negative type in their lives. For some it meant the loss of the family breadwinner and the beginning of an uncertain economic future. Many suddenly found themselves playing father to their bereaved children. To make matters worse transport fares were raised. Many sold their household effects to any person who was willing to pay any price to enable than escape to the east.

At home, while some of the widows received sympathetic reception others were not that lucky. Many of them found their marital kinsmen out rightly hostile as they accused than or at least suspected them of complexity in death of their husbands. The cause of hostility for some of the women was the fear that they have come to either be a burden on their home-based kinsmen or would want to partake in the exploitation of family resources which the home-based have hitherto enjoyed exclusively.

Accordingly, many of the women, finding no support, had to depend on themselves for the survival and upkeep of their children. For a number of them this involved making a difficult and painful transition from full time house wife to father and breadwinner. There seemed to many there was no choice than to shoulder the outcome of this unfamiliar path they have set their feet. This marked the beginning of the unhappy transition
of Igbo woman from the status of “Oriaku (wealth eater) to that of “Okpata aku” (bringer of wealth). This in many households led to a decrease in family income, which in turn had negative impact on the up-bringing of the children. Absence of mothers in the home left the training of the children to house-helps, many who are under aged. Thus when people ask or talk about the origin of the present state of delinquency among youths as well as the instability and tension we see in many of our homes these days, some weight must be assigned to the negative effects of this transition.

The Civil War and Genocide against the Igbo (1967-1970)

Under Section 45(2) of the 1999 constitution, any death resulting from war is not considered a derogation to the right to life or existence (Section 45(2) of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria). But this is restricted to war combatants, that is to say fighting soldiers. There are rules in international Humanitarians Law that govern the conduct of hostilities and the legitimate instruments for warfare. These are found in the Geneva and Hague Rules, elaborated in the Geneva Conventions of 1948 and the Additional protocols I and II of the 1977, the latter being for conflict of a non-international character (Geneva Convention, 1948).

At the same time the “Genocide” Convention of 1948 coming a few years after the adoption of United Nations (UN) charter of 1945 in relation to self-determination prohibitions extermination of a people because of self determination (United Nations Charter on self-determination 1945). The charter reorganized in clear language the right of a people to exist by prohibiting their examination.

Genocide is defined as any of the following acts below committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group by:

(a) Killing members of a group;
(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of live calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
(d) Imposing measures to prevent births within the group; and
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

From the definition above genocide should include violation of right to Dignity of Human person. Section 34 of 1999 constitution recognizes and accords every individual respect for the dignity of his person and accordingly provides that:

(i) No person should be subjected to torture or to inhuman degrading treatment;
(ii) No person should be held in slavery or servitude; and
(iii) No person shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour (unless authorized by law or a people’s custom or culture).

The right to human dignity is intrinsic to human existence, shorn off his right to dignity, the human person is worth nothing. It should therefore be restated that no circumstance should the dignity of human person be debased or trampled upon. Respect for this right require commensurate reciprocity in that we all must act with dignity towards one another.

The genocide experiences by the Igbo between 1967 and 1970 can only be compared with those of the Jews in the hand of the Nazi government. This is why there is widespread tendency among modern Igbo to compare their painful historical experience the last forty five years or so with that of Jews from the days of Joseph the Dreamer to the creation of the modern state of Israel as a consequence of the second world war. Some situations need be cited as illustrative of the threat to the right of existence of the Igbo (1967-1970):

1) THE ASABA MASSACRE:

Weeks after the out break of the Nigerian civil war in 1967, the Biafra solders poured into the mid-west and claimed to have captured it only to be driven out a few weeks after Thereafter Igbo civilians especially the men, were killed systematically. A correspondent of the International Herald Tribune put the number killed in parts of the Midwest Region including Benin and Warri, but excluding Asaba at 5,000 (International Herald tribune-23th. October, 1967). A greater number was recorded in Asaba after Federal troop took over the town on the 5th, 6ht and 7th October 1967. According to Emma Okocha (1994),Asaba was oozing with blood as men folk were systematically cut down. In one case the people had been urged to come out in their best dresses and ornaments to welcome the federal troops. As usual, the men were separated from the women and children and mowed down with machine gun. As Okocha puts it from eye witness account:
With the dead stacked up in pile, waiting to be buried, there was nobody to accord them their normal, traditional rites. The first wave of killing produced so many bodies that their disposal presented gruesome logical problems. Some bodies were simply hurled into the River Niger. And because of men to bury the numerous dead bodies all over the town, River Niger became the most expedient cemetery for civilian casualties. The Niger was turning crimson read. There was blood on the Niger (Emma Okoach, 1994:84).

His Holiness Pope Paul vi, having received no commitment from either the Nigerians or the Biafrans for a cease-fire, sent his emissary, the well-regarded Monsignor Georges Rocheau to Nigeria on a fact-finding mission. The horrified Roman Catholic priest spoke to the French news paper “Le Monde” following the visit, recounting what he witnessed:

There has been genocide, for example, on the occasion of the 1966. Massacres…. Two areas have suffered badly (from the fighting) firstly the region between the towns of Benin and Asaba where only windows and orphans remained, Federal troop having for unknown reasons massacred all the men (Monsignor Georges Rocheau, 1968).

The above described episode was so shocking that General Gowon broke his silence thirty years later on the matter and apologized for this atrocity to the Igbo in Asaba:

it came to me as a shock when I came to know about the unfortunate happenings that happened to the sons and daughters….. of (Asaba) domain. I felt very touched and honestly I referred to the killings and ask for forgiveness being the one who was in charge to that time. Certainly, it is not some things that I would have approved of in whatever form I was made ignorant of it, I think until it appeared in the papers, young man wrote at the time (Interview with retired Nigeria officer who prefers to rain anonymous, quoted by Achebe 2012:134).

Testifying at Justice Oputa Panel (a Nigerian Version of South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission) Major General Ibrahim Haruna, belligerent and unremorseful as ever proclaimed:

As the commanding officer and leader of the troops that massacred 500 men at Asaba, I have no apology for those massacred in Asaba, Owerri, and Amake item, I acted as a soldier maintaining the peace and unity of Nigeria…. If general Yakubu Gowon apologized, he did it in his own capacity. As for me I have no apology (Ogwuda, “Gowon faults setting up of Oputa Panel” quoted by Achibe, 2012:135).

2) **The Aba massacre:**
On entering into Aba the Nigerian solders massacred more than 2,000 civilians. Susan Masid Said of the French Press Agency who reported this horrifying incident had this to say “young Ibos.. with terrifying eye and trembling lips told journalist in Aba that in the villages Nigerian troops came from behind shooting and firing everywhere shooting everybody who was running, firing into the homes(Susan Masid French Press Agence Quoted By Achebe 2012 :138).

3) **The Calabar Massacre**
The Nigerian Forces over ran Calabar in early 1968 without much resistance or investment. In action reminiscent of the Nazi policy of eradicating the Jews throughout Europe, Nigerian soldiers shot at least 2,000 Ibos, most of them civilians (Alfred Friendly Jr, 1968) there were other atrocities throughout the region, “In Oji River, Times of London reported on August 2,1968, that Nigerian forces opened fire and murdered fourteen nurses and patients in the wards. In Uyo and Okigwe more innocent lives were lost to the brutality and blood lust of the Nigerian soldiers (The Times, (London) August, 2,1968)

4) **The Economic Blockade**
The other situation affecting the existence of the Igbo was the total blockade of Biafra and the refusal to allow relief materials into the Biafran enclave. The finance minister of general Gowon, Chief Obafami Awolowo, declared that hunger was a legitimate instrument of war. Following this policy, no relief materials were allowed into Biafra and whatever came had to be delivered in rickety planes on dirty and rough run ways (Akpuru Aja, 2000)

Apart from the fact that the federal government’s hunger weapon was having its desired effects on the Igbo Civilian population and many people due to malnutrition suffered kwashiorkor and died.
The government equally embarked on massive bombing raids of the Igbo civilian population including such targets as hospitals, refugee centers, schools, market places and churches. Quite expected, several more additional thousands of Igbo were killed in those raids (Akpuru Aja, 2000).

In some of these areas mentioned above, confirmed stories has it that, people were made to drink urine, their men and boys were flogged every morning by federal soldiers, their women were sent to soldiers at night to be subjected to rape and abuse (Onyemerenkeya, 2001). Moreover, the statement of the ruthless federal army officers eg colonel Adekunle as reported in the former West German magazine, “Stern”—made the West German Government protest to Lagos in August 19th, 1968. This did not help matters. According to the magazine, Adekunle had warned the Red Cross and other relief bodies to keep off his sector because as his troop matched into Biafra territory every moving thing would be shot (Stern, 1968).

Perhaps Adekunle’s most heinous statement during the war was this: “Biafra aid is misguided humanitarian rubbish ………. If children must die first, then that is too bad just too bad” he maintained that the denial of food to Biafran held areas and to Igbo people in federally controlled areas, is a legitimate and necessary strategy. He told a Dutch newspaper “I want to see no Red Cross, no Caritas, no World Council of Churches, no Pope, no Missionaries and no U.N (United Nations) delegation. I want to prevent even one Ibo having even one piece to eat before their capitulation (The American Jewish Congress Reports, December, 27th, 1968)

The above seem to be the fulfillment of Nigerian war Slogan blared in Hausa over Nigerian Radio Network on the invasion of Biafra on July 1967. The Slogan reads in Hausa: “Mu Je Mu kerkesh su tu tafara kayan su mu ber su suna kulcan banza” its English translation is: “we go, we slaughter them we ravish their precious wares. We abandon them crying useless tears” (Ekwonwa, 2010)

Igbo people suffered in other ways. There were shortage of accommodation, clothes and other basic facilities of life incidental to Biafran blockade. As a result, immorality grew up and became rampant and the people’s value was altered; prostitution was accepted, some women “bossed” their husbands because the exigencies of the time turned them into bread winners for their families. Begging because professionalized as many refugees saw it as the only way to survive. Reverence of old age became untenable, and the people’s culture was abused. Things that were formally regarded as taboo were done with imprudence.

Conclusion
What is terrifying about the pogrom and the genocide directed against the Igbo after the January 15th coup of 1966, in which more than thirty thousand civilians, men, women and children were slaughtered, and hundreds of thousands wounded, maimed and violated; their home and property looted and burned was that no one asked any question.

The reason being that a detailed plan for the mass killing was implemented by the government, the army, the police, the very people who were there to protect life and property. Not a single person was punished for these crimes. It was not just human nature, a case of somebody hating his neighbor and chopping his hand according to Achube (2012). Rather, it was something else far more diverstating, because it was premeditated plan that involved careful coordination, awaiting only the right spark.

At the end of the civil war in January 1970, the federal government officially declared that the purpose of the war was to bring the Igbo back to the Nigerian fold. This is not true. The main purpose was to annihilate the Igbo forever; to completely wipe them out of from the face of the earth and to replace them with other ethnic groups in the country. This pathetic ploy to get the achievers out rather than celebrate them is one of the fundamental reasons why Nigeria has failed to develop as it should.

Finally, this article is no attempt to open old wounds. But to allow the reading public judge within themselves, whether Igbo people have been treated fairly like other ethnic groups in the country. Igbos, have their own faults as earlier quoted, just like any other ethnic groups in the country. But
this is not enough to deliberately mark them out for total elimination for any reason no matter how grievous.

References

Achebe C (2012), There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra, USA: Penguin Books
Colin, L (1966) London Observer, 16th October
Ekwunwa, M.O (2004), Socio-Political Institutions, Owerri: Chukwuemeka Publishing co.
Ekechi F.k (1982:2) Igbo and their History Alvana Journal of the Social Sciences Vol. 1 No 2
Geneva Conventions of 1948.
Monsignor, G.R (1968) Reported in Le Mode (the French Evening News) and Forsyth, The Biafra story page 220
Section,33 of 1999 Constitution the Federal Republic of Nigeria.
Section, 34 of 1999 Constitution the Federal Republic of Nigeria
Section, 42 (2) of 1999 Constitution the Federal Republic of Nigeria
Section, 327 of the Nigeria Criminal Code
Time Magazine of the USA, 7th October 1966.
The American Jewish Congress Report, December, 27,1968.P.196
Umozuruike,U.O (2000) the Right of the Igbo to Exist. A Paper Prescuted at the Centre for Igbo Studies symbiosis Abia-State, University, Uturu
United Nations Charter of Self- Deter-Mination of 1945
United Nation Charter of 1945