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## FOOD SHORTAGES, SURVIVAL STRATEGIES AND THE IGBO OF SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA DURING THE NIGERIA CIVIL WAR

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### Abstract

War as an acceptable component of intergroup relations is usually resorted to when every other option may have failed. This is given its usually devastating consequences on both individuals and groups. To a great extent the thirty-month Nigerian Civil War practically devastated the Igbo food economy and in particular its food production systems. However, given the need to survive, especially under very difficult conditions, characterized by mass deaths, incessant population movements, insecurity and an economic blockade by the federal administration, which ensured that food supply was restricted, the Igbo had to evolve far reaching survival strategies including adapting to the consumption of several plants and animals hitherto unknown in their dietary habits. Although, this was hardly sufficient, but it all the same enabled them to sustain their resistance for a longer period. What this shows is that there is hardly any plant or animal that may not be consumed by man, depending on local circumstances and the willingness to adapt to changing conditions.

**Keywords:** Food Shortage; Survival Strategies; Igbo; Nigeria Civil War

### Introduction

On 15 January 1966, Nigeria recorded its first military coup d'état, which also ushered the military into governance. Under the new military administration, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, was appointed Military Governor of the Eastern Region. Later that year, in fact on 29 July, a counter-coup took place, which saw the coming to power of Colonel Yakubu Gowon as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of Nigeria's Armed Forces. Disagreements between Col. Ojukwu and Col. Gowon over leadership issues resulted in the former refusing to take instructions from Lagos (then the federal capital). Within a short time, the country was engulfed in a protracted crisis, which resulted in a 30-month Civil War.

The primary causes of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) otherwise called the Biafran War, have already been discussed in several works (Forsyth, 1977; Madiebo, 1980; Nwankwo, 1972; Cervenka, 1971; Obasanjo, 1981; St. Jorre, 1992). It is important to note however, that this war had several consequences on the Igbo economy and in particular its food production systems. It has been argued that five major factors contributed to the breakdown of the indigenous food production systems of Eastern Nigeria during the period: the influx of refugees;

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total economic blockade; mobilization of men and materials for the Biafra Army; military operation resulting in population displacement; and, the capture of the food surplus areas of the Cross River Basin especially Ibibioland, Bende, Abakiliki and the Rivers areas by the federal troops in the early months of the war (Ikpe, 1994).

There were other challenges associated with ensuring food security during the period including: general insecurity, which was not conducive for agricultural pursuits; loss of farmlands following evacuation of people from conquered territories and movement into lands hitherto reserved for cultivation; looting of barns and farmlands by soldiers; hunger and malnutrition occasioned by the Federal Government's economic blockade, which saw to a further depletion of labour; and, the inadequacies of the interim agricultural plans of the 'Biafra' administration. These issues combined to make food production relatively difficult. Hence, the desire to look for alternative means of survival, which in some cases included experimenting with new crops.

### **Civil Wars**

Civil Wars and conflicts generally have indeed attracted considerable comments from scholars particularly in recent times given the frequent occurrence as well as the associated consequences in several countries of the world. However, the terrible consequences of these wars have indeed driven conflict scholars to a better understanding of their causes, duration, severity and outcomes (Thyne, 2006: 937-961).

On the numerous causes of Civil Wars, Fearon and Laitan suggest that the prevalence of Civil Wars especially in the 1990s for instance was not due to the end of the Cold War and associated changes in the international system. It rather resulted from a steady, gradual accumulation of civil conflicts that began immediately after the Second World War (Fearon & Laitin, 2003: 75-90). Sambanis however insists that not all civil wars are the same. Conventional wisdom, he argues, suggests that each war is as different as the society that produced it (Sambanis, 2001: 259-282). In any case, ethnicity could be said to be at the centre of politics in divided societies, given that the most important tensions in the world could be found among others, in Lebanon, Israel, Algeria, Nigeria, Sudan, Ethiopia, India, and Yugoslavia during the 1990s (Reynal-Querol, 2002: 29-54). The same could be said about religion. In fact, religiously divided societies are more prone to intense conflict than countries where people have conflicting claims to resources based on interest groups or language divisions. This is because religious identity is fixed and non-negotiable. Hence, disputes among identity groups based on their religious nature are particularly difficult to negotiate, thereby raising the odds of violence (Reynal-Querol, 2002: 29-54). Scholars also point at the abundance of natural resources as a significant factor in explaining civil conflict since they provide a pool in which rebels can acquire a stake to finance their warfare (Lujala et al, 2005: 538-562). In fact, Collier and Hoeffler admit that states that rely heavily on the export of primary commodities face a higher risk of civil war than resource-poor states (Ross, 2004: 35-67).

Yet another dimension to civil war literature relates to its longevity and severity. Here, Hegre points to the fact that civil wars last a longer when neither side can disarm the other resulting in a military stalemate, even as they are relatively quick, when conditions favour a decisive victory (Hegre, 2004: 243-252). At the same time, civil wars are also known to create a conflict trap given that societies that have experienced one civil war are significantly more likely to experience a second or even a third war than are societies with no prior history of violence (Walter, 2004: 371-388).

In all cases the consequences of civil wars are known to be varied and far reaching, depending on the issues involved and how long it lasts. Thyne for instance calculates that over the past 50 years, civil conflicts have caused more than 16 million deaths and have lasted over 6 years on average. Civil Wars he says, also disrupt society by causing massive flights of refugees,

devastating countries' economies and interrupting social programmes (Thyne, 2006: 937-961). Ghobarah, Huth and Rusett also opine that the direct and immediate casualties from civil wars are only a tip of the iceberg compared with their long term consequences for human misery. According to them, that civil wars kill and maim people is hardly surprising. They in fact, continue to kill people indirectly, well after the shooting stops. These new deaths (and disabilities) are overwhelmingly concentrated in the civilian population (Ghobarah et al, 2003: 189-202). On a wider scale, civil wars could also drive away foreign direct investments, an important source of savings, as foreign investors redirect their funds to less risky and more politically stable countries. Moreover, battles and guerilla activities destroy private and social capital while inhibiting market exchanges (Murdoch & Sandler, 2003: 91-110).

It is evident based on the foregoing that considerable literature exists on the nature, causes and consequences of civil wars. The Nigerian Civil War also manifests evidence from the numerous scholarly opinions. Perhaps, what has not been adequately covered is the effect of these wars on food production processes and some of the strategies frequently adopted by individuals and societies in a bid to survive Civil Wars. It is to these areas that we shall now turn our attention.

### **The Nigeria Civil War and Disruption of Food Production Processes**

The beginning of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967 also brought with it a lot of confusion in governance especially in the Igbo territories. Perhaps as a first step to break Colonel Ojukwu's power base in the Eastern Region, the Federal Government under Colonel Gowon immediately divided the country into twelve states on May 30, 1967. As a result of this, the core Igbo territory now came under the East Central State with Mr. Ukpabi Asika as Sole Administrator. Ojukwu, however, refused to recognize this exercise and continued to hold sway as the de facto leader of Eastern Nigeria. What this meant, was that the Igbo territory now came under two separate administrations: the existing authority under the leadership of Col. Ojukwu and the new East Central State, which had Mr. Ukpabia Asika as Sole Administrator. There were yet parts of Igboland that were still located within Rivers, Southeastern and Midwestern States. This further complicated the task of governance.

Meanwhile, most of the policies and programmes of the post independence administration of Eastern Nigeria were either temporarily halted or completely abandoned following the eruption of the civil war. Thus, plantations, farm settlements and other agricultural establishments that characterized government policies at the time were abandoned. Even the aggressive marketing of fertilizer and other government agricultural extension services suffered severe neglect. More than ever before, food crop production came under severe threat as the outbreak of the war disrupted food production, resulting in massive food importation given that the conducive environment necessary for agricultural production was lacking. Similarly, several agricultural infrastructures were destroyed, while most of the programmes initiated under the Eastern Nigeria Development Plan 1962 - 1968 were abandoned.

There were equally problems associated with the conscription of able-bodied men and women into the Biafra force after an initial unsuccessful attempt to encourage voluntary enlistment. This further depleted available hands in agriculture. Government's war propaganda in the period was indeed self evident. For the government:

*That young man who sneaked about the village, avoiding service in his country's armed forces was unpatriotic; that young and able-bodied school teacher who preferred to distribute relief when he should be fighting his country's war, was not only unpatriotic but was doing a woman's work, while those who helped these loafers to dodge their civic duties should henceforth re-examine themselves (Kirk-Green, 1971: 357).*

Of course, this was the only step to take in the circumstance and its implications on the regions fledgling economy were quick to manifest, as labour hitherto engaged in agricultural and commercial activities were henceforth channeled to the war effort.

The loss of labour in agriculture was to be further compounded by the massive return of the Igbo from other parts of the country especially from Northern Nigeria, leading to an astronomical rise in population and concomitant increase in the demand for foodstuffs. According to the Nigerian Red Cross, more than one million people mainly from Eastern Nigeria and in particular of Igbo origin left different parts of Northern Nigeria and returned to their ethnic areas in the East between September and October 1966 following the pogroms that took place prior to the war. And by the time the civil war eventually broke out in 1967, over 4 million Easterners had returned home from other parts of Nigeria due to tension and bad feelings against them (Ikpe, 1994: 96). Expectedly majority of these returnees were Igbo, while the sudden rise in population further aggravated the pressures especially on the limited resources of the region, which were already over stretched.

But the pressure on the Igbo food economy following the mass return from different parts of the country had other implications. According to the Administrator of East Central State, Mr. Ukpabi Asika, the return of these immigrants, cut off a substantial source of income transfer, which they used to send back to their communities and which provided a significant proportion of the gross income of these communities. Thus, not only were incomes from such sources terminated but catering for these immigrants, who returned in poverty conditions, even became another source of worry (Kirk-Green, 1971: 357). In effect, the ensuing war not only sapped the area of its manpower resources, but also increased the demand for food resulting from the additional mouths that now had to be fed.

Of course, the burden of reintegration and resettlement was shouldered by the different families that had to accommodate their returnee relations. The influx of the returnees, thus, put pressure on food supplies and in fact threatened the food security of the area. Incidentally, Eastern Nigeria even before this period had the highest population densities of about 420 persons per sq. kilometer as against 337 in the West, 170 in the Mid-West and 106 in the North (Ikpe, 1994: 96). Furthermore, given that the influx of population to the East took place mainly in September 1966, which coincided with the beginning of the yam harvest season and when the cassava planting season had just ended, there were bound to be difficulties in food supply (Ikpe, 1994: 96). Martin has observed that the population of the Ngwa and in fact, other parts of Igboland had already increased before the war with the return of Igbo from the other regions, and with each city that fell into federal hands, more refugees fled into rural Biafra thus increasing the pressure on local land resources and further worsening the deplorable food situation (Martin, 1988: 133).

It is also a known fact, that a considerable number of people died either in combat or other war related causes. In fact, it has been argued that perhaps up to one million lives may have been lost from deaths resulting from combat, starvation, disease or even shock (Igbokwe, 1995: 15). Of course, the heavy death toll dealt a damaging blow on food production by depleting the regions manpower resources. As one town after another fell to Federal forces, the civilian population withdrew further and further into the bush or into other towns, only to resume their flight a few weeks or a few months later. Some succumbed to exhaustion on the way, others died of snake bites, and nearly all suffered greatly from the immense hardships that were usually encountered in such circumstances (Balogun, 1973: 115). And for an economy that hitherto depended heavily on food production and commercial activities, the resulting food shortages both during and after the war was not unexpected. We have already noted that the general insecurity occasioned by the war was not conducive for serious agricultural pursuits. To say the least, normal agricultural practice could not take place, as it became risky to engage in farming not knowing exactly when the next strike or air raid by the federal forces would take place. Indeed only a few ventured into their farmlands as air raids were very frequent.

There was equally the problem of the loss of farmlands following the evacuation of conquered areas and movement into hitherto reserved farmlands for abode. All through Igboland, as town after town fell, people retreated into villages and creeks where they built shanty houses, often times under tree shades essentially to escape the onslaught of ravaging Nigerian soldiers. In most cases, these flights were undertaken before or after harvests. Thus, what resulted was not only loss of their homes and farmlands but that of their crops. There is in fact sufficient evidence to show that many of the communities whose harvests were eaten up by these soldiers never recovered from the loss several years after. An example is Owerri and its environs, which was said to have lost virtually all their yams either due to looting or massive consumption in the war period following the fall of the town in September 1968. They people have up till now failed to regain their former status as significant yam producers essentially due to this and other reasons (Oparaocha-Ekwe, 2004). This is not to say that the people were indeed great yam farmers prior to the war, but even the little that was produced completely disappeared after the war.

By the end of 1968, virtually all the major food producing areas of Igboland had come under the federal troops. The food producing areas of Biafra were essentially the outlying parts especially Abakiliki and Ogoja to the North, where yam, rice and other staples were produced; the Onitsha, Atani and Anam axis to the west; together with the Ikwerre and Etche areas to the South. With very few exceptions, the central area to which Biafra was eventually compressed and contracted by military defeat was and still is largely deficient in the major staples (Harneit-Sievers et al, 1997: 112). It has been argued that it was the loss of major food producing areas like Ngwa, Arochukwu, Bende, Abakiliki, Nsukka and Onitsha to the federal troops in fact, more than any other factor that led to the collapse of Biafra (Akpan, 1976: 193). In many of the places, where looting of farmlands took place, the people returned to their homes after the war only to begin life from the scratch. Some even had to borrow seed yams and cassava stems from their more fortunate neighbours to start a new life.

In the case of Ohaji, in Imo State, this rather disturbing trend now restricted yam production to the following villages: Ochia, Iguru, Ikwerede, Asaa, Obile, Ihie, Mgbu Isii and Umuapu, which have been able to pick up since the end of the civil war (Nwulu, 2004). Some species of the yam crop like *ji oko*, *ji Ibibio* and *ji Iyaghiri* have either become completely extinct or have now been restricted in circulation, owing to the devastating effects of the war, even as many attribute the reduced quality of cocoyam being cultivated in Igboland to the civil war period, when most of the crop was eaten up (Ibezie, 2003). It was also as a result of this that many began to adopt rice as a substitute crop in Edda so much that it began to challenge the dominance of yam in the area (Nnachi, 2003).

Likewise, the movement of population in Igboland had a distracting effect on food production. Whereas the forceful evacuation of people led to the looting of their farmlands and harvest, the movement of people into areas hitherto reserved exclusively for cultivation, led to the loss of farmlands, which ultimately affected food production adversely. Hence, choice farmlands became places of abode for fleeing refugee population and with this movement came the complete abandoning of the traditional farm practice of fallowing, which equally led to the shortage of foodstuffs in the war period.

Ogbudinkpa has argued that although the Biafrans would not accept it, the collapse of their economy was not so much due to military might of the Federal Army as due to the shortage of food. Neither would the Federal Army accept that it was by starvation rather than by military might that it won the war (Ogbudinkpa, 1985: 58). Hence, a major aspect of the civil war which adversely affected the economy of the Igbo was the economic blockade placed on Biafra by the Federal Government at the inception of the war in 1967. The blockade was placed on June 1, 1967, essentially to prevent the export of palm produce and crude oil so as to destroy the economic basis of the secessionist Republic, seen as a potent weapon for achieving quick victory (Ikpe,

1994: 94). With time the blockade became effective as hunger and starvation ravaged the Igbo territory. Diseases like 'Kwashiorkor', which resulted from severe protein deficiency, ravaged the population even as prices of protein foods rose astronomically. Thus, a chicken in 1968 cost five Biafra pounds (£5:16s:8d or \$14), while a young goat went as high as twenty-five pounds (Harneit-Sievers et al, 1997: 113). With time the protein deficiency became acute, so much so that according to St. Jorre:

*By the end of 1967 the churches in Biafra made their first public appeal for help. The basic needs were protein-rich foods, medicine and bulk foods. At this time, Kwashiorkor, a disease caused by extreme protein deficiency, which leads to the body cannibalizing itself, had begun to be noticed in some children. The children were the worst hit with their soft fluffy ginger hair and almost fleshless skulls ... they have swollen bellies and overblown legs and ankles where the flesh had started to peel off like the skin of tomato fresh from boiling water ... Protein, not medicine, was the cure for kwashiorkor. Caught on time, it could easily be reversed; left too long it either killed or maimed – through brain damage for life. The great majority of civilian deaths in Biafra came from Kwashiorkor (St. Jorre, 1992: 237).*

Also, because of the blockade, the flow of livestock and leguminous food crops from Northern Nigeria into the East practically stopped, again leading to rise in prices of those items. And because the entire region lacked sufficient sources of conventional protein, the war further created an imbalance in the people's diet (Ikpe, 1994: 97). The launching of an emergency food programme with the formation of the 'Land Army' in 1969 by the Biafran authorities did not help matters.

Indeed, the economic blockade seriously hit the foundations of the Igbo economy. With practically nothing coming in from outside, the people were forced to produce virtually everything they needed. In a situation where there were hardly any previous arrangements for such an emergency not a few were caught unawares. What resulted was large scale frustration, hardship and poverty, as the resources of the food producing areas already under pressure due to insecurity, became over-stretched and obviously gave up in the face of grave challenges resulting in food shortages. It was in this circumstance that people ate up their barns of yams, while cocoyam and cassava were oftentimes prematurely harvested and eaten. Therefore, not only was the people's energy sapped due to hunger and malnutrition occasioned by the economic blockade, all the available foodstuffs were equally eaten up albeit prematurely and this was disastrous for the food situation both in the war period and directly after war.

The result was massive hunger. It is possible that perhaps, more people may have died in the war due to hunger than actual combat. However, the extent of hunger, starvation and malnutrition equally varied from place to place according to the extent of military operations, how long ago the area had been liberated, the degree of displacements of people, natural ability of the area concerned to feed itself and the availability of relief food (Ikpe, 1994: 113).

There were however, slight variations in the different parts of Igboland especially on the extent of devastation and want arising from the Civil War. Among the Aguleri of Anambra State for instance, and possibly owing to their unique locational advantage, the people simply withdrew from the right to the left bank of the river where it was perceived that the Nigerian soldiers could not easily penetrate owing to the topography of the region. Thus, agricultural practice in this area even received a boost at least for sometime, as many returnees from the various towns joined in food production. That way, it became possible for them to produce sufficient food even for the fighting soldiers (Okechi, 2004). Also in Nsukka, Northeastern Igboland and given the remoteness of their location, the war rather forced many into farming as there was hardly any other business available. And, given that the prime targets of the 'enemy' fighters were the market areas and other public places, people avoided such places and rather concentrated on their farm lands (Otti, 2004). Similarly, in the Ishiagu and Ohaozara areas, the

people recorded some of their biggest harvests during the war, because many hands were once more engaged in agriculture even as the war did not seriously touch their area (Chukwu, 2003). Some of the indigenes attest that they did not see a Nigerian soldier until the end of the war.

At the same time, production of food crops particularly yam continued in Ezzeagu and its neighbouring communities. In these places, it was said that the presence of the Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters (BOFF) provided reasonable protection for local farmers. Aside from this, even the farmers organized themselves into groups, to protect their barns, which were temporarily shifted to the soil, while trade in foodstuffs especially with Enugu and other cities continued and in fact, recorded tremendous boost owing to the astronomical rise in demand. This also resulted in renewed interest in farming (Amaechi, 2003).

Nevertheless, places where real farming took place during the civil war in Igboland were few and far between. These were mainly areas in which the war practically did not touch or the major food producing areas, where, in spite of raging hostilities, people still found it worthwhile to farm if only to earn an income or guarantee their own subsistence. In the latter case, this was done at great costs, in terms of human and material resources. In essence, the general insecurity engendered by the war, made both agricultural and commercial pursuits virtually impossible in many parts of Igboland and this in the long run not only affected the people's health standards but also their economic wellbeing.

#### **Official Reaction by the Biafran Administration**

In response to these problems the leadership of Biafra undertook a number of measures aimed at addressing the food problem. First, it set up Refugee Camps and feeding centres as well as a Rehabilitation Commission and Food Directorate, which attracted the attention of international relief agencies (Nwokeji, 1995: 71-89). The Food Directorate was specifically charged with the responsibility of producing or purchasing either through smuggling or otherwise all foods, drinks, and cigarettes, which were first to be distributed to the soldiers and then to the civilian population (Ogbudinkpa, 1985: 59). The Directorate also went into direct farming by acquiring extensive lands in the hinterland where it planted several food crops. Through the Biafran Information Service it persuaded people to cultivate more food to avert imminent hunger. Elders, village and religious heads were specifically instructed to educate their people on the benefits of maintaining self-sufficiency in food production. These efforts were given coherence in the famous Ahiara Declaration of May 1969, which signified the official proclamation of the Biafran Revolution. In it, the contributions made by the farmer, the craftsman and other toilers to the war effort were given adequate recognition. Therefore, a cardinal point of the Biafran economic policy was to keep their welfare constantly in view. In fact, its defined goal was to achieve self-sufficiency in food production.

Next, the Biafran Land Army was constituted to mobilize people towards effective food production. By using initiative, resourcefulness, ingenuity, hard work, and trust in God, the Land Army was able to attack every available piece of land to produce yams, maize, okro, groundnuts, beans, cassava, plantain, cocoyams, etc. (Ogbudinkpa, 1985: 59). Furthermore, farmers, craftsmen and tradesmen were to form cooperatives and communes, so as to make them take pride in the work by according them the recognition and prestige they deserved (Akpan, 1976: 217). In spite of these laudable programmes, the war situation made it virtually impossible for them to be realized. The Biafran Land Army actually took off, but the challenges before it were so much that it became overwhelmed within a short time. Under war condition, it was also difficult to check the high-level corruption associated with the officers. Cases of favouritism and nepotism were rife and this further led to the early demise of these interim policies. However, up till the end of the war, the Biafran Land Army maintained some farms essentially for the feeding of soldiers. In the same vein, the Biafran government set up a Food and Nutrition Directorate to cater for the feeding of the army and the populace. But because it was starved of the necessary funds, the

directorates depended solely on forced food donations from villages within Biafra (Ikpe, 1994: 101).

The Biafra Administration also set up research centres at Bende and Umudike. As scrutiny centres for the propagation of crops, they equally embarked on developing crops for double cropping, identifying early maturing varieties as well as high yielding seedlings. They also served as demonstration centres for people living around the neighbourhood. The seedlings, which they developed, were further sent to the Land Armies at the riverine areas for mass production (Ogbudinkpa, 1985: 60).

#### **Adaptation / Invention: Strategies for Survival**

In terms of food production, the civil war obviously introduced a change of a special kind in Igboland. For want of something to eat, many either began to experiment with existing plants or completely adopted new ones. Hence, new crops and new species of existing crops were discovered and incorporated into the Igbo food economy. For instance, *Uda* (a tree-bark) was discovered to contain a lot of salt and was cooked in soup as a veritable alternative to scarce processed salt. Also and especially among the riverine communities, so acute was the shortage of salt that people had to resort to the unwholesome practice of cooking food with water drawn from the ocean to give it the taste of salt (Harneit-Sievers, 1997: 114). Others used fermented termites, crickets or grasshoppers, which were collected, killed or left covered in special clay pots for some days before they were used. Some even cooked soup with bitter leaf, the bitter taste of which reduced the need for salt (Harneit-Sievers, 1997: 117). This was especially after Okposi and Uburu, the major salt producing areas had fallen into federal hands.

Lemon grass was widely used for making tea. Essentially due to its aromatic lemon-like taste, it was easy to drink without the addition of sugar. Fresh lemon grass was therefore harvested, boiled and sieved, and the resulting drink was taken as tea, cold or hot according to preference to help relieve the uncomfortable feeling of hunger. It was equally used in traditional medicine for treating fevers (Ikpe, 1994: 108). Other crops/plants eaten included the kolanut, which was constantly chewed to keep the mouth busy and confer the psychological effect of eating and it was also made into drinks, which could be taken in the form of beverage (Ikpe, 1994: 109).

*Famiwa* (species of wild cassava) had its large dose of prussic acid reduced through boiling before consumption. Similarly, leaves such as *Shrashra* and *Nturukpa* were discovered to be highly medicinal, especially as remedy for stomach upset and were widely consumed, while lizard meat, especially the broth was consumed with relish as a reliable prophylactic for kwashiorkor (Emeadi, 1996). Also, in addition to mushrooms and snails, every available animal was eaten. Even the vulture landed in the soup pots of some families from time to time. It was these people who broke the traditional taboos concerning the types of food and meat eaten who survived the war without much injury to their physical health. Many others kept the fact that they ate these traditionally repugnant things secret from others due to shame (Ikpe, 1994: 116) - a clash of traditional imposition and economic reality.

In a bid to also survive, many equally resorted to food items that had long gone out of fashion. The most common was perhaps the eating of rats (*Oke*) for meat. Consumption of rats had been wide spread up to the 1950s but fell out of fashion after that time, essentially due to improved feeding habits resulting from better incomes and more varieties. Hence, those who continued to eat rats were seriously stigmatized in some places. But because of the food shortages occasioned by the war, rats once more became a choice delicacy (Harneit-Sievers, 1997; 116).

Somehow, the forced movements of people due to the war facilitated a process of culture exchange among the Igbo. While introducing new crops, people also freely borrowed from their hosts. In many parts of Abakiliki, for instance, two species of yam, *Obiaeturugo*, and *Igun*, were



introduced by people who fled into the area during the war. It is also believed that it may have been people who fled from the war that brought these species back with them at the end of hostilities (Adumike, 2004). Also in Afikpo, it was the refugees who resided in the area that introduced the species of yam called *Ona* (three-leaved yam), as well as consumption of *Ugba* (oil bean) and *Ukwa*. All these were not yet popular in the period before the war (Onu, 2004).

One crop that seriously benefited from the war, at least comparatively, was cassava. In fact, cassava since it was introduced was essentially regarded as a female crop in most parts of Igboland. However, with the virtual absence of men from the farm, women became the major food producers. In this case, cassava benefited tremendously. This was due to the fact that as the yam barns were looted, the only cassava products that faced such experiences were those that had just been harvested or were due for harvest. Moreover, whereas, cassava could be replanted with the stem which was not edible, yam suffered as even seed yams meant for planting were eaten up due to hunger. Though many attempted eating cassava leaves in the war period, but at least there was still the stem left for planting. Following the loss of seed yams and cocoyam in many parts of Owerri, cassava practically became the only source of carbohydrate food. This was also a development that came with the war (Ukaegbu, 1975: 7). Also in Ngwaland, the war marked the emergence of cassava as a staple food crop, displacing the yam, now cultivated only on a small scale in the Northern Ngwa region. Equally, gari became and has since remained the most popular form of cooked cassava among the villagers (Martins, 1988: 133). The new emphasis on cassava, it may be argued, resulted in a gradual shift of power to the women in the family. Women practically became the main source of income in most families, as majority of the men were away to the war fronts.

Moreover, men who did not enlist in the army were in constant hiding for fear of being conscripted. That way, their livelihood and survival became completely dependent on their wives and grown-up daughters. Hence, men lost respect as well as their biological and natural place as the head of the home, while women were elevated socially and economically (Emeadi, 1996). With the introduction and spread of gari grating machines in many parts of Igboland, the demand for cassava and cassava products became virtually impossible to meet. And with the increased pressure on garri, many now turned to cocoyam another of the "female" crops hitherto ignored by the people. Again, this was to the advantage of the women who were also associated with this crop.

### **Conclusion**

No matter how one looked at it, the civil war had grave consequences for Igbo economic life in general and food production in particular. The enabling environment to produce was lacking, the brigandage exhibited by soldiers did not help matters, while the economic blockade placed by the federal government was the main factor that led to the collapse of Biafran resistance during the war. The hunger and malnutrition which at a point took over Biafra encouraged inflation. Prices were intolerably high, with gari attracting the fantastic price of one Biafra pound or more to the cigarette cup. There were times before the war when the same amount or its equivalent could buy between 240 and 720 cups (Akpan, 1976: 194). By the beginning of 1970, the situation had almost gone out of hand, so much that the Biafra leader, Colonel Ojukwu, once he left the territory continued to make fervent appeals to the international community for urgent food aid to his kinsmen to avoid a major catastrophe. It only took a few more days before the Biafran resistance was finally broken, thus bringing the 30 month War to an eventual end.

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