



DYNAMIC MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF NIGERIA

DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, ABRKA, DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

DYNAMIC MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF NIGERIA
DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, ABRAKA, DELTA STATE, NIGERIA.
Email: dmjon2080@gmail.com
ISSN: 2955-0564

Volume 4, Number 1, January, 2024

PUBLISHED BY DYNAMIC MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF NIGERIA
DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, ABRAKA, DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

THE KILLINGS OF CIVILIANS IN NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR: THE ESAN EXPERIENCE

Ighodalo Joseph EJMHEARE, PhD

Department of General Studies,
Federal Polytechnic Ekowe, Bayelsa State
E-Mail: ighodalo1111@gmail.com

&

Gold, Sunday Chukwuemeka

Department of History and International Studies, Delta State
University, Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria
Email: goldchukwuemeka@gmail.com

Abstract

Scholars have significantly examined the Nigerian Civil War fought between July 1967 and January 1970. The emphasis has not been given to the inherent killings of the civilian population in the war. Historical evidence abounds that in the war, there were killings of civilians by the Biafran and the Federal forces. Consequent to the Biafran invasion of the Midwest on August 9, 1967, the Biafran and Federal forces killed a lot of civilians whom they suspected that they opposed them in the Esan land of Midwestern Nigeria. The killings resulted due to a hostile attitude of the Federal and Biafran forces toward those they claimed to have opposed them. In Esan, while those who opposed the Biafran were protected by the Federal troops and killed by the Biafran forces, those who antagonized the Federal forces were rescued by the Biafran forces and killed by the Federal troops. This paper examines the killings of civilians in the Nigerian Civil War in Esan land of Midwestern Nigeria. Relying on primary and secondary sources, the paper contends that the massacre of the civilian population in Esan land was triggered by tension between the loyalists and the antagonists of Biafra and the Federal Forces respectively. The paper also finds out that while the Federal Troops that are made up of mainly Northerners were hunting the Igbo civilians, the Biafran forces, on the other hand, were killing the Hausa civilians in retaliation for the killings of the Northerners in the Eastern Region and the massacre of the Igbo in Northern Region before the war.

Keywords: Northern Region, Midwestern, Killing, Civil War, Esan & Biafra,

Introduction

Seven years after Nigeria gained independence from the British, the country was meshed in a brutal civil war between the Nigerian government under the leadership of Col. Yakubu Gowon and the defunct Biafran government under the Leadership of Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu. The war, which started in May 1967, formally ended on January 15, 1970.¹ At the outbreak of the war, the Midwest was not involved in the escalating confrontation. However, before the outbreak of the war, the region's leadership had earlier declared before Gowon that it would not be part of the conflict in the event of any hostility. "The Biafran invasion of the Midwest on August 9, 1967, brought the war to the region." Following the Biafran invasion of the Midwest, there was a massacre of the civilian population in the region. The killings were occasioned by the hostile attitude of the Biafran and the Federal forces toward those they suspected that opposed them. The

massacre of Igbo in Northern Nigeria before the war was also a factor in the killings of civilians in the region as the Biafran forces were on a mission to revenge these killings. It was also the reason why the federal army, made up mainly of Northerners, was hunting civilian Igbo for the cause of liberating the Midwest from the Biafran invaders. The massacre of Igbo in the North, which ignited the war, was countered with large-scale massacres of Northerners resident in the Eastern region. The news of Biafran killing of Hausa/Fulani civilians in the war was everywhere, and this spurred the Nigerian forces, dominated by Northerners, to take revenge on the Igbo civilians anywhere they found the Igbo. How the war started, being a provocation from the killings that commenced in the North, made the war begin as a quarrel between the Hausa/Fulani and Igbo. The war initially started as a battle between the Hausa/Fulani and the Igbo of the Eastern region. This remained the nature of the war before the Biafran invasion of the Midwest. The Biafran invasion of the Midwest gave the war a national outlook. It must be emphasized that the bulk of the Federal forces comprised Northerners, who the Nigerian government envisaged could fight the Biafran with determination.³ Hence, the Biafran and the federal forces were determined to eliminate the civilian population of each other. The situation was not different in Esan, which was part of Midwestern Nigeria, where there were massive killings of the civilian population by the Biafran and the Federal troops. This paper, therefore, examines the massacre of the civilian population in Esan during the Nigerian Civil War.

Brief History of Esan

Esan occupies a land mass of about 1,858 square kilometres northeast of Benin, South-South Nigeria, and is the second major ethnic group in the present Edo State. Esan was part of the area colonized by the British under the Benin Province. When Nigeria had three regions, the area was under the Western region, with Ibadan as the capital. The location was in the Midwest when the region was created in 1963 as the fourth region in Nigeria.⁴ Esan may be found in Irrua, Ubiaja, Uromi, Ewatto, Ewohimi, Igueben, Ebelle, Ekpon, Ogwa, Ewossa, Amahor, Ewu, Ekpoma Uzea and Ohordua. Even though other economic activities exist, such as hunting, basket weaving, and traditional medicine, the Esan people are agriculturalists.⁵ The people are in five local governments: Esan North East, Esan West, Esan South East, Igueben, and Esan Central. Esan is bounded in the North by Etsako while on the West by Benin. The area is bounded on the East by River Niger and Ibaji local government area of Kogi State and on the South by Oshimili, Aniocha and Ika Local Government Areas of Delta State.

The Killing of Civilians Biafran Forces

The killings in the North, which predated the war, were committed by the Hausa/Fulani against the Easterners in particular and Southerners in general. Consequently, at the outbreak of the war in 1967, Esan was filled with many displaced returnees from the North. In the East, they were also expelled by a State Edit promulgated in October 1966 by the Biafran government that the non-Easterners should vacate the East. Esan villages became crowded with frustrated and displaced returnees from the North and the East, and this made the people resist any party that would bring the war to their area.⁶

When the people of Esan woke up on August 9, 1967, and saw Biafran in their domain, anger reached fever pitch. The people were shocked as they expected the Biafran troops to direct their attention toward their enemy (Hausa/ Fulani). At the outbreak of the war, the Esan people had initially sympathized with the Biafran for the persecution they underwent at the hands of the Northerners. "Another factor that initially attracted them to the plight of Biafrans was that in all the various crises like the 1966 pogrom, some of them almost suffered the same fate as the Igbo."⁷ Obasanjo sums up the positions of the Esan and other non-Igbo groups before the invasion:

This was the turning point of the Civil War. Ojukwu had made a

very costly mistake by subverting the neutral, if not sympathetic, government of the Mid-West State and by invading the West... The non-Igbo Mid-Westerners... suddenly became fully aware of the dangers of "Igbo domination," oppression, and maladministration that would be their lot if their land should be conquered and occupied... In a way, this rallied these different groups solidly behind the Federal Military Government in its effort to crush the rebellion. As a result of that gamble and miscalculation by Ojukwu, many young men from this area reported for recruitment.⁸

The invasion alienated the people of Esan from the Biafran cause. There was apprehension on the part of Esan about the role they would play under Biafra. The people regarded Biafra as a regime that is pursuing self-determination while at the same time denying other people this same freedom. Ojukwu envisaged that Esan and other non-Igbo groups would oppose the Biafran in the Midwest. Frederick Forsyth affirms, "Ojukwu was at pains to placate the non-Igbo majority of the Midwest and assure them that he bore them no harm."⁹

The Biafran forces entered Esan with the mindset that they were going to meet those that are against them, and this was the primary reason why they were ruthless to the Esan people. In most parts of Esan, the Biafran forces mounted roadblocks in strategic places and imposed a curfew, and those who violated the curfew were killed. Philips Ekeoba reveals that the Biafran forces mounted a roadblock at Okaigben in Ewohimi, and anybody passing was apprehended and taken to Ekpon. Ekeoba testified that he was on his way to the farm when he was arrested with Mr. Ekenfoh Osojehon, Mr. Francis Omanda, and Mr. Okolo Omondiagbe. The Biafran forces saw them as those positioned to inspect them ahead of Federal Troops. While Ekenfoh and Omanda were killed instantly, Ekeoba and Okolo were taken to Ekpon for detention. Ekeoba reiterates that the Biafrans would have killed all of them, but for want of intelligence information from them. In Ekpon detention cell, they met 23 other people for the same offence of suspecting them to be inspecting the area ahead of Federal Troops. The 23 were later killed and buried in a mass grave, which Ekeoba and Okolo were commanded to dig. When the two Biafran guards were sleeping, they forced the door open and escaped since the detention cell did not have a secured door. Ekeoba further reveals that Peter and Alade, staff of Midwest Oil Palm Development Company, Ewohimi, and sons of Onogie of Irrua were killed on September 23, 1967, on suspicion of inspecting the area for the Nigerian Troops. Biafran troops killed one carpenter from Ewossa because he identified himself as being from Ewossa, which Biafran troops mistook or understood as Hausa.¹⁰

When the Biafran troops arrived in Ubiaja on August 9, 1967, they occupied St. Benedict Primary School Ubiaja. On arrival, the Biafran troops fired indiscriminately into the air unchallenged. The Biafran forces first went to the police station and collected their guns. The imposition of a curfew followed this, and those who violated the curfew were killed. Joseph Okoyomon reveals that one man from Oyomon who broke the curfew was killed. Nobody could go out as a result of the curfew. Ebo C was Boys Scouts' Senior Patrol Leader in Ubiaja before joining the Nigerian army in 1967. He recounts how Biafran troops were mandated by their commander to shoot any mad person at sight. He said he learned this from those conscripted by Biafra and later decamped to the federal side. In most parts of Esan, like Ubiaja, Uromi, Ekpoma, Ewohimi, and Illushi, Biafran troops killed a lot of mad persons because they saw them as those who disguised to reconnoitre the terrain in preparation for the advancement of the federal forces.¹¹ In the same vein, Mathew Ihensekien affirms that virtually all the mad persons in Ebelle and its environs were killed by Biafran forces.¹² In Ubiaja, family members resorted to hiding their relatives with mental challenges since Biafra forces would not spare

them in sight.¹³ International Humanitarian law mandates that the sick have the right to be cared for in a war situation regardless of their interest in the war. Consequently, the Biafran troops have committed war crimes by killing mentally ill persons in Esan.¹⁴

In Igweben, Chief Idogun Cletus notes that the Biafran troops came and occupied the Teachers' Training College. The students vacated the school as a result of the invasion. The Federal Forces traced the Biafrans to Igweben, and as they were fleeing from the Federal attack, they were shooting anybody that came their way. The Biafran troops killed more than 25 persons in Egbiki alone. The relatives of those killed were responsible for their burials. The Biafran forces accused the Egbiki people of giving the Federal troops information about them.¹⁵

Samson Aibueku reveals that the Biafran troops killed a lot of Hausa people in Ekpoma, and anybody harbouring Hausa's friend was arrested by the Biafra and in the end, such person will be killed.¹⁶ Similarly, Benedict Akhigbe notes that Biafran troops garrisoned themselves at the School of Agriculture (now Ambrose Alli University Secondary School). The Biafrans were particular about those they perceived to be Hausa.¹⁷ The six-week of Biafra occupation in the Midwest generally was almost unbearable for the Northerners:

Northerners had been killed in their hundreds; The rebel soldiers had gone from house to house seeking out people of Northern origin. They killed men, women, and children indiscriminately, including many who had lived in the Mid-West state for years. He said that he believed they did so openly because they relied on the strength of Colonel Nwawo and Okwechime. He told a pitiful story of the sight he had seen. Northerners had been buried alive, burnt to death, thrown into rivers to draw after their hand and feet had been tied, shot while they were sleeping, killed by having nails driven through their skulls, and had been flayed alive, and many had their eyes put out.¹⁸

The process of identifying Hausa in Esan was by language as some Hausa who were denying that they were not Hausa was asked to speak the local language, which they claimed, and if they could not, the Biafran forces would kill them.¹⁹ Some people can only speak the local language of where they were born. Ejemheare affirms:

That at roadblocks during the war, a man is expected to identify himself by speaking his language. The use of language and knowing the name of one's king as a means of identification was used by Biafran in all parts of the Midwest. Some people could only speak the language of where they were born. The war resulted in the movement of people from where they were born to their places of origin. If the proof of origin is the test of language, the people born outside their place of origin are in serious trouble.²⁰

Enedion John reveals that the Biafran forces entered Uromi town in search of the Hausa and Fulani. They killed the Hausa in Uromi and confiscated their cows and other belongings. One group went to Anthony Enahoro's house searching for the father, mother, and other relatives but could not locate them. Enahoro's parents went into hiding immediately after the information got to them that the Biafran troops were in Uromi.²¹ In Ebelle, Mathew Ihensekler reveals that there was information that Hausa people were hiding in Chief Ogedegbe's house. In an attempt by Biafra forces to get the Hausa people, Ogedegbe's brother Aihebho Ogedegbe, who tried to escape out of fear, was killed by the troops. The Biafrans killed him with the hope that he must have been one of the people that is hiding the Hausa people in his home. Aihebho Ogedegbe died,

leaving a wife and a son.²²

In all parts of Esan, Biafran troops were prepared to take revenge on the Northerners anywhere they found them. Stephen Ebozele reveals that the Biafrans in Ugbegu occupied Umelen Ugbegu Centre Primary School. In Biafra's ferocious desire to locate Northerners, one Etsako man who appeared like Hausa was mistakenly killed by the Biafran troops in Ugbegu.²³

The Killing of Civilians by the Federal Forces

The second Division meant to liberate the Midwest, including the Esan Division, was hurriedly formed under the command of Col. Murtala Mohammed.²⁴ "On recapturing Benin-City, the state capital, Col. Murtala Mohammed broadcasted to the people that the liberation of the Midwest State had been achieved..."²⁵ On September 20, 1967, the Midwest was cleared of Biafran forces just as Major Albert Okonkwo proclaimed the independent and sovereign Republic of Benin. By the end of that day, the federal troops had completed the city's liberation.²⁶ With the takeover of the Midwest by the federal forces, the non-Igbo groups, including the Esan, collaborated with federal forces to kill the Igbo. It was in retaliation for what the non-Igbo groups suffered at the hands of the Igbo when the Biafran army invaded the state. In Benin, non-Igbo groups like Esan, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Etsako, Owan, and Ijaw assisted the federal troops in identifying the Igbo. Jorre revealed the mass killing of Igbo people in his work:

Similar massacres occurred in Benin and other Mid-Western towns, perpetrated mainly by non-Igbo civilians, though sometimes Federal soldiers would join in when the victims had been pointed out to them. Signs like 'Urhobo man lives here' 'Benin man shop,' or One Nigeria suddenly appeared on people's doors, and inevitably, many old scores were settled before law and order returned.²⁷

On the arrival of the Federal troops to Esan, there was jubilation and chanting of 'One Nigeria' everywhere. The Esan people perceived it as transitioning from the Government of Biafran to the Government of the Midwest. It also applied to other non-Igbo groups in the state. At every passage of the federal forces, the people gathered by the roadside to welcome them, which, in no small measure, boosted the troops' morale. In recourse to this Obasanjo notes :

Throughout 2 Division's operation in the non-Igbo speaking areas of the Midwest, the formation received a tremendous warm and cheering welcome from civilians who thronged to the roadside at every passage of troops to shout one Nigeria while indicating the symbol of one Nigeria by clenching their fists and pointing with the forefingers. It was a great moral booster and encouragement for Federal troops who had to contend with considerable rebel opposition despite fighting in a predominantly friendly area. Considering how the Division was hurriedly put together, their overall performance could only be described as laudable.²⁸

Esan was unlike the areas that had given their allegiance to the Biafran, who were forced to flee to escape persecution when the federal troops arrived. Immediately after the federal troops captured Esan, the local people stayed behind. Thus, the people of Esan were not converted by the Federal group. The position of being a strong protagonist of the federal cause tended to unite the Esan people and another non-Igbo group in the Midwest. Uromi, the economic nerve centre of Esan, had a high population of Igbo people.

Consequently, the arrival of the federal forces made them go into hiding since their allegiance to the Biafran could not be doubted. The Massacre of Igbo civilians occurred in Uromi and was perpetrated by the federal forces in collaboration with Esan civilians, as they were responsible for identifying the Igbo civilians. As the federal troops attacked the Biafran troops in Uromi, panic set in among them, and they ran in all directions, some throwing away their Biafran uniform and guns. Ojiefoh revealed that in Uromi:

The Biafran were retreating, running, and throwing their guns away. The fleeing Biafran soldier pulled away their uniform, asking farmers in the bushes the way to Agbor. The officers have commanded the few vehicles in their flight to the Niger Bridge.²⁹

As Uromi was liberated in September, Uromi youths quickly showed the federal soldiers Igbo shops and houses. The national forces killed the Igbo and, in collaboration with the youths, looted the stores and other Igbo properties. The civilian youth were responsible for identifying the Igbo.

The role played by the Uromi people in identifying the Igbo before the federal troops massacred them is seen by many as avoiding killing the Esan person in place of the Igbo. However, Esan's dislike for Igbo predated the war. The Igbo were accused of taking over all aspects of Esan's economy. Even in the Catholic Church, you cannot use the Esan language without using Igbo. Consequently, the war allowed the Esan to address long-time animosity toward the Igbo. According to John Okhohere, the war became constructive for Esan as it allowed them to take over their economy that was hitherto in the hands of the Igbo.³⁰ Ojiefoh affirms that:

The Uromi artisans now replaced the Igbo, who were their masters. Uromi Sons, who were traders, mechanics, drivers, etc, all returned home and established their various trades in Uromi... Among the Uromi sons that returned at this time are some great merchants and politicians...³¹

Chinua Achebe revealed that "Nigerians of all other ethnic groups will probably achieve consensus on no other matter than their common resentment of the Igbo."³² Achebe further said that "the civil war gave Nigeria a perfect and legitimate excuse to cast the Igbo in the role of treasonable felon."³³

In Ebelle, the Federal troops gathered all the Igbo civilians captured in Ujogba, Ugun, Amahor, Igweben, Ekpon, and Ewossa in St. Mathew Primary School (now Square Primary School), gave them hoe and spade, and commanded them to dig massive grave after which they were ordered to enter the grave. The federal forces fired and killed all the civilians in the mass grave and covered it.³⁴ In Ewohimi, the federal forces searched for Igbo hiding in different houses, and when they were located, they were brought out and shot dead. The villagers were instrumental in helping the army to identify the Igbo. After the killing of the Igbo, the local populace and the military looted the stores and other properties of the Igbo people.³⁵ The villagers gathered seven Igbo civilian corpses killed by the federal forces and buried them in a mass grave at Omen Eguare forest in Ewohimi. As in other places, some Igbo people escaped the federal onslaught due to the goodwill of their Esan friends.³⁶

Conclusion

The study has attempted to analyze the massacre of the civilian population during the Nigerian civil war in Esan of Midwestern Nigeria by the Biafran and the Federal forces. There is no gain in saying that the killing of a civilian was a result of the hostile attitude of the Biafran and the federal troops toward those that they perceived as their opponents. Another factor that propelled the

killing of the civilian population in Esan was the desire by both the Biafran and the federal forces to take revenge on each other. The Geneva Convention of 1949 came up with one of the most critical international rules limiting the barbarity of war on civilians. Article 3 of the convention states:

The person taking no active part in the hostility... shall in all circumstances be treated humanely without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria. Violence to life and person in particular, murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment, and torture... shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever.³⁷

Since the civilians that were killed were not part of the hostility, the Biafran and the Federal forces have infringed on the international humanitarian law, which forbids the killing of civilians in war. The high-handedness of the soldiers can be attributed to how they were recruited. They were recruited so quickly that they lacked proper training on discipline and the rules of engagement. The soldiers lack the military etiquette required to prosecute the war in line with international standard practice.

Endnotes

1 Philip Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story* (Aba: Business Forum Publications, 2000) 266.

2 Ighodalo J. Ejemheare, Reconstruction of Education in Ogbemudia's Years: A Study of Esan Civil War Experience, *Satiru International Journal of Peace and Security Studies*, Vol. 1, No.1, 2020, 89. Also see Ighodalo J. Ejemheare, Biafran Invasion of Midwest and Its Implications on The Nigerian Civil War, *Lampai Journal of Humanities*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2020, 299.

3 Ejemheare, "Biafran Invasion of Midwest," 303

4 Ejemheare, "Reconstruction of Education", 91.

5 Joseph I. Osagie, "Agriculture in Esan in Pre-colonial Period", *Benin Journal of Historical Studies*, Vol. 1, No.1, January, 1997, 74

6 Ighodalo J. Ejemheare, "The Esan and the Nigerian-Biafran War, 1967-1975: A Study in an Aspect of Midwestern Nigerian History,"(PhD Dissertation Department of History, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, 2019), 114.

7 Ighodalo J. Ejemheare, "Identity Issues in Nigerian Civil War: The Midwestern Episode", (A paper presented at the annual conference of the Historical Society of Nigeria, 12 to 15 October, 2021).

8 Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Lagos: Kachifo, 1980), 50.

9 Forsyth cited in Ejemheare, "Identity Issues

10 Philip Ekeoba, *c80 Years, Ehi of Ewohimi and Retired Staff of Midwest Development*

- Company, Ewohimi Branch, Interviewed at Ewohimi, January 13, 2019.
- 11 Eboh Christ, c73 Years, Retired Nigerian Army, Interviewed at Ubiaja, January 14, 2019.
- 12 Mathew Ihensekhien, c.65 years, Head of Department, Quality Assurance Igweben Local Government Education Authority, Interviewed at Ebelle, 25 January, 2019.
- 13 Eboh Christ, Interview.
- 14 See "The rule of war, also known as international humanitarian law", accessed November 8, 2021. <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/10-things-rules-of-war-Geneva-Conventions>.
- 15 Chief Idogun Cletus, c71 Years, Member Igweben Council of Chiefs, Interviewed in Igweben, January 18, 2019.
- 16 Samson Aibueku, c82 Years, Politician, Interviewed at Ekpoma, January 15, 2019.
- 17 Benedict Akhigbe, c70 Years, Chief and Personal Assistance to Onogie of Ekpoma, Interviewed at Ekpoma, June 15, 2018.
- 18 See, "Atrocities in the Midwest", New Nigerian 21 August, 1967.
- 19 Samson Aibueku, Interview.
- 20 Ejemheare, "Identity Issues."
- 21 Enedion John, c69 Years, Retired Teacher, Interviewed at Uromi, January 15, 2019.
- 22 Mathew Ihensekhien, Interview.
- 23 Stephen Ebozele, c72 Years, Farmer, interviewed at Ugbegum, January 18, 2019.
- 24 Obasanjo, *My Command* ..., 52.
- 25 Iweze, "Post Civil War", 99.
- 26 John De St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 162.
- 27 Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*..., 164-165.
- 28 Obasanjo, *My Command*..., 57.
- 29 Aregbeyegwale Patrick Ojiefoh, 75 years, Director, Centre of Esan Studies, Uromi, Interviewed at Uromi, 15 January 2019.
- 30 John E. Okhokhere, c83 Years, Retired School Principal, Interviewed at Uromi, January 22, 2019.
- 31 Aregbeyegwale P. Ojiefoh, *Uromi Chronicles, 1025-2012*, (Uromi: Aregbeyegwale Publishers, 2015), 84.

32 Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, (England: Heinemann, 1983), 45.

33 Achebe, *The Trouble...*, 45.

34 Mathew Ihensekhien, Interview.

35 Chief Philip Ekeoba, Interview.

36 Chief Philip Ekeoba, Interview.

37 See Article 3 of the Geneva Convention of 1949.