

Clandestine Role of Religious Bodies in the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970

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ABSTRACT: Religious bodies play important roles in the socio cultural, political and economic survival and development of societies. Their role is even made more prominent in the time of crisis and wars. In most instances when an ongoing conflict requires diplomatic maneuvering in the provision of humanitarian and other assistance, religious bodies present clandestine humanitarian assistance which sometimes come with a lot of risk factors, these are done with a view to maintain and sustain the faith of citizens and their strengthened believe that God can send help even in the hours of need. This paper examined the role of the Catholic Church and other religious bodies in humanitarian and other assistance during the Nigerian civil war, Christian missionary groups in Biafra played an agenda setting role in the humanitarian drive to prevent a holocaust in the Nigerian Civil war. Their initial appeal laid the foundation for large scale international relief operations that followed. In spite of the blockade and poor communication with the outside world, the Christian churches saw it as a duty not to keep silent and watch people die of starvation and disease. Their activities in humanitarian and other efforts and the challenges faced is the focus of this paper. The politicization of religion and the religious practice of politics is very relevant in this instance and religious bodies remain an anchor of evangelistic and humanitarian efforts in times of war as was presented in the Nigerian civil war.

KEY WORDS: *Clandestine, Role, Religious Bodies, Nigeria, Civil War.*

I. INTRODUCTION

There is avalanche of research on the Nigerian civil war. These vary from historical studies to diplomacy and international relations. Others have considered the post-civil war settlements and the management of relations between the belligerents and civil societies. The peculiar case of religious bodies as being clandestinely involved in the civil war became a point of interest to these writers because of the peculiar strength of the Catholic Church in the eastern part of Nigeria, which was declared the state of Biafra by General Odumegwu Ojukwu, the then regional governor. Other religious bodies will not also be left out in these considerations, as the humanitarian, political and diplomatic implications of their role are made prominent. Scholars (1) (3) have noted the undeniable association between religion and politics. The nexus between these two concepts have been complimentary, contradictory, intertwining and self-imposing. Interestingly, these siamese are factors that dominate and control societies. While the actual role that religion plays in politics has remained debatable, it is being used as an instrument of oppression and deceit in the Nigerian Peculiar instance. It appears that Nigerians have resigned themselves to fate and this is possibly further compounded by poverty, illiteracy, and lack of political education on the part of majority. This position is further aggravated by the general perception that politics is a dirty game and that only people who can deceive, manipulate, and greedily accumulate wealth are meant to participate.¹ The number of religious bodies in Nigeria run into million, yet the

¹ W. O. Egbewole, and M. A. Etudaiye, Religion, Politics and Justice: Interplay of Forces in Nigeria. Retrieved from http://www.etudaiyeandco.com/.../religion_politics_and_justice_interplay_of_forces_in_nigeria.pdf.

level of insecurity, destruction of lives and properties and crimes committed in God's name is overwhelming noted Barnett and Janice.²

A major variable in the Nigerian polity is the relationship between religion and politics which some consider as inseparable, while some support the notion of the separation of religion from politics, so that the former will not imbibe the corruption inherent in the latter.³ Generally speaking, there is a common fallacy that religion and politics are two different fields of social activity. This leads observers sometimes to speak of the politicization of religion, and aver that it is against the original intent of the founder of religion, or God himself.⁴

All over the country, religion plays an important role in the daily lives of citizens; the way we interact with one other, our choice of dressing, food, and politics are mostly affected by our religious practices. In other words, religion and politics are intertwined and it empowers man to function in his society by contesting for a political position so as to contribute his ideology to development. Nigeria's population of over 140 million is divided nearly equally between Christians and Muslims. The importance of this division is well illustrated by the fact that religion, not nationality, is the way in which most Nigerians choose to identify themselves; though not in all cases. It is ipso facto derivable that the domains of religion, secularism and politics are becoming increasingly intermingled in both overt and covert ways. Invariably, sectarian politics is inherently problematic and has constituted a nuisance to the polity of the state.⁵

II. BACKGROUND DISCOURSE

At 6 a.m., May 30, 1967, the Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria, Lt. Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, made a broadcast declaring the Eastern Region with its continental shelf and territorial waters to be an independent state under the name, Republic of Biafra.⁶ The secession of Eastern Nigeria had its roots mainly in ethnic and regional animosities between the people of Northern Nigeria and those of Eastern Nigeria.⁷ The declaration of independence of Biafra came after two military coups in January and July 1966 and the subsequent pogrom; a killing of thousands of Eastern Nigerians resident in Northern Nigeria and some parts of Western Nigeria. While the January 15, 1966 coup led mainly by military officers of Eastern Nigeria origin was believed to be a revolution against a corrupt civilian regime, the July 1966 coup was a reprisal attack against people of Eastern Nigeria by Northern Nigerian soldiers. Six weeks after the declaration of Biafra's independence, a war broke out between the secessionists and the Federal government. Biafra's declaration of independence came after efforts to reconcile the Eastern Region with the Federal Government of Nigeria failed. Neither the famous peace talks in Aburi, Ghana, nor the mediatory efforts of some prominent Nigerians could restore peace and trust between Eastern Nigeria and the Federal Government. Efforts by the British government to promote peaceful negotiation between Eastern Nigeria and the federal government also proved ineffective.⁸ Commenting on the secession of Eastern Nigeria, the British High Commissioner in Lagos noted at the outbreak of the war, that Eastern Nigerians were "grievously shocked by the massacre of their fellow tribesmen in the North."⁹ Biafran leaders presented "Biafra" to the outside world as the "last hope of

² Barnett, Michael and Janice Gross Stein, *Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

³ O. O. Afolabi, The role of religion in Nigerian politics and its sustainability for political development. *Net Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(2): 2015, pp. 42-49.

⁴ P. Van der Veer, The ruined center: Religion and mass politics in India. *Journal of International Affairs*, 50(1): 1996, p. 50.

⁵ U. Tar, and A. G. Shettima, Discussion Paper 49: Endangered Democracy? The Struggle over Secularism and its Implications for Politics and Democracy in Nigeria. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala. 2010, p. 5. See also, O. O. Afolabi, The role of religion in Nigerian politics and its sustainability for political development. *Net Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(2): 2015, pp. 42-49.

⁶ Nigeria: The Secession of Eastern Nigeria: Memorandum from the British High Commissioner in Nigeria to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, July 7, 1967, File National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter NAUK), 25/232. See also E. O. Ojo, and O. S. Osadola, The Nigerian Federation and Secession Threats – The Case of the IPOB, *Journal of Public Policy in Africa*, (JOPPA) African University, Zimbabwe, Vol. 5. Issue 2, 2017

⁷ A Reply to Senator Caso's Enquiry Concerning the Situation in the Nigeria-Biafra War by the US Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, William B. Nacomber, Jr. July 12, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria. See also E. O. Ojo, and O. S. Osadola, The Nigerian Federation and Secession Threats – The Case of the IPOB, *Journal of Public Policy in Africa*, (JOPPA) African University, Zimbabwe, Vol. 5. Issue 2, 2017

⁸ Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs on Possible Blockade and Secession of Eastern Region, May 8, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

⁹ Nigeria: The Secession of Eastern Nigeria: Memorandum from the British High Commissioner in Lagos to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, July 7, 1967, File NAUK, 25/232.

security to life, to property and the will to exist as ordinary human beings for 14,000,000 people thrown out of Nigeria.”¹⁰ The renowned Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, described “Biafra” as a “state of mind, a mind free from the pattern of the past.”¹¹ The Federal Government of Nigeria, however, interpreted the declaration of Biafra’s independence as a rebellion¹² and tried to prevent the secession by imposing a blockade on Biafra. In order to quell the “rebellion,” Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, Nigeria’s Military Head of State, took what he described as a “police action” against Biafra. The “police action” was meant to be a short disciplinary action against “rebellious” Biafra, but it turned out to be the beginning of a thirty-month war that would attract global attention.

The rigorous enforcement of a blockade by the Nigerian military forces had a debilitating effect on the civilian population in Biafra. There was an acute shortage of food supply from outside Biafra. The cessation of protein food supply (mainly meat) from Northern Nigeria and fish from the Nordic countries began to damage the health condition of the general population, especially children and nursing mothers. The food crisis was most serious in the Northern Igbo region of Biafra which was cut off from food supply from Northern Nigeria and the relatively richer southern Biafra. The mass movement of about 2 million returnees from Northern Nigeria to Eastern Nigeria partly accounted for the quick exhaustion of the local food supply after the blockade. When the major areas that supplied food to Biafra were overrun by the Nigerian forces, in May 1968, Biafra began facing the prospect of serious starvation. It was at this point that both foreign missionaries in Biafra and the Biafran leaders launched an appeal to the world for food support.¹³

In a bid to attract the sympathy and support of the international community, the Biafran government hired Markpress, a Geneva-based public relations firm for a publicity campaign. Markpress coordinated Biafra’s propaganda campaign in Europe and North America. The public relations firm constantly used genocide and religion as its propaganda themes.¹⁴ The Biafran government accused the Nigerian government of waging a religious and genocidal war through starvation.¹⁵ The allegation of using starvation as a legitimate instrument of warfare against the people of Biafra roused deep feelings in many parts of the world. As people followed the course of the war through the mass media, horrifying images of starving children elicited sympathy among many television watchers in Europe and North America.

In response to the humanitarian crisis, many religious and humanitarian organizations organized relief supplies for Biafra. The Catholic and Protestant Churches, for example, created the Joint Church Aid (JCA), a consortium of relief agencies to provide emergency aid for Biafra.¹⁶ The organization had its operational base in Sao Tome. The Governor of the Province of Sao Tome and Principe had given approval to the humanitarian organizations to use the airport facility in Sao Tome for the purpose of humanitarian relief operations.¹⁷ It was from this base that the humanitarian supplies were sent into Biafra for further distribution. To ensure smooth distribution of the relief supplies, the JCA operated two distribution networks: the World Council of Churches (WCC), which represented Protestant churches; and *Caritas Internationalis*, which represented the Catholic Church.¹⁸

¹⁰ Christian Council in Biafra: Biafra’s Rebuttal of Nigeria’s Falsehood in Two Documents Nigerians Circulated During the Conference of the World Council of churches, File Presbyterian Church of Canada Archives (hereafter PCCA) 1973-5005-7-8.

¹¹ Lloyd Garrison, “Odumegwu Ojukwu is Biafra,” *The New York Times Magazine*, June 22, 1969.

¹² The Biafran Illusion: the Fate and Future of Non-Igbo Peoples in the Eastern States of Nigeria, May 23, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-9-3.

¹³ Cervenka, Zdenek. *The Nigerian War, 1967-1970*. Frankfurt am Main: Bernard and Graef Fur Wehrwesen, 1971 see also Cronje, Suzanne. *The World and Nigeria: the Diplomatic History of the Biafra War 1967- 1970*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972.

¹⁴ Davis, Morris. “Audits of International Relief in the Nigerian Civil War: Some Political Perspectives.” *International Organization*, Vol. 29, no. 2 (1975): pp. 501-512.

¹⁵ “Genocide Charges: False,” *Telegram* November 20, 1968. See also “Full Text of a Speech Delivered by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe to Biafran Troops,” *Biafra Newsletter*, February 25, 1968.

¹⁶ Other JCA Members: Catholic Relief Services, January 9, 1969, File 1973-5005-7-5.

¹⁷ Nordchurchaid: A Report on Its Operations by the Managing Coordinator, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, File 1973-5005-7-4.

¹⁸ Draper, Michael I. *Shadows: Airlift and Airwar in Biafra and Nigeria, 1967-1970*. England: Hikoki Publications Ltd, 1999.

Humanitarianism and the Biafran Economy of War

From a media point of view, Biafra was a success story, the first major famine to be addressed through media images of starving Africans, before Ethiopia in 1984 or Somalia in 1992. But from a humanitarian point of view, David Morris argued that it was an operational disaster, a logistical nightmare and a political failure.¹⁹ Professionals know that a fundamental dilemma of relief organizations is that they help combatants while trying to assist war victims. Aid exacerbates conflicts because it feeds militants, sustains their dependents, supports war economies and provides legitimacy to belligerents (Lischer 2005:6).²⁰ And all of this happened in Biafra. Aid legitimized the struggle for independence of Christian Igbo who were portrayed as victims of genocide. It also helped the rebels to be supplied with food and weapons. This was because humanitarian logistics in war zones usually follow the same routes and means of transport as the military (Nordstrom 2004).²¹ Planes that supplied Biafra from São Tomé carried both food and weapons. Other humanitarian hubs like Peshawar for Afghanistan after 1980 or Lokichokio for southern Sudan after 1989 are also known to have provided 'freedom fighters' with fresh supplies. Biafra was no exception to such a problem. The strategic contribution of relief to the Biafran war economy was twofold: logistical and financial.

To start with, planes were a vital link to the outside world after the last Biafran access to the sea, Port Harcourt, fell in May 1968. Humanitarian organizations, especially the Catholic Caritas and the Scandinavian Protestant Churches, were instrumental in setting up an air bridge from São Tomé. Unlike the ICRC, they worked only on the Biafran side, so they did not have to bother with the Nigerian Government. The Norwegian Church Relief, for instance, decided to circumvent the Federal authorities because Lagos did not allow it to supply the enclave and had diverted one of its food cargoes to Santa Isabel, now the capital city of Equatorial Guinea.²² After a secret visit to Lisbon, the organization's general secretary, Elias Berge, began to send provisions from the Portuguese island of São Tomé in the planes of an American adventurer, Hank Wharton, who carried weapons for the Biafrans.

By loading food onto these planes whenever there was space available, the Norwegian Church Relief opened itself to the charge of being involved in arms-smuggling. But it justified the violation of the Nigerian airspace because the blockade was an illegitimate weapon of war and could therefore be broken.

With its Danish, Swedish and Finnish counterparts, the Norwegian Church Relief eventually participated in August 1968 in the creation of Nordchurchaid, an ad hoc organization in collaboration with a company based in Reykjavik, *Flughjalp* ('Aid by Air'), to send food to São Tomé from here, relief was then transported to Biafra by a consortium of some thirty European and American NGOs, the Joint Church Aid (JCA), which was nicknamed 'Jesus Christ Airlines'. Their clandestine planes flew by night in very difficult conditions, and three of them were destroyed by Nigerian bombs. The Norwegian Church Relief funded two million out of a total of seven million dollars spent during these operations, which were joined in June 1969 by secular organizations like Oxfam, Save the Children and the ICRC. Interestingly enough, the 'Jesus Christ Airlines' was headed up from August until September 1968 by Carl-Gustaf Von Rosen, a Swedish count who was to rebuild the Biafran Air Force in May 1969.²³ Internal rules of Nordchurchaid did not mention the prohibition of weapons, and the cargo included spare parts for trucks that were supposed to deliver food within the enclave, but could also transport troops (Lloyd 1972).²⁴ The military support was obvious. To continue receiving weapons and planes, the Biafrans had only one airstrip, at Uli, and the JCA agreed to enlarge it to keep it operational, unlike the ICRC, which refused to do so.²⁵ At the end of 1969, the situation was so dire that Odumegwu Ojukwu officially asked the relief agencies to supply his army. During distributions, it became more and more difficult to protect

¹⁹ Davis, Morris. "Audits of International Relief in the Nigerian Civil War: Some Political Perspectives." *International Organization*, Vol. 29, no. 2 (1975): pp. 501-512.

²⁰ S. K. Lischer, *Dangerous Sanctuaries: Refugee Camps, Civil War and the Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 2005

²¹ C. Nordstrom, *Shadows of War, Violence, Power, and International Profiteering in the Twenty-first Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press. 2004

²² More details and references on foreign NGOs involved during the Biafran crisis, from Oxfam to Norwegian Church Aid, are to be found in the database of AidWatch: <http://www.observatoire-humanitaire.org/>.

²³ Davis, Morris. "Audits of International Relief in the Nigerian Civil War: Some Political Perspectives." *International Organization*, Vol. 29, no. 2 (1975): pp. 501-512. See also Cronje, Suzanne. *The World and Nigeria: the Diplomatic History of the Biafra War 1967- 1970*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972. Barnett, Michael and Weiss, Thomas G., eds. *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2008.

²⁴ H. Lloyd, et al, *The Nordchurchaid Airlift to Biafra, 1968-70: An Operations Report*, Copenhagen: Folkekirkens Nodjaelp. 1972

²⁵ L. Wiseberg, 'Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from the Nigerian Civil War', *Human Rights Journal* 7(1): 1974, pp. 61-98

civilians from soldiers who tried to take food by force; aid workers had to hire armed guards to protect their stores from looting.²⁶

The relief support to the enclave war economy was not only material, but also financial. The secessionists lacked hard currencies because the introduction of new banknotes by the Federal government in January 1968 rendered valueless the millions of old Nigerian pounds still in Biafran hands. The creation of a Biafran pound was not a solution. It had no value outside of the enclave. Printed in Portugal, it was a paper money only, for it would have been too costly to mint and import coins. As a result, even Biafran banknotes were scarce, while plastic tokens were used as ersatz coins. Within the enclave, the population preferred to keep its cash at home because their accounts had been frozen by the local authorities and they risked being recruited by the military while going to the bank.²⁷ They tried to save Nigerian coins which, unlike banknotes, were still used on the Federal side and whose highest value was one shilling. With these coins, some smugglers succeeded in crossing the frontlines and importing goods on the black market.²⁸ But the government of OdumegwuOjukwu could not export anything to gain hard currency. Because of the Federal blockade, oil revenues did not materialize and no foreign private interests were willing to risk purchasing rights to exploit Biafran mineral resources. In order to be allowed to go inside the enclave, humanitarian organizations were the only ones to buy the local currency, and they provided for free the necessary supplies that fed the military.

Aid thus became crucial to prevent the collapse of the secession attempt.

The Commander of the Biafran Army, Alexander Madiebo, admitted that they eventually lost the war because of a lack of money.²⁹ As a matter of fact, relief and mission organizations were the primary source of foreign exchange (£4.3 million), followed by the French secret service (£2 million) and donations from the Igbo diaspora overseas (£750,000), the Igbo in Nigeria (£100,000) and various concerned citizens in the West (£100,000).³⁰

According to OdumegwuOjukwu, 'the only source of income available to Biafra was the hard currency spent by the churches for yams and garri'. His Chief of Military Planning, Mike Okwechime, confirmed that 'financing the war was largely accomplished through private and humanitarian contributions. Much was diverted from funds raised abroad. Those who wished to make strictly humanitarian contributions could give to specific agencies but those giving to Biafra often didn't ask any questions, and the money could be used to purchase arms on the black market'.³¹

Out of \$250 million of humanitarian aid to Biafra, it was estimated that 15 per cent was directly spent on military items. This was equivalent to the amount of hard currency spent on weapons by the Nigerian Federal Government during the whole of the war.³²

EFFORTS AND INTERLINK BETWEEN FOREIGN AND LOCAL RELIGIOUS BODIES IN THE WAR

Effort of Foreign Religious Bodies

The Biafra famine presented many humanitarian groups with urgent demands for humanitarian aid. The Norwegian Church Relief and the Dutch Protestant Churches recognized the starvation crisis as early as November 1967 and began to mobilize public opinion in Europe for humanitarian assistance.³³ Before the war

²⁶ S. Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: The Diplomatic History of the Biafran War, 1967–1970*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson. 1972

²⁷ C. Uche, 'Money Matters in a War Economy: The Biafran Experience', *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics* 8(1): 2002, pp. 29–54.

²⁸ Interestingly enough, such war profiteers did not suffer much when the secessionists were defeated in 1970. Their wealth was accumulated in merchandise and was not seized when a federal decree compelled the Biafrans to exchange all their cash for a lump sum payment of twenty Nigerian pounds per person. Cf. A. Harneit-Sievers, Axel and S. Emezue, 'Towards a Social History of Warfare and Reconstruction: The Nigerian/Biafran Case', in I.

Amadiume and A. An-Na'im, eds., *The Politics of Memory: Truth, Healing and Social Justice*, London: Zed Books, pp. 2000, pp. 110–26.

²⁹ A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension. 1980

³⁰ K. Lindsay, 'How Biafra Pays for the War', *Venture: Journal of the Fabian Colonial Bureau* (London) 21(3): 1969, pp. 26–27.

³¹ J. Stremmlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1977

³² I. Smillie, *The Land of Lost Content: A History of CUSO (Canadian University Service Overseas)*, Toronto: Deneau. 1985

³³ Hugh G. Lloyd, Mona L Mollerup and Carl A. Bratved, *The Nordchurchaid Airlift to Biafra, 1968-1970: An Operation Report* (Copenhagen: Folkekirkens Nodhjaep, 1972), p. 5.

began, the Norwegian and Dutch missionary groups, like many other church groups, were well established in the former Eastern Nigeria. Norway for instance, had a project known as the Norcap agricultural project.³⁴ Their long presence in Biafra gave them the opportunity to have first-hand information about the life of common people in the rural areas. Following the initial appeals from these church groups for aid in November 1967, Danchurchaid Copenhagen sent money and food supplies to the starving population through the World Council of Churches (WCC) in December 1967.³⁵ This initial response was only a trickle compared to the huge number of civilians already affected by starvation and diseases. It took the larger campaign efforts of other missionaries, especially Irish priests, the Biafran government, and common people to arouse the conscience of the Western world to the horrifying suffering and death of the civilian masses in Biafra.³⁶

In March 1968 when the symptoms of malnutrition became very common among children in refugee camps, Bishop Joseph Whelan who was in charge of Owerri Diocese, appealed to the Catholic Church in Britain and the United States for dry milk.³⁷ The money raised towards buying the milk was channeled through the African Continental Bank, Cheapside, London. The American Catholic Organization also sent £84,000 worth of drugs and about 3,900 kilograms of dry milk to Bishop Whelan. Reverend Father Kilbride, who had been on leave in the USA from Biafra, collected the donations and sent them to Europe where Caritas had them shipped to Biafra. Bishop Whelan received the donations and presented them to the Biafran government for distribution to the hospitals.³⁸ At this time, there was no coordinating organization such as the Joint Church Aid.

As the starvation became more serious, Bishop Whelan embarked on a campaign for food support in Europe. During his visit to London in June 1968, he informed the press that nearly four million Biafran refugees were starving to death. Bishop Wilson of Birmingham who was at the conference observed that when he was in Biafra in March 1968, there were already signs of starvation and malnutrition.³⁹ These reports further moved the director of the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (Oxfam) Leslie Kirkley, to launch an appeal to raise emergency funds to assist the suffering civilians in Biafra. After a visit to some feeding centers in Biafra, Kirkley noted: "Unless we pull out all the stops in Britain and other countries, we will have a terrifying disaster in Biafra before the end of August, 1968. By then, two million may have died."⁴⁰ Sister Mary Lorcan of the Holy Rosary Sisters at Emekuku, near Owerri, told Kirkley that even if the war ended immediately, several hundreds of thousands of children who had severe cases of malnutrition would be condemned to death.⁴¹ Reverend Nicholas Stacey, an Oxfam assistant director who also visited Biafra confirmed the need for urgent humanitarian intervention to prevent further widespread starvation.⁴² Caritas and Oxfam further embarked on an aggressive media campaign that generated huge donations from different church groups in Britain.

Many of the pleas for humanitarian aid in Biafra did not sit well with the Nigerian government. In a joint meeting with the relief agencies on July 19, 1968, the Nigerian Head of State, General Gowon, lambasted the Oxfam and Caritas representatives for making "biased appeals" through newspaper advertisements.⁴³ Gowon complained that the leaders of these relief organizations, in media interviews, were making reference to the secessionist region as "Biafra," a word that amounted to recognition as far as the Nigerian authorities were concerned. An Oxfam representative at the meeting, Timothy Brierly, apologized on behalf of his organization for the misunderstanding and assured Gowon that his organization would not do anything that would cause any

³⁴ The Norcap project site at Ikwo in Ebonyi State is the present location of Ebonyi State College of Education, which was formerly a college of agriculture. When I joined the college as a lecturer, I noticed that most of the buildings that served as offices were inherited from the Norcap.

³⁵ L. Wiseberg, 'Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from the Nigerian Civil War', *Human Rights Journal* 7(1): 1974, pp. 61–98

³⁶ Alvin Shulter, "In Nigeria's Civil War, Humanitarianism Comes In a Poor Second," *New York Times*, August 18, 1968, E4.

³⁷ "Missionaries Hit in Biafra," *Catholic Herald*, March 8, 1968, p. 9.

³⁸ L. Wiseberg, 'Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from the Nigerian Civil War', *Human Rights Journal* 7(1): 1974, pp. 61–98

³⁹ "4 Million Biafran Refugees, Says Bishop," *Catholic Herald*, June 21, 1968, p. 1. See also L. Wiseberg, 'Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from the Nigerian Civil War', *Human Rights Journal* 7(1): 1974, pp. 61–98

⁴⁰ "Blockaded Biafra Facing Starvation." See also S. Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: The Diplomatic History of the Biafran War, 1967–1970*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson. 1972

⁴¹ Ibid see also L. Wiseberg, 'Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from the Nigerian Civil War', *Human Rights Journal* 7(1): 1974, pp. 61–98

⁴² "Plight of Refugees in Biafra," *Catholic Herald*, July 5, 1968, 1. See also, J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1977

⁴³ Nigeria: Peace Talks and Relief Assistance, July 19, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-5. See also J. O. Aremu, and O. S. Osadola, *The Organization of African Unity and Its Mediatory Role in the Nigeria Civil War: A Historical Assessment*. *International Journal of Research*, Vol. 5, Issue 15, 2018, pp. 214-238

suspicion of the humanitarian motives of his organization.⁴⁴The Nigerian government's reaction, however, did not stop the church groups from carrying on with their campaign for humanitarian aid.

On July 31, 1968, Holgar Wricke, a West German doctor with the World Council of Churches in Biafra stated in a news conference in Geneva that as many as 40 percent of the children in the besieged territory of Biafra would die if urgent relief supply was not sent.⁴⁵Wricke's estimate was based on his experience at Anang Province which was already occupied by the Nigerian troops. Wricke, who compared the situation in the Nigerian-held territory to the region under Biafran control quoted nutritional experts as saying that the mortality rate in Biafra would climb even much higher.⁴⁶Middlekoop, the organizing secretary for the Christian Council of Biafra also made a daily appeal for world humanitarian support through Radio Biafra. Middlekoop's broadcast which was received in Europe called for medical supplies, especially measles vaccine.⁴⁷

Another significant effort that stimulated humanitarian response in Biafra came from Reverend Father Tony Byrne, the Director of Catholic Relief in Biafra, who held a number of press conferences in different parts of Europe and the US. In a press conference in Dublin in October 1968, Byrne told his audience that Biafra would experience the severest famine between November and December 1968, if urgent steps were not taken.⁴⁸ Byrne made this remark when he came to recruit staff that would serve in the evacuation of 3,000 Biafran children under the Caritas project. In a letter he sent through Byrne, Bishop Whelan informed the press conference that the situation in Biafra was "hopeless" and that the war was a "holocaust of hundred thousand little ones."⁴⁹ Reverend Father Kevin Doheny described Biafran children as the main victims of Nigeria's "deliberate policy to starve Biafrans through a land and sea blockade."⁵⁰ Another firsthand account of the food crisis was provided by Father Raymond F. Maher who reported that hundreds of thousands of people in refugee camps were "slowly but surely" dying of starvation in Biafra. Father Maher, who wrote from Aba, stated that shortage of food was impossible to overcome because the Nigerian troops "frequently and deliberately" harvested crops that were growing on the farm, seized food that were stored in the barn and stopped farmers from carrying out their normal farm work.⁵¹ These actions suggested a deliberate effort to starve civilians to death. Most of these accounts attributed the humanitarian crisis directly to the actions of the Nigerian government. The missionaries highlighted the Nigerian government starvation policy and the misery it had caused innocent civilians through the media. As a result of the missionaries' strategic use of the media in communicating with the world community, ordinary people in Europe and North America were able to see and feel the devastation caused by the starvation in their own living rooms through the television.⁵²

As the Biafran famine gained more publicity in Europe, a group of Christian churches in Switzerland sent a delegation to Britain to meet Cardinal Heenan and the Archbishop of Canterbury to discuss ways of bringing the war to an end and alleviating the suffering of the people.⁵³ After that meeting, Cardinal Heenan directed priests in the Westminster Archdiocese to appeal to their congregations to pray for Biafra and appeal for funds for relief supplies.⁵⁴ With this directive, the campaign for humanitarian support for Biafra gained more momentum and generated a huge response from individuals and groups in Britain. Cardinal Heenan's earlier sermon on the mass suffering in Biafra on June 2, 1968 had also received a huge response leading to public protests in Britain.⁵⁵ The motivation of the missionaries to bring the suffering civilians in Biafra to the consciousness of the world

⁴⁴ J. O. Aremu, and O. S. Osadola, *The Organization of African Unity and Its Mediatory Role in the Nigeria Civil War: A Historical Assessment*. International Journal of Research, Vol. 5, Issue 15, 2018, pp. 214-238

⁴⁵ "Higher Death Toll Foreseen," *New York Times*, August 1, 1968, p. 3.

⁴⁶ "Higher Death Toll Foreseen," *New York Times*, August 1, 1968, p. 3.

⁴⁷ "Biafra Broadcasts Call for Food Aid," *New York Times*, December 8, 1968, p. 11.

⁴⁸ "Big Famine Threatens Biafra," *Catholic Herald*, October 18, 1968, 1. See also Peter Worthington, "Without the Church, Biafra Would Have Starved," *Telegram*, February 7, 1969.

⁴⁹ Ibid see also J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967- 1970*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1977

⁵⁰ Ken Waters, "Influencing the Message," p. 697. See also Peter Worthington, "Without the Church, Biafra Would Have Starved," *Telegram*, February 7, 1969.

⁵¹ "Biafra Starvation," *Catholic Herald*, July 18, 1968, p. 2. See also "Yakubu Gowon: Soldier Statesman," *Daily Sketch*, October 19, 1970.

⁵² Tony Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade* (Dublin: the Columba Press, 1997), 44. See also J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967- 1970*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1977

⁵³ "Plight of Refugees." See also D. Jacobs, *The Brutality of Nations*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf., 1987

⁵⁴ Ibid see also Madiebo, Alexander A. *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co, 1980.

⁵⁵ "Biafra: Cardinal's Help to Humanity," *Catholic Herald*, June 21, 1968. See also J. Okpoko, *The Biafran Nightmare: The Controversial Role of International Relief Agencies in a War of Genocide*, Enugu: Delta. 1986

community did not only lead to a large scale humanitarian aid but also galvanized different church groups in Europe and North America into forming the Joint Church Aid.⁵⁶

III. CONCLUSION

Christian missionary groups in Biafra played an agenda setting role in the humanitarian drive for Biafra. Their initial appeal laid the foundation for large scale international relief operations that followed. In spite of the blockade and poor communication with the outside world, the Christian churches saw it as a duty not to keep silent and watch people die of starvation and disease. They took it upon themselves to alert the world about the Biafran famine through their reports and press conferences which helped to bring the plight of the civilians to the knowledge of the world community. Apart from the role of the missionaries, Biafran government overseas publicist played an important role in awakening the conscience of the global community to the starvation. Markpress, which was Biafra's overseas press agent was effective in drawing the attention of the world to the crisis through its network with the Western newspapers and television stations. Its media campaign in Europe and North America attracted the attention of many journalists who visited Biafra to witness the war. The reports of starving "kwashiorkor children" presented by the Western media moved humanitarian organizations and private individuals to support the humanitarian effort. The politicization of religion and the religious practice of politics is very relevant in this instance and religious bodies remain an anchor of evangelistic and humanitarian efforts in times of war as was presented in the Nigerian civil war.

⁵⁶ Aall, Cato. "Relief, Nutrition and Health Problems in the Nigerian-Biafran War." *The Journal of Tropical Pediatrics*, Vol. 16 no. 2 (1970): pp. 69-88.