

Time and Identity: The Legacy of Biafra to the Igbo in Diaspora

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INTRODUCTION

The 30th of May 1997 marked the 30th anniversary of the declaration of independence by Biafra from which the Nigerian Civil War or the Biafran War (1967-1970) ensued. In the course of this paper my interest is focussed on the legacy of Biafra and the Biafran War for the Igbo in diaspora. In the course of my research I followed discussions on the Igbo--net (an Internet discussion group whose identity exists in this double-hyphenated form) throughout 1996, and the material I am drawing on here is based on 40 discussions from 22 Igbo--netters (users of the Internet discussion group), most of whom are Igbo living in the USA. It should also be noted that all of the Igbo--netters mentioned are male. In addition, my attention will be focussed on an article published in 1996, 'Locating Biafra. The Words We Wouldn't Say', which exceeds in length the combined separate writings from the Igbo--net. Further, it is the only writing under consideration produced by an Igbo female. Although my focus here is on the Igbo, among the above-mentioned 22 male Igbo--netters there were also some non-Igbo as well.

As Harneit-Sievers et al. (1997) note, commemoration of the Civil War experience in Nigeria continues to be a difficult issue. The date the war started - 6 July 1967 - is commemorated nowadays only within the military, and the day of the official end of the war - 15 January 1970 - is not officially remembered at all. There is a National War Museum at Umuahia, but it has only military exhibits on display. Thus, the rather sparse official commemoration of the Civil War has been left mainly to the military, which uses the opportunity to assure itself of its role as guarantor of national unity. (Harneit-Sievers et al. 1997: 1) Characteristically, in a paper presented at a seminar in the National War Museum Chief N.U. Akpan writes that "what happened in, and to, Nigeria during the period in view should better be seen and judged not through the lenses and perspectives of a civil war, as such, but through those of a struggle for the survival or dismemberment [sic] of Nigeria. In that way, a better description of the conflict would be the Nigerian War of Unity." (Akpan 1985: 166) The motto of the museum - referring to those who fought on the Federal side - reads: "That they did not die in vain".

The major ethnic groups of Nigeria's Eastern Region included the Igbo, who formed the majority, Ibibio, Efik, Ijo (Izon), Ogoni and a number of others.

Nigerian Federal forces attacked Biafra soon after its secession, and the war ended when Nigeria defeated Biafra. There is a vast literature devoted to the political and military history of the Nigerian Civil War (see, e.g., Harneit-Sievers et al. 1997: 2, 230). My main interest here is in how the Igbo in the diaspora understand the legacy of Biafra in their lives. In other words: what are the meaningful points and emphases of Biafra and of the war for the people concerned? Further, I am interested in the official, institutionalized interpretation of the war offered to Nigerian young people, that is, the interpretation offered in the schoolbooks. In my last section, the 'Discussion', I will then compare the points raised by Igbo--netters to two Nigerian school texts: *A History of Nigeria for Schools and Colleges* by Eluwa et al. (1988, all writers are Igbo) and Modupe Duze's (1985, not an Igbo) *100 Model Questions and Answers on National History of Nigeria for G.C.E. O.Level*.

In the twentieth century civilians increasingly became the targets of war: in the First World War civilians made up 10 per cent of all casualties; in the Second World War they accounted for 50 per cent; and for all subsequent wars around 80 per cent of casualties were civilians. (Sivard 1987; quoted in Dodge and Raundalen 1991: 8) Besides casualties, there are those who have to live with their memories and even traumas.

1. EMOTIONAL ISSUE

The topic of Biafra is a difficult and emotional topic for the Igbo--netters. Golden Nwanoka even uses capital letters, as if to ensure that his message hits home. "I posit that our long term interest cannot and will never be tied to the deceitful awoists [the followers of the Yoruba politician Awolowo], their descendants, the caliphate and Ex and Present ndigbo errand boys of the caliphate." (16.2.96) And while Ganiyu Jaiyeola sees Nwanoka "beating the civil war drums" (15.2.96), Nwanoka reacts: "To understand the mind set of the likes of Ganiyu, one ought to have a knowledge of the wild, wild west of yore - from whence he originates. The wild, wild west was/is characterised by abuse, betrayal, fearful cowardice, sycophancy, house slave mentality etc... What do we expect from the offspring of a snake?" (16.2.96) Further, while Chiji nwa Akoma (17.2.96) criticizes Nwanoka's writing style: "I'm not impressed by this recourse to foul verbal sallies, and really would wish that you attempt to address your fellow discussants with a measure of respect and mature conduct even while defending a position dear to your heart. I'm sure you know the use of capital letters in cybertalk as a sign that one is shouting/screaming. [...] Really, I think it is rude to shout on one's listeners in order to make a point", Nwanoka's answer reads (18.2.96): "Chiji, Other netters who have written to me privately think otherwise." And as a final example, Mobolaji E. Aluko writes (26.2.96): "I would without hesitation remind you and your like, of

the following: (1) That I would not relent as long as I have an ounce of breath left in me, in telling the world of your atrocious deeds between 1967-70. (2) That I would continue to dissuade as many as are prepared to listen to wise counsel, not to enter into any form of cooperation or sweetheart deals with you or those of awoist persuasion. That you and your kith and kin are in the same league as the German Nazi.”

While Nwanoka seems to be shouting rather than inviting a dialogue, more disturbing is his linking the deeds of the previous (Yoruba) generation to the deeds of the present-day (Yoruba) generation: “What do we expect from the offspring of a snake?” and “[Y]ou and your kith and kin are in the same league as the German Nazi.” Certainly, this kind of name-calling is not preparing the soil for open discussion.

However, if we read Nwanoka’s assertions within their contexts - seeing them as reactions (all the examples above are emotional reactions to non-Igbo Nigerians) - his way of writing becomes slightly more understandable (although no more dialogical). While the Igbo--net concerns Igbo issues in particular - and Naijanet [another discussion group] is a forum concerning issues affecting Nigeria as a whole - it does sound patronising when Mobolaji E. Aluko states on the Igbo--net: “some things about these emotional issues are best left alone [---] response to one question invariably leads to another, until we are emotionally exhausted and only generate more heat than light”. (26.2.96) The same applies to Ganiyu Jaiyeola, who states: “The civil war is over and should be over in the minds of reasonable individuals.” He is irritated by writings which “bash Nigeria”, or “even [...] Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a pioneering and great Nigerian.” He wishes to put a complete stop to the discussions by stating, briefly and simply: “The victim was Nigeria.” (15.2.96)

Golden Nwanoka is an extreme among Igbo--netters - certainly no one else uses such strong language. However, he is an important informant since with his eight writings on Biafra Nwanoka wrote more than anyone else on the Biafran issue in Igbo--net during the year we are here analysing, 1996. Nwanoka seems to be not only one of the oldest participants on the Igbo--net but also a kind of “elder” (although under fifty) to the Igbo: none of them criticizes him on the Net. On the contrary, some of the Igbo take on the role of being his attorney. Clive Chinedu Anawana writes (to Mobolaji): “Are you aware that Nwanoka whom you are trying to discredit carries about the opinion of a vast majority of Igbos?” (26.2.96) And Alvan Ikoku states: “His style notwithstanding, people like Mazi Golden Nwanoka are doing Nigerians a public service. Attempts to demonize Nwanoka and downplay the importance or veracity of the crimes against humanity he is exploring will only alienate the Igbo and other ethnic groups who suffered these atrocities in Biafra.” (8.11.96)

2. THE REASON FOR BIAFRA

The Igbo of the Igbo--net don't see oil as the reason for Biafrans to secede - with only one exception, Chuks, who states: "The Biafra was about oil and Ojukwu knew just that. That's why Ojukwu included areas outside Igboland as parts of Biafra." (29.1.96) We have to add, however, that, Chuk explicitly refers to Ojukwu's motives only, not to the motives of other Biafrans.

But the Igbo are unanimous in their view that oil was the reason for Nigeria to attack Biafra. Nwanoka writes about the strong historical connection between Nigeria and Britain in general. During the War, these countries shared an interest in the oilfields of Eastern Nigeria, and, since then, history has repeated itself. Just as Shell and Britain sent arms and ammunition to Nigeria during the Biafran War, they have also been sending arms and ammunition to the Abacha regime of the 1990s. (30.1.96)

But there is one event on which all the Igbo on the Igbo--net place great weight when talking about the birth of Biafra: the pogrom. As Ukpabi states: "50 000 innocent civilians were slaughtered preceding the war. That's the reason for Biafra, and not the oil." (29.1.96)

Mo Ene, together with Nwanoka, are the two 'veterans' on the Igbo--net. While he is as dedicated as Nwanoka to the Biafran issue, Mo Ene's view differs from those of Nwanoka. Mo Ene feels that it is unjust to accuse a person of the sins of her/his (ethnic) leader, in contrast to Nwanoka's "what do we expect from the offspring of a snake". He also emphasizes, like Nwanoka and all the other Igbo, that killing someone only because (s)he belongs to some ethnic group is extremely inhuman. Mo Ene's reasoning reads (27.9.96): "No Igbo person has EVER thrown a 'pomo' or 'panla' at another Yoruba for whatever it was Awo did, or did not do. They talk, so what. Talk back and show that it was not so. You see, the Igbo are ruggedly republican. [...] We as a people suffered a brutally bloody pogrom, starvation, economic emasculation, political marginalization, educational castration and covert social ostracization.[...] TALK, my dear, is cheap; ACTION, is another ball game. Whatever, no Igbo person is ever going to persecute the Yoruba as a group. No way! [...] The moment Nigerians find ONE OKORO to blame for all their exhaustion and frustration, they will hang the Igbo - NOT the person, the people. This is exactly my point. It may not happen again, but we do not want to find out. Believe me, it hurts; it hurts. [...] So when has any other Yoruba held responsible, or asked to account, for the 'perceived sins' of Pa Awo? I will be offended if any Igbo is held responsible for the 'perceived sins' of Zik [...] but when the Igbo are savagely dehumanized and persecuted for no just cause, something in me snaps."

Several Igbos compare themselves to the Jews, and their killing to the Holocaust. Oguocha writes: "Where I disagree strongly with Oga Gani in his recent submission is in his bold claim that Biafra never existed and his subtle play down

on the gravity of what happened between 1967 and 1970. It's like telling the Jews that there's never a Nazi holocaust. To me, that's a rape on history and every objective analysis." (8.11.96) The Igbo habit of comparing themselves to the Jews has not been invented on the Igbo--net: it has a longer history. In this context the meaning is clear: no other people have been killed in Europe like the Jews. In a similar way: no other group in Nigeria has been killed like the Igbo.

The roots of Biafra were in the events of 1966: in reaction to the persecutions and killings of the Igbo in Northern Nigeria, they fled to Igboland in Eastern Nigeria. The ordinary Igbo were victims only because of their ethnic identity. Biafra was meant to be a safe place, a real homeland. The Igbo on the Igbo--net seem to be in a consensus as to the reason for Biafra: it was a vision of survival.

3. THE VOICE OF THE OLDER GENERATION

Golden Nwanoka and Mo Ene, who represent the 'elders' and are also the most prolific writers on the Igbo--net, are clearly 'teachers' of Biafran history.

Earlier we mentioned Golden Nwanoka's expression "what do we expect from the offspring of a snake". Insult aside, the expression reveals much of Nwanoka's reasoning: since the Yoruba have repeatedly deceived and betrayed the Igbo in past alliances and friendships, it would be stupid for the Igbo to make the same mistake again; it is better to avoid alliances and friendships with those who may again deceive you. Nwanoka reminds the Igbo--netters several times about the false statements made by previous Nigerian leaders. Gowon and Awolowo, who did not want to permit the secession of Biafra from Nigeria, have both given statements which contradict their actual conduct: "The basis for one Nigeria does not exist" and "Nigeria is a mere geographical expression". A third and more famous utterance, by Awolowo at the beginning of the Biafran War, epitomizing the inhuman politics of Nigeria, reads: "Starvation is a legitimate instrument of war." (e.g. 3.3.96) Thus, the poor relations between the Yoruba and Igbo are rooted in the Biafran War, and, for Nwanoka, Awolowo is the most to blame. Concerning Obasanjo, the other major Yoruba figure - and Nigeria's current president - Nwanoka says: "Obasanjo sat on the liquidation of Biafra and Biafranism. Was it not the same Obasanjo who in collaboration with Adisa Akinloye convened a meeting at Ibadan January 1995 in an attempt to resolve what he termed 'as the differences between the Igbo and Yoruba' - the rift created by the unprincipled stance of Awo between 1967-70. Talk about inconsistency." (16.2.96) From commentary of this kind we may conclude that tensions between the Yoruba and Igbo have yet to be resolved and that these tensions have an existence beyond Golden Nwanoka, the concerned Biafran patriot.

To his younger Igbo 'brothers' Nwanoka recommends the South-West 'Declaration of War' and 'the Biafran video' (taped from the BBC; the Igbo--

netters distributed several copies of it among themselves) (e.g., 5.3.96). And as a person who himself participated in the war, Nwanoka tells about his own experiences. The next excerpt is the longest of his descriptions, in which he attempts to categorize his experiences. Further, while describing the victims of propaganda, Nwanoka explains how so-called 'ethnic hatred' is manipulated. As he recounts, it is not so much the evil in a commoner or his hatred of the Other, but rather it is simply the machinery of the war:

Without wasting words, I would recount the confessions of the Nigerian vandals captured in my own war sector by a column of wil'o the wasp of gallant Biafran soldiers - including yours sincerely. Of the 22 Nigerian vandals captured by a bunch of us (mainly in our mid-teens in 1969), 4 were YORUBA vandals. I personally interrogated these soldiers of fortune. I was detailed to interrogate them on account of my fluency of the Yoruba language.

Summarised below are the reasons offered by Yoruba soldiers:

1.1. That Awo and the Awoists instructed them to join forces with the Caliphate, in order to teach Biafrans and in Ndigbo in particular a lesson; and render us irrelevant within the Nigerian body politic - hence paving the way for the Yoruba to take charge of the economy and the promise of abundant life for all sons and daughters of Odua. [still remember the owambe of the 1970s??? Is it by happenstance that the indigenisation decree favoured the SW]

1.2. That all the captured land, houses and other assets in Biafra, would be shared among the soldiers, who fought gallantly and survived then. I was not present at the time Northern soldiers were being interrogated, but I got a whiff of their confessional statements from the officer who interviewed these vandals. Those from the middle belt had these to say:

2.1 That they fought against Biafra because of their kinsman Gowon - who was then the junta's head of state (i.e. the caliphate's stooge). What is implied here is that they were merely supporting their kinsman.

2.2. They were ordered to fight - most of them were professional soldiers.

2.3. That Ndigbo and Easterners are greedy bunch - that if they fail to annihilate us, they stood the chance of losing their land to Ndigbo and the Easterners (so they told)...

From the far North:

3.1 It was an opportunity to deep the Koran into PH, Onitsha, Calabar and the entire east.

3.2 That they were instructed by the caliphate that it was the wish of Allah to annihilate the ungodly Biafrans - i.e. non-believers of the Moslim faith (Jihad that is).

3.3. That it was the manifest destiny of the Moslem North, to rule Nigeria forever - and so on and so forth.

From the aforementioned confessional statements, we the dare-devil Biafran soldiers, fighting without guns, resolved to employ our #6 (6th sense that is), in defending the Nazi-like hausa/fulani/yoruba soldiers other supporting cast from the South...these Nazi soldiers from Nigeria...There is no doubt that the existence of these permanent underclass in the North and South account in large part in influencing the decision to wage a war in the first place. As far as I know, the likes of Olowole Awolowo, the Awoist offspring were in school memorising the laws of Physics, while the lives of the sons of the peasant farmers and the downtrodden were wasted in an encounter with the peace loving and innocent but strong willed Biafran freedom fighters. (3.3.96)

Although Nwanoka fiercely attacks Awolowo and the 'Awoists', ultimately he does not see a person's ethnicity as a problem: "I have maintained all along, that we isolate haters of Igbo progress; team up with those whose long term interest intersects with the interests of the generality of Ndigbo and the downtrodden. [...] I would be comfortable in the company of Wole Soyinka, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Tunji Braitwaite, Gani Fawehimmi and lesser known progressives who pit[ch] their tent daily with the oppressed. And from the North, the likes of Balarabe Musa." (3.2.96)

Mo Ene teaches his younger Igbo 'brothers' as well. The next excerpt is his longest contribution as well as his most concise interpretation of concepts and events:

Ahiara was where Ojukwu made public his visions for a Biafran nation. Well, it wasn't to be, so shall we say it is now history. Before the talks turned to blows, the British peripatetic point man in Africa, Mr. McDonald, told Gowon to talk...to buy time, of course...This was early 1967. An agreement was reached. Called 'Aburi Accord', everyone heaved a sigh of relief, but Gowon backed out. - On May 27, 1967, Gowon came up with the 12-state structure, effectively taking the rug off Ojukwu's feet, since the region he represented was now balkanized into Rivers, South Eastern and East Central States. Three days later, on May 30, 1967, the elders gave Ojukwu the mandate: Biafra was born. Exactly seven days later, the fireworks. "Gowon's police action." WAR! - The 3 R means: Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction. It is a policy that Gowon came up with to try and heal the wounds of war, this coming after his professed "No Victor, No Vanquished" declaration. But [...] he forgot the fourth 'R': Restitution...for Pogrom most savage, crimes against innocent civilians who had no clue what was going on, and the criminally insane use of hunger as a weapon of war. On the contrary, 'abandoned property' was implemented, the twenty-pound scandal followed, ban on stockfish and flea-market clothes, and then the final blow: indigenisation decree. Now the economic emasculation was set to roll, it is still rolling...we know the authors, but this is not the forum. [...] I am sure Benjamin Adekunle will one day tell us what possessed him in Pitakwa to humiliate and butcher innocent Igbo civilians now that his main man, Saro-

Wiwa (the wartime administrator of Bonny) is no more. (Colonel Murtala Muhammed met Abiola and made him millions...) - Finally, your take on reasons for failure will make a good Ph. D. thesis. But please take OUT Major Kaduna Nzeogwu on your list of 'saboteurs'. The so-called 'saboteurs' were Agbam, Alale, Banjo, Ifeajuna...they were publicly executed in Enugu. Many cheered...like bloodthirsty mobs, but many mothers wept. That day, Biafra lost its innocence. It never recovered. It was the beginning of the end. However, the distrust you 'heard' about was not widespread. Maybe amongst the top echelon, but rising sun nationalism was still at its peak...thanks to Okokon Ndem and Ojukwu's almost mythical posture and stories woven around his personality as the best African has to offer! The other 'sabo' was Colonel Hilary Njoku: he was locked up throughout the war. [...] You can start by reading 'Biafra: the Making of a Nation' by Arthur Nwankwo and Sam Ifejika. I recommend the book because it was written during the war. There are no pretenses, no hindsight. And they were there. Many of the other writers depended so much on hindsight and hearsay. [...] No one wants to reenact Biafra. It was terrible...a shame on all those who allowed all the atrocities. Never again shall we as a people walk down that path. This is exactly why I scream when some netters say we should forget and move on with one Nigeria. Fine, I am coming, but I am not going to be in the front again. You know why: we are the only ethnic group in Nigeria that are held collectively accountable for the perceived sins of one member of their group." (25.9.96) G. Ugo Nwokeji agrees with Mo Ene that as an Igbo he is made aware of his ethnic group: although he has never been accused of playing the ethnic card, he has experienced discrimination; what he asks for in Nigeria are his civil rights. (22.8.96)

We may note that Mo Ene presupposes that his readers already know what is meant by 'abandoned property' or 'twenty-pound scandal' or the issue of 'saboteurs' (these are explained, e.g., in Harneit-Sievers et al. 1997). The concept of 'restitution' - the fourth 'R' - which he uses is usually 'reintegration'. Suffice it here to say that all of the mentioned issues are related to the question of marginalization. Or, as Mo Ene presents three categories for the general attitude in Nigeria towards the Biafran war: (1) ignorance: "laziness and inability to look way back and critically analyse events", (2) denial: "there are the facts and the story is known", however, they don't matter anymore, and (3) there is distortion. (22.11.96)

Among the Igbo--netters, a piece of cultural history, the Biafran National Anthem, was collectively reconstructed and presented. First one writer started remembering some words, another added, the third corrected. Ultimately, it was Mo Ene who found the full version of it: his source was Arthur A. Nwankwo and Samuel U. Ifejika's work *Biafra: The Making of a Nation*. Indeed, before Mo Ene's contribution not only the words of the song but the knowledge of where to find it

seemed to be lost to the Igbo--netters. Thus, in a way one could even talk about the rebirth of the song on the Igbo--net.

Land of Rising Sun

Land of rising sun, we love and cherish,
Beloved homeland of our brave heroes;
We must defend our lives or we shall perish,
We shall protect our hearts from all our foes;
But if the price is death for all we hold dear,
Then let us die without a shred of fear.

Hail to Biafra, consecrated nation,
O fatherland, this be our solemn pledge:
Defending thee shall be a dedication,
Spilling our blood we'll count a privilege;
The waving standard which emboldens the free
Shall always be our flag of liberty.

We shall emerge triumphant from this ordeal,
And through the crucible unscathed we'll pass;
When we are poised the wounds of battle to heal,
We shall remember those who died in mass;
Then shall our trumpets peal the glorious song
Of victory we scored o'er might and wrong.

Oh God, protect us from the hidden pitfall,
Guide all our movements lest we go astray;
Give us the strength to heed the humanist call:
'To give and not to count the cost' each day;
Bless those who rule to serve with resoluteness,
To make this clime a land of righteousness.

It was not only the words (written by Nnamdi Azikiwe) but also the origin of melody that puzzled the Igbo--netters. Ultimately the problem was solved: the melody comes from 'Finlandia', composed by the Finn, Jean Sibelius!

4. THE VOICE OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION

Occasionally a younger Igbo will openly confess to being a disciple of the older one. Chris Ayika writes (27.9.96): "MOE, again thanks for sharing your Biafra

story with us once again.” The young man, however, try to broaden the area of discussion. “Although the war was for a worthy and justified cause, I think we should still be able to talk about the bad aspects of it, like raping of girls by our soldiers, confiscation of people’s property and the saboteur issues. These things, I was told were very demoralizing among the Igbo populace.” (ibid.) The same young man encourages people to “open up and talk about the pros and cons”. Further, he asks, for example, whether Ojukwu and the other leaders were “really matured enough to fully comprehend the total impact of their decisions” (ibid.).

Another young Igbo--netter (Xdragon 5.12.96) starts by commenting that “it is a thrill to see this group up and running. It will become a powerful educational tool.” Then he discloses his position as a student and his interest in acts of self immolation: “Students of modern history know the impact of the televised image in shaping popular opinion [...] in Vietnam [...] the burning monk. [...] Not many westerners are capable of such a stunning display of self sacrifice. But some are. Ojukwu, in his published speeches and Diary of events, mentions that on 30 March 1969 “a white woman in Paris burns herself to death near the Nigerian Embassy in protest against the Nigerian genocidal war in Biafra”, and on 30 May 1969, “In New York, an American boy, David Mayrock, burns himself to death carrying a placard on which is written: ‘Stop Genocide, Save Nine Million Biafrans’. May his soul rest in peace. May his death not be in vain. Can anyone elaborate on the suicides, which were very obviously inspired by the ‘burning monk’ incident? These were extraordinary events and yet now completely forgotten. Were there any other self immolations?” (ibid.)

The only text by an Igbo woman under discussion is a full-length article. The writer, Faith Adiele, born in 1963, was a young child of between four and six years of age during the Biafran war. The article “Locating Biafra. The Words We Wouldn’t Say”, was published in 1996 when the writer was 33 years old. Characteristic of the writer is that, while telling about the great impact of Biafra to her life, she lives in the USA and first visited Nigeria in 1989, at the age of twenty-six.

“I grew up thinking that Biafra was a curse word. Late at night in the living room, my mother and other grown-ups whispered the term under their breath, and it had a nasty, frightening sound.” This is how the article starts. And a little later the narrator continues: “I had no idea what the whispered word meant, but it frightened me too. Occasionally I had nightmares and vague, unexplained feelings of shame.” (75) Years before Faith understands the word Biafra the images of starving children come into her dreams: “The scenes of horribly emaciated black children and babies with protruding ribs and distended bellies, their huge watery eyes staring into the camera lens, became the physical manifestation of my nocturnal anxiety.” (80)

The history of Biafra is closely linked to Faith’s parents and through them to Faith. By and large, the article runs in chronological order. Faith’s grandparents were Scandinavian immigrants who, when their daughter, Faith’s mother, had a

child by a black man, stopped paying her college tuition and threw her out of the family. Faith's father was an Igbo man and once Chinua Achebe's classmate, who while studying in the USA met Faith's mother. Although they split up when Faith was still a baby, they continued caring for each other, the biggest reason being their common child. Flashbacks from the history of the USA of the 1960s with the Civil Rights Act and blatant racism run side-by-side with the main lines of Nigeria's history. In the USA Faith's mother is shouted at, "Nigger lover! Nigger lover!", while in Biafra, Faith's father tries to survive.

In 1914 "the British had shackled together three different tribal groups occupying two distinct geographic regions to create the fragile political entity known as Nigeria." (76) It may not be surprising if the African American Adiele uses the word 'tribe' since it is used by many Nigerians as well. However, we may also note that she simplifies by talking about the three tribes of Nigeria. Like other Igbo, Adiele emphasizes the cruelty of the pogrom: "In Nigeria a full-scale pogrom against Igbos began. Between May and December 1966, at least 30 000 people lost their lives and more than 50 000 others were wounded or maimed. Radio stations in the North broadcast music and speeches celebrating the violence: *We are off to kill the infidel and destroy his child* one song bragged. Igbos attempting to flee the North were rounded up at airports and bus and railway stations and attacked by soldiers and civilians." (78) And Adiele's view of the reason for Biafra is the same as that expressed by the Igbo--netters, survival: "To escape the pogroms, the Eastern Region and parts of the central provinces seceded from the rest of Nigeria, forming an independent republic." (78)

Adiele agrees with other Igbos over the reason why Nigeria attacked Biafra: the oil. In addition, she subscribes to the image of the Biafrans as 'inventive' people. The Biafrans were "known for their clever guerilla tactics and resourceful use of materials. Towards the end of the war, when Biafra could no longer afford to purchase weapons, engineers built ingenious homemade anti-aircraft and artillery guns that kept the resistance going several more months." (79)

In addition to historical events and their role in the formation of identity, the article tackles the role of memory. Or better: it tackles the dialectic of remembering and silencing, the need for words and the pain which kills them. "Perhaps my father, like my mother, had chosen silence as a strategy of love. He censored his communication with my mother, and she in turn censored hers with me. I grew up in a shadow of unspoken words, one parent trying to shield me from the shouts of *nigger lover*, the other from cries of *kill the Igbo infidel!*" (78) "Reading [his] letters as an adult, I was furious at my father's decision to leave me in ignorance. I understood his desire to forget the past and his reluctance to relive his pain, but it was my story as well. I was tired to death of being protected against death, tired at not having been prepared for the world.." "I had become a black woman in America. History was the greatest gift he could give me." "Our history had always

been painful; the important thing was to remember it.” “Memory is everything.” (82)

The writing is a story about how greatly the historical and family roots of a person may influence a person’s identity. It is also a story of growing up to accept and understand them. The last paragraph of the article reads: “When I now imagine *Biafra*, I see both sides. There will always be the nightmare of children who could have been me, who despite my parents’ great efforts, inhabited my dreams and left their bruises, whose hunger pains I still feel as strongly as my own. At night they still sleep with me, in rivers, in the shade of trees. *Their bones shall rise*. But there is also the dream: in it my mother and father stand separated by a river now, not an ocean, each of them looming taller than any tree I have ever seen. Barefoot, I climb high in my mother’s branches and inhale the perfume of her whitest bark. As evening approaches, I stop at my father’s blackest roots and lay the day to rest. My parents’ broad arms stretch out to shade me, not quite touching, daring the world to attack. If ever someone tries, their branches take the blow for me, and the amount of blood they are prepared to lose would frighten anyone.” (85)

For Adiele, Biafra has overwhelming significance: “Africans cheered, praising Biafra as the first African nation based on self-determination rather than a legacy of colonial boundaries, the first nation where Africans were completely independent, both politically and psychologically, the first truly black nation. Biafra saw itself as a radical experiment in self-determination, a black African endeavour with universal implications.” (79) Further: the meaning of Biafra is still huge in Adiele’s understanding even today. While visiting Nigeria in 1989, she finds the federal government being still “blatant, penalizing the East”, and testifies about “tribal oppression”. Now she realizes that she is not only one of America’s blacks but “Africa’s Jew” as well. She is told: “There’s no room for the Igbo in this country” and “We’re all just waiting for Biafra to rise again” and “All the opportunities go to uneducated Northerners who grow fat on Eastern oil. Without Biafra we are nothing”. (83-4) She suggests that all black people - American blacks included - need Biafra. Because of her history in America and Biafra, Adiele develops a double consciousness. “I was obsessed with being African and not-African, with being American and not-American, with being half-white and looking all-black.” (82) For Adiele, Biafra is not only a republic that once existed but also a possibility and a hope for a future.

Among Igbo--netters of the younger generation, Uzo Okoroanyanwu also sees Biafra as a hope for the future. The title of his writing is illuminating: “The promise that was and still is Biafra”. For him, “Nigeria must inevitable collapse on the weights of its own internal contradictions, which are now glaringly apparent to even those who pretended to be blind to the crises that gave birth to Biafra.” He refers to Ojukwu’s first major post-Biafra War speech delivered in February of 1994, where Ojukwu mentions the many technical inventions the Biafrans made during the war, i.e., during the existence of Biafra. Okoroanyanwu’s conclusion

reads: “Twenty five years since the war ended, Nigeria has achieved nothing in the field of technology that one can compare to Biafran inventions.” Further, the fundamental issues that led to that war have still not been resolved twenty five years after the cessation of hostilities. Briefly: the Igbo people have little to look forward to as part of Nigeria. Although there is no politically sovereign Biafra, “at least for the time being”, “the noble ideals of Biafra” should guide the Igbo. (27.8.96)

At the Aburi Conference in Ghana, just before the beginning of the civil war, the Biafrans proposed confederalism as the most pragmatic way of solving the fundamental political problem of Nigeria. Okoroanyanwu refers to the famous Aburi Conference and suggests that indeed the people should be allowed to determine their own destinies. According to him, “a loose confederation of six regions (just like the Igbo are now advocating) should be created. It should comprise:

- (1) The Eastern Region (the Igbo region) - made up of Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Imo states along with the Igbo-speaking people of Delta, Rivers and Cross River States.
- (2) The Western Region (the Yoruba Region) - made up of Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Oyo along with the Yoruba-speaking people of Kwara and Kogi States.
- (3) The Southern Region - made up of ethnic minorities of the south - Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers States.
- (4) The Central Region - Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Niger, Plateau and Taraba States.
- The (5) North Eastern Region - Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, and Yobe States.
- (6) The North Western Region - Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi and Sokoto States.

In Okoroanyanwu’s view, each region should be governed by a governor-general. There should be six vice-presidents, one from each region, and one president for the whole country. Power should be decentralized as much as possible. Each region should adopt its own constitution, have its own police, and (if it should so desire) carry out its own foreign policy. Further, the views of Christians and Muslims should be taken into account. Okoroanyanwu’s example concerns Nigerian foreign policy in connection with the Sudanese Civil War: “There is no earthly reason why we should not have provided material, moral and financial support to our brothers and sisters in southern Sudan who are fighting the most repressive regime on earth that is bent not only enslaving them but ensuring that they are converted to Islam.” The impact of the Muslims in Nigerian politics then seems to direct to his antagonistic view towards the efforts of those who “would want to make Nigeria a member of the Organization of Islamic States (OIC)”. (‘naija-poem’, 27.8.1996)

5. DISCUSSION

The Igbo--net discussion group was created in November 1994 - "out of the realization that before its inception, there existed no computer mailing list that was devoted exclusively to the discussion of issues on and about the Igbo people of West Africa as far as their culture, history, religion, art, literature, philosophy, science, etc. - in fact their contributions to civilization - are concerned." While the Naijanet was meant for issues concerning all Nigeria, the Igbo--net was meant mainly as a forum for Igbo issues. It is illuminative that the attribute reads "Igbo village in cyberspace": the villagers traditionally formed the most important political unit of the Igbo, being also a good expression of the Igbo understanding of democracy. While it may be a commonplace to refer to villages in cyberspace, it is particularly interesting and apt when used by the Igbo widely dispersed from the Igbo heartland. There is a famous expression: "There is no place in the world where you cannot find an Igbo". The Igbo may be said to have antagonistic needs: to go abroad on the one hand and be at home on the other. The Igbo--net brings a 'village' or a home to those in the diaspora, or abroad.

In the present paper I have restricted my material on Biafra to the Igbo--net during the year 1996, which does not mean, of course, that discussion of Biafra was restricted simply to that year. As far as possible, my aim has been not to rely on material but rather to find out what one can 'learn' by following the Igbo--net over a certain period, which here means one calendar year. The question posed was: what is the image of the Biafran war one gets by having followed the Igbo--net throughout the year of 1996? What are the points where all the Igbo on the Net seem to agree, and how does the contribution of the younger generation (the material includes one female voice based on an article) possibly differ from that of the older generation??

It is conspicuous that the issue is emotional and difficult: pain colours the analyses of the older generation. One reason certainly is that the war is not a distant memory. We may compare: in Finland the Civil War of 1918 is a difficult issue to this day; and there are studies of Finns suffering the pain of their Second World War experiences (Dodge and Raundalen 1991: 114). Another reason for the emotional tone seems to be that, according to the Igbo, many details concerning the war have been silenced, undervalued or belittled in Nigeria (some examples are found even on the Igbo--net).

The clearest consensus among the Igbo concerns the motive for the Biafran secession: survival. The massacres of 1966 and 1967 were the main reason why the Igbo wanted a country apart from Nigeria. Biafra has also been seen as the only option in a non-survival interpretation by G. Ugo Nwokeji, who wrote on the Igbo--net a couple of years earlier. In his contribution, 'The Necessity of the Biafran War', the Igbo--netter Nwokeji states (26.12.1994) that even if the grave consequences of secession were known, most people in Eastern Nigeria realized

that it was better to try and die fighting than just wait to be annihilated. Nwokeji attacks those interpretations of history which emphasize the personal traits of Ojukwu (his ambitiousness) as a seminal reason for the secession. He starts his writing by stating his argument: “Personalizing Nigerian history is a favourable past-time for many.”

Golden Nwanoka and Mo Ene, who represent the ‘elders’ and are also the most prolific writers on the Igbo--net, are teachers of Biafran history. Because of their dominant voices on the Net, the general impression of the discussions on the Igbo--net which one gets is quite patriotic: their emphasis is on setting the Biafran patria against the enemy instead of concentrating on more ambivalent issues like problems within Biafra and among Biafrans. Their views may also be characterized as patriarchal: women are invisible in their (and not only their!) discussions on the war. However, it is well known that women struggled a lot for Biafra, the most popular activity perhaps being to join the Civil Defence Corps.

The contribution of the younger Igbo is not so much in providing knowledge as that of being disciples, and thus inspirer, of the older Igbo. They present comments and pose questions. Without these young people the Igbo--net would not be such an Igbo village in cyberspace: clearly there is more talk since the older generation feels obliged to deliver the legacy of Biafra to them. But it may also be illuminating that while the older Igbo analyse details of the war and recount their own experiences, for some younger Igbo Biafra is not only a war lost but an ideal and an imagined homeland.

What then are some of the crucial points where interpretations about the war among the Igbo of the Igbo--net and the Igbo writers of the school book *A History of Nigeria for Schools and Colleges* differ?

As stated earlier, the reason for Biafra was, according to the Igbo of the Igbo--net, survival. In contrast, *A History of Nigeria* by Eluwa et al. implies that while the Igbo were aware of Gowon’s attempt to remove them “from most of the oil producing areas of the East”, proclaiming the independent Republic of Biafra was connected with this oil. While Mo Ene states that the Aburi agreement “was reached”, the history book states that in Ghana Gowon, Ojukwu and other military governors and service chiefs “seemed to have reached an agreement”; while Eluwa et al. continue writing about the Aburi accord to the effect that “[l]ater, however, Lagos and Enugu differed over their interpretations as to just how much autonomy they had agreed for their regions. The Aburi talks had failed ---”, for Mo Ene it was Gowon who “backed out”. While Eluwa et al. write that Gowon’s political move dividing Nigeria into twelve states “seemed aimed at preventing the three major ethnic groups directly and dangerously competing with each other as before”, Mo Ene sees that Gowon came up with the 12-state structure, effectively taking the rug out from under Ojukwu’s feet, since the region he represented was now “balkanized into Rivers, South Eastern and East Central States”. While Eluwa et al. write that “[t]he minorities of that region [in the East] which were now new States - the

Rivers State and the South Eastern State - were naturally not in support of the new Biafran State though they could not be so outspoken about it”, Mo Ene does not talk about the minority problem when stating: “the elders gave Ojukwu the mandate: Biafra was born”. And while Eluwa et al. do not take a stand against hunger as a weapon used in the Biafran War, Mo Ene talks about “the criminally insane use of hunger as a weapon of war”. (Eluwa et al. 1988: 261-267)

The interpretations which the school book conveys differ greatly from those of the Igbo--netter, Mo Ene, above. Let us look at a few more examples. One of Mo Ene’s central points - shared by many other Igbo - is that restitution has not been arranged by the Nigerian government. In contrast, *A History of Nigeria* by Eluwa et al. states that the Biafran surrender was followed by “a massive relief programme mounted by the Federal Government”, and further: “Gowon’s policy of reconciling the defeated secessionists with the rest of the nation was one of his greatest achievements. It did so much to save the young Nigerian nation and it was a model example of how to win the peace.” (Eluwa et al.1988: 270) My last example concerns some national symbols. *A History of Nigeria* by Eluwa et al. does not mention the Biafran national anthem (let alone tells its words), nor the fact that the Biafrans had a flag of their own (let alone describe it).

Clearly the closeness of the 30th anniversary of the declaration of Biafra activated these discussions. Comparisons between the writings of the Igbo--netters and the school book show how much the interpretations may differ. In the preface of the book the four Igbo state that their writings are based on the texts of Nigerian scholars from various ethnic groups. On the one hand, then, this emerges as a tendency towards many-sidedness (such as the reminder that there was also a minority question connected with Biafra). On the other hand, one wonders whether it is the ideal of ‘neutrality’ that has led the writers to dampen down the question of ethnicity connected with the Civil War: I find it strange that the schoolbook does not emphasize the fact of the killing of the Igbo preceding the war, instead it even avoids the expression ‘pogrom’. We may compare: the 1966 pogrom and the concomitant fear of further genocide on the people is mentioned as the Igbo reason for seceding, for example by Ahazuem (Ahazuem 1997: 44).

The other school book, Modupe Duze’s *100 Model Questions and Answers on the National History of Nigeria for G.C.E. O.Level* then replies in two pages to the question “What were the effects of the Nigerian Civil War?” As the first (and by implication, the most important) negative issue it mentions ‘financial loss’, and ‘loss of lives’ comes only thereafter: “Secondly, the war led to the loss of lives and caused depopulation especially in the eastern part of the country where fighting was most fierce.” As the first positive effect of the war was, according to the text, the creation of twelve states out of the existing few regions: “By dividing Nigeria into twelve states, the acute problem of conflict between majority and minority groups in each region was solved.” Earlier we noticed how, for example, Mo Ene interpreted the division quite differently. Ahazuem goes even further in his

scepticism: “The ethnic minority problem is not peculiar to the former Eastern Region alone. It is a national issue that also affects the other major ethnic nationalities such as the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba. The creation of states, about 30 at present, has not solved this nagging problem.” (Ahazuem 1997: 231). Along with the new states came the new headquarters, and with them - according to the school book by Duze - a “balanced and rapid development in all parts of the country”. This interpretation is again very much in contrast to the Igbo view of themselves as marginalised. Further, the way the school book sees employment reads: “The war provided employment in the army. Before the war, the army was increasingly going restless for lack of activity. The war therefore kept the khaki boys busy.” And lastly: “More than any other factor, the war welded the various peoples and ethnic groups in Nigeria together. As a result of the war, Nigeria had become one united country. The war, therefore, marked another significant milestone in Nigeria’s journey to nationhood.” (Duze 1985: 198-199)

Some Igbo--netters express the idea that the denial and belittling of the Igbo issue connected with the Civil War has been an attitude more or less backed by the Nigerian government. The school books echo the official voice of the government. One can only imagine what the Igbo students may feel when answering in the exams according to the *100 Model Questions and Answers on National History of Nigeria for G.C.E. O.Level* as follows: one of the good sides of the war was that it “provided employment in the army”, and that the war “kept the khaki boys busy”. By the ‘khaki boys’ is of course meant the soldiers of the Nigerian army attacking the Biafrans. Further, as we have seen, the other ‘good side’ mentioned in the school book, that “as a result of the war, Nigeria had become one united country”, is also far from the experience of the Igbo under discussion. In fact, the many Igbo in diaspora may be seen as an indicator of the fact that since the Biafran war many Igbos have not reintegrated into Nigeria.

Seyoum Y. Hameso (1997: 40) - who wants to emphasize the positive side of ethnicity in general - claims that as long as the present form of non-nationhood persists unreformed, ethnicity in Africa is set to remain a powerful force. In the absence of a nation state, ethnic loyalty provides the basic survival strategy. This may also partly explain the Igbo cyberspace village. As far as the Biafran War is concerned, the Igbo--net may be seen - as one younger Igbo--netter states - as “a powerful educational tool”; but perhaps even more it has offered an outlet for Igbos to communicate with fellow Igbos in the diaspora about a suppressed and difficult issue of mutual concern. While the sparse official commemoration of the Civil War has mainly been left to the military, which uses the opportunity to assure itself of its role as guarantor of national unity, the commemoration of the War on the Igbo--net may also be seen as an act of resistance by civilians against that monopoly.

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For further online information about the Igbo--net, see:

http://www.sas.upenn.edu/African_Studies/Listserv/igbo_net.html

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