

**MBEMBE WOMEN AND THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR:
INTERROGATING A MINORITY NARRATIVE**

Irom, Obar Ayami

Department of History and International Studies,
University of Calabar,
Calabar - Nigeria

Email: iromobar@gmail.com

obarirom@unical.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

The story of the Nigerian civil war, what led to it, and its impact on especially the Igbo has been told, is being told, and will continue to be told. Although, Igbo land was the central theatre of the war some peripheral areas also experienced the war and its impact. Just like the centrality of the Igbo in any discussion of the war, the historiography of the war has generally privileged male writers and male experiences since the war has often been viewed as a man's theater with little or no attention paid to the experiences of most women who belonged to communities not mapped out as areas of the theater of war. Using the qualitative research approach, this paper adopts the feminist narrative interpretation an approach to narrative grounded in both history and feminist perspective to bring to the fore the experiences of some Mbembe women during the government policy of liberation of territories. These narratives in conclusion demonstrate how an official policy became the bases of experiences ranging from especially socio-economic and psychological dislocations, but it also brings to the fore the gender insensitivity of post-war reconciliation policies.

Keywords: Mbembe women, Feminist narratives, Qualitative research, Victimized Femininity, Civil War.

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is an ancient human tradition hence a cross range of researchers in many disciplines share an affinity for storytelling. Acknowledging this, B. Buford (1996) has suggested that 'implicit in the extraordinary revival of storytelling is the possibility that we need stories- that they are the fundamental unit of knowledge, the foundation of memory, essential to the way we make sense of our lives. We have returned to narratives in many fields of knowledge because it is impossible to live without them (12). Despite this renewed interest in stories and narratives, there is still little agreement about what constitutes either as there are also different methodologies and definitions amongst researchers who engage in narrative inquiry. In the discipline of history narratives remain an important component of oral histories 'the recording of personal testimonies delivered in the oral form' (Yow 2005, 3) especially for researchers using qualitative methods to explore experiences. Feminism supports diversity in extending the methods of qualitative traditions and experimenting with different forms is one-way feminists have found to express more fully the insights arising from the transformation in research practice (Devault 1990). Although there is no singular definitive feminist research method, there are certain features that characterize the research process as feminist (Bloom 1998, Reinharz

1992). Feminist methodologies allow for more interpersonal and reciprocal relationships between researchers and the individual whose life and experiences constitute the focus of the research (Lawless 1993). This is similar to the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee in historical research.

Using qualitative methods the paper explored some women's experiences in the Nigerian civil war from three minority communities. This is because these narratives represent a diversity of oral testimonies related to the war. First-hand data and testimonies were collected from women victims and survivors of the war irrespective of their age and class. They were interviewed at home, in markets, and on their farms, because of the consciousness of diversities in women's experience. The recognition of diversity among women is another of the generally accepted characteristics of feminist research (Anderson 1985). The paper uses the historical in-depth and open-ended interview method which allows the interviewee a free hand to discuss issues without being boxed in, which also bares similarity to the in-depth interview which Bell (1988, 10) suggest that 'people spontaneously tell stories in their lives and also makes sense of their experiences,' and what resembles a conversation (Riesman 1992, 58).

The paper's understanding of the story is adapted from D.K.H. Messias and Jeanne De Joseph's (2004) definition as 'the unfolding of a description of a particular woman's experience around a focus topic of research.' In representing these women's stories maintaining a balance between the voice of the researcher and the participants was a challenge. This was so since for both history and feminist narrative the mutual process in storytelling confronts the historian with objectivity (Walsh, 167, Yow 1997) because of the nature of the discipline of history on one hand and feminist narrative interpretation and the assumption of inter-subjectivity between the researcher and the participants and the mutual creation of data. Thus, bringing multiple perspectives of history, and feminist and qualitative research methods to represent and interpret these women's stories, the paper considers it a form of feminist narrative interpretation.

The women are of the Mbembe stock, and the name *Mbembe*^(Irom 2019) is given to several tribes who speak related dialects and who are found close to the banks of the middle Cross River. Their classification as semi-bantu speaking in the works of Roland Oliver (1966) and Jan Sterk (1979) is based on their migration pattern, along with other ethnic clusters including the Ekoid and Boki that are found between the Cross River basin and the Cameroon-Nigeria border. Most of the Mbembe people live in Obubra Local Government Area and a portion in Akam, in Ikom Local Government Area. Traditionally these tribes had no common name, but the word Mbembe, which comes from their frequent use of the word "Mbe" (I say!) to start a sentence, was probably first used on them by African traders in the nineteenth century (Harris 1965) but as the people themselves have become increasingly conscious of the bonds between the different Mbembe tribes they have adopted the term in those contexts in which they wish to express a sense of unity with each other.

The Mbembe-speaking peoples who numbered 50,889 according to the

1963 population census are found in four main clans: Adun (17,381), Osopong (13,606), Okum (14,403), and Ofumbongha (5,499), (MFEP/S 1965, 88-91). The Okum population here does not include the Okum in Akam. Diverse elements have gone to make up Adun, Okum, and Osopong, but, among these tribes, the various elements have been so fused that within one tribe it is possible to see a common pattern among the villages, this is not so among the Ofumbongha for whom include divers elements of various languages, especially the Isobor people. All the people of these tribes are primarily yam farmers, for yams are both the staple food and the most important of the cash crops, rice, has gained popularity as a cash crop on seasonally flooded land. The most important subsidiary crop is the coco-yam which can stand shady conditions; and cassava which has become increasingly popular as a cash crop since it can tolerate depleted soils.

The Mbembe people fall within the collectivity of the non-Igbo “minorities” foisted into the Eastern Region and excluded from the power game at the centre because of their emasculated political status by the Igbo-dominated political elite (Odey forthcoming). The creation of Biafra can be compared to the controversial gathering that resulted in the scramble for Africa. It took place without consultation or representation from the Mbembe, one of the linguistic populations in the new republic. The evidence from the Mbembe people generally debunks the claim by the Eastern Nigeria Consultative Assembly that minorities within Eastern Region supported Biafra Republic (Uwechue 2004). When the war broke out, the majority of the Mbembe thought that the war between two of the three major tribes in Nigeria Igbo and Hausa-Fulani was not going to affect them in more ways than it was affecting the Biafra nation as a collective entity. Hence, by joining the armies on either side they did not seek political relevance, superiority, domination, or freedom which the Igbo sought and lost, or maintenance of the status quo which the Hausa-Fulani ought and achieved. The uniqueness of these narratives lies in the fact that the experiences of these women occurred during the official declaration of liberated areas. When any community was declared to have been liberated, it meant that the Nigerian soldiers had reclaimed the land for the government and the secessionist Biafra soldiers pushed out. The declaration of liberated areas in itself was not the problem, the decision of keeping some of the Nigerian soldiers behind to make sure calm returned to communities provided the conditions conducive for the experiences that were to befall these young girls who returned from hiding assuming their communities were safe again. The objective of these narratives represent the experiences of most women among the ethnic minorities in the grass root which did not fit into official policies and books written over time on the war.

The paper does not in any way claim the universal innocence of women nor does it argue that women are inherently peaceful or men more warlike. These narratives do not in any way ascribe to these women the characteristics of passivity and helplessness since they are everything but that. But as with all groups facing discrimination, violence, and marginalization the causes and consequences of their victimization must be publicized so that such official policies can have preventive caveat and resources that particularly focuses on the protection of women. The

dearth of materials on the activities and experiences of minority groups during the period led to dependence on oral sources to reconstruct the neglected but relevant history of especially these women during and after the war.

AKAM

Madam Iya Agbor Egbebiri is a woman leader and a traditional healer. She is from Akam which geographically is located in Ikom Local Government Area, but linguistically, is a Mbembe-speaking community. For administrative convenience, Akam is one of the three villages that make up the Olulumo clan. The other two villages are Okuni and Okangha. Unfortunately for Akam, she is sandwiched between these two other communities and their languages, mutually unintelligible. By 1963, 2409 inhabitants lived in the three wards- Ogbebit, Igbadung, and Ovon that make up Akam (MFEP/S 1965, 47). This overview can explain why there has been a constant war over land between Akam and her immediate Ikom neighbors. Madam Iya Agbor Egbebiri who doubles as a woman leader and a traditional healer was so important to Akam history at this time since as a woman leader she was very vocal about the issues which concerned her people as well as fortifying the Akam people whenever land disputes degenerated to a war-like situation.

Like many other communities in Biafra, the first military troop to register their presence around September of 1967 was the Biafran soldiers. The assertion that 'the Akam people were favorably disposed towards Biafra soldiers and consequently used them to harass Okuni community, which caused the loss of some lives in the process,' (Inah 2012, 87-88) was not the true situation. Rather, the Okuni people had attacked the Biafran soldiers in the course of their intrusion into the Olulumo Clan in a farmstead known as Obioko (Irom 2019). Akam Council of Chiefs, (personal communication, May 5, 2019) unanimously confirmed that this resistance to the Biafra intrusion caused them to unleash violence on the Olulumo Clan, in general. By early 1968, the Biafra soldiers had settled down in Okuni and Okangha Nkpani which had more hospitable accommodation and built a dispensary in Okangha Nkpani. Thus, apart from this initial setback, the Akam people recall the history of the whole clan's relationship with the Biafran soldiers as friendly. Akam Council of Chiefs (personal communication, May 5, 2019).

In the dry season of February 10, 1968, the Nigerian troops entered the Olulumo clan from the Cameroon axis; the Olulumo Clan welcomed them as the Biafran soldiers retreated. Chief Rex Ekperebi (personal communication, May 5, 2019). Chief Clement Ebi Ogar remembers Ayang Obia and Edim Okey as ladies who voluntarily followed the Biafran soldiers when they retreated for fear of the advancing Nigerian troops into the Olulumo Clan. Although both women had passed on by 2019, Chief Clement Ebi Ogar recalled that these ladies came back immediately after the war, and when asked why they left in the first place? They replied that they were not sure of the way the Nigerian troops would treat them. So they preferred to stick with the Biafran troops that they had come to be acquainted with (personal communication, May 5, 2019) The Nigerian troops marched out the

clan the next day in a file with palm fronds chanting 'ONE NIGERIA' to declare their mission. When they got to the field the 'Big Oga' addressed them stating that 'we are the Nigerian army, the owners of the land and we stand for one Nigeria. We have come to save u, are there Biafra's here? Bring them out if not we will kill you all. We chorused no and they told us we are secured.' Okim Arong (personal communication, May4, 2019).

But unknown to the Akam people, the other two communities chose to host the Nigerian troops since they saw in them a force they could use to dislodge the Akam people from their land and settle ones and for all the land issues that had lingered over the years, and which the court had refused to settle in their favour. Wilfred Inah has also mentioned land and political issues as reasons for the Okuni peoples' betrayal of Akam by the Nigerian troops (Inah 2012). As a linguistically different community from her neighbours, the Okuni and Okangha Nkpansi went ahead to report to the Nigerian troops that since political affiliation linked the Akam clan with the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), they were, therefore, Biafra supporters. They also mentioned Madam Iya Agbor Egbebiri, a woman leader and a traditional healer whom they claimed had been aiding the rebels (Biafran) with fortifications for the war. This must have been their way of removing the help the Akam people relied on in times of war (Inah 2012).

On the 20th of February 1968 at precisely 10 am, the Nigerian troops led by an Okuni son Ofem Nyambi advanced from Okuni and Okangha simultaneously, towards Akam. Chief Awuri Okey of Ogbebit ward out of fear told the Nigerian troops that his ward was loyal to Nigeria. To the Nigerian troops, this meant that the other two wards Igbadung and Ovon were Biafra, hence they became the target as they unleashed their venom on innocent and defenseless civilians they were originally commissioned to protect. With this commotion, most of the people escaped back to the plantations as others found their way to their Akam brothers in Obubra. Most of them were waylaid by the joint forces of Okuni and Okangha men, beaten up and taken to Ikom as prisoners, and the women raped. The first victim to be shot was Mrs. Obia Edim (Adekpe 1990).

Madam Iya Agbor Egbebiri's woman leader who was accused of fortifying Biafra troops, without as much as asking her if the allegation against her was true, was named an enemy of the Nigerian nation by the Nigerian troops, who decided to kill her openly as a deterrent to other Akam people. When all attempts to kill her with a gun were not successful, they attempted to drown her in the river. She warned them that if they tried it the river will overflow and drown them all. She promised to give them the secret to what will kill her, on the condition that they will not kill another Akam indigene, which the Nigerian troops accepted. She took them to a spot away from Akam village and told them to butcher her to death that was how they successfully killed Madam Iya Agbor Egbebiri. Chief Rex Ekperebi (personal communication, May 5, 2019)

ONYAN OKPON

Onyan Okpon with a population of 3,660 as at 1963 (MFEP/S 1965, 88) represented different things to the contending parties of the civil war– Biafra, Nigerian troops, and Okosara Onyan Okpon's immediate neighbour. The war was declared in July 1967 and by September of the same year, Biafra soldiers had assessed Onyan Okpon through Ikom River using speed boats. Chief Federick Agbor (personal communication, May 22, 2019), who was in his thirties, and married to his first wife before the war recalls the first encounter the community had with Biafra soldiers thus:

We woke up two months after the declaration of war and saw a complete battalion of soldiers. They called us to the primary school and addressed us that we are a part of Biafra now. But that the federal government is fighting us and that the federal troops could come in anytime, and when they do, we should run for our lives.

With this information passed unto the community In general, the Biafra soldiers under Colonel Uche their leader asked the chiefs to remain as the others dispersed and informed them that they had decided to settle in Onyan Okpon and use it as a sub-headquarters for their battalion in Obubra. To the Biafra soldiers, Onyan Okpon was chosen as a sub-headquarters for two reasons. Firstly, they had hoped that with its location in the interior, it would not be easily accessible, especially to the Nigerian troops who were advancing. Secondly and most importantly, they saw Onyan Okpon as central to their Ikom and Obubra operations and subsequently, the control of both areas. Ohorodo Mbina Ajom (personal communication, May 21, 2019).

As a sub-headquarters, they established a dispensary and recruited information gatherers especially young boys and some able-bodied men sent for training in Apiapum as soldiers. They were given cooks and attendants on request. Madams Mary Agbor and Edim Agwu were 25 and 18 years old respectively, and both recall their services as dispensary attendants. They had the privilege of being trained to treat and take care of wounded Biafra soldiers. (personal communication, May 22, 2019). Both women admitted having acquired enough knowledge from their duties as dispensary attendants that would have given them an edge into the mainstream of the health ministry had the war ended on the Biafra side. (personal communication, May 22, 2019). The generality of Onyan Okpon people who survived the war remembered living their normal lives with the Biafra soldiers, never believing that the war will ever get to them especially as Biafra news reached them through the soldiers. This peace was altered the moment the Nigerian troops set foot in Onyan Okpon. Ovar Lawrence Ngbongha (personal communication, May 22, 2019).

Madam Alice Agwu and Madam Felicia Ovat are best friends and age mates. They were 16 years of age at the time the Biafra soldiers settled in Onyan Okpon and they were among the young girls chosen to cook for the rebels. Madam Felicia seems to be more precise about the events that happened in Onyan Okpon when the Biafran

soldiers arrived. She recalls that ‘before the war advanced into Onyan Okpon, Biafra soldiers had reached them first and it was these soldiers that informed them that Nigeria was at war and it could reach them at any time’ (personal communication, May 22, 2019).

Madam Felicia (personal communication, May 22, 2019) also recalls that Biafra soldiers spent close to eight months in Onyan Okpon before the Nigerian troops showed up. Her reason was that less than two months after the Biafra troops came and settled in, she got married to Emeka Okena a Biafran soldier with two strips (rank). When asked if she was forced to marry, she emphatically said no. Rather, she met Emeka in primary school when she resumed work as one of the girls chosen by the community to tend to the needs of the Biafra soldiers. They fell in love and decided to marry despite the war situation. Emeka's boss Colonel Uche stood in for Emeka's father as they looked forward to the end of the war so that she could meet his people. A normal day after marriage revolved around her going to the farm and tending to her husband while her husband went about his military assignments. Madam Felicia (personal communication, May 22, 2019).

Madam Alice on the other hand did not get married to anyone. She rather kept herself busy and doubled as a dispensary attendant when wounded cases were brought back for treatment. The food cooked was supplied mostly by the Biafra soldiers and these foodstuffs were got from plundering Ofutop farms, especially the neighboring Okosara farmlands. She corroborated the fact that they lived with the Biafra soldiers as one big family and there was no problem until the Nigerian troops showed up (personal communication, May 22, 2019). A detachment of the Nigerian troops advanced towards Ikom from the Ogoja axis, on the 4th of February 1968, while another detachment entered Nsofang at the same time. It must have been from around here that they advanced to the Olulumo clan on the 10th of February, and 10 days later, they assisted the Okuni and Okanga communities to wreak havoc on the Akam people (Inah 2013). It must have been the outcome of this mission that encouraged the Ofutop communities, especially Okosara who like the Olulumo people had been having long-standing land issues with Onyan Okpon to betray them to the Nigerian troops as supporters of Biafra because the Biafra soldiers had left no stone unturned in plundering their farms.

Onyan Okpon was important in the war strategy of the Nigerian troops like it was important in the Biafran war strategy since it was in Onyan Okpon that the Nigerian troops shared themselves into three sections for a total overrun and subsequent liberation of Obubra Local Government Council as a whole from the clutches of Biafra soldiers. The first group moved eastward from Onyan Okpon towards Ofombongha axis, while the second group moved westward towards Iyamoyong, Apiapum, and Adun axis. The third group moved into Onyan Okpon to repeat what they had done in Akam. Ohorodo Mbina Ajom (personal communication, May 21, 2019).

The Okosara people showed the Nigerian troops the way into Onyan Okpon but they either failed to inform them that, unlike Akam, they were going to meet with formidable resistance as the community played host to a Biafra soldier garrison or it was the Nigerian troops that underrated their opponents. If not, how then does one explain the encounter the Nigerian troops faced with the Biafra troops as they entered Onyan Okpon that reduced their fighting forces?

On entering the community, rather than meet a group of helpless civilians, they were confronted with an empty community as the people who did not go to the farm had deserted the place, and the Biafra soldiers had taken cover. Their first victim according to Ohorodo Mbina Ajom was a food vendor who sold food in the community and the soldiers nicknamed her 'Mama Biafra'. She seemed to have been ignorant of events going on for as soon as the Nigerian soldiers met her, they asked her where everybody was. She said they had gone to the farm. When asked her name, she said Mama Biafra, and immediately, she was shot dead. (personal communication, May 21, 2019).

With the appearance of the Nigerian troops in Onyan Okpon, peoples' lives took a different turn. Madam Alice (personal communication, May 22, 2019) chose to retreat with the Biafra soldiers when the Nigerian troops advanced into the Onyan area since she felt it was safer to be around people she had come to know. Madam Felicia on the other hand, was taken along by her husband to Apiapum from where they crossed the river to Ikwo in today Ebonyi State with other Biafra troops dislodged in Onyan Okpon. At Ikwo, he had to leave her there and join others on the war front. He never came back with the others two weeks later. She had to take care of herself from then on. She kept running with other people for safety and the war ended when she was at Okigwe. A year later, in 1971 she and her friend Madam Alice ran into each other at Afikpo and together they returned home. She had to remarry and start a new life since she did not have any children with Emeka. (personal communication, May 22, 2019)

The Nigerian troops were known to leave a portion of their army in any liberated place to checkmate the Biafra soldiers in case of a planned return. For the people of Onyan Okpon, the relationship with the Nigerian troops was not as smooth as that with the Biafra troops. Their daily actions reminded them that they were in the occupational army and most people interviewed think that they suffered because according to the Nigerian troops, they were full fledged Biafra citizens. If not, how could the community have allowed Biafra soldiers to gain a foothold to the point of making Onyan Okpon a sub-headquarters? Chief Federick Agbor (personal communication, May 22, 2019). Onyan Okpon people on the other hand have been asking whether they had what it took to resist the equipped Biafra soldiers. One cannot forget the reprisal attack suffered by the Olulumo clan at the hands of the Biafra soldiers when the Okuni attempted to resist their advance into the clan. This must have spread to other communities as a warning against resisting Biafra troops.

The policy of keeping the Nigerian soldiers behind to make sure calm returned to these communities was one of the most negative decisions ever made

since it provided the conditions conducive for the routine kidnapping, raping, and abduction of young girls. The survivors of the civil war in Onyan Okpon recalled that they lived in constant fear because of the Nigerian soldiers left behind. Chief Frederick recalls how after the liberation of Onyan Okpon, many males who had been recruited into the Biafra army returned, while others came to stay there and await the liberation of their places. But unfortunately for them, most of them were to fall prey to the Nigerian soldiers since they formed the habit of inspecting the soles of unsuspecting males for any trace of boot marks, and anyone found with these marks was killed. When asked how this was possible, Chief Frederick (personal communication, May 21, 2019) replied thus “I don’t know how they found out; maybe they are trained in that. But most of the males were killed for this reason and many young men had to relocate.” These men who relocated came back after the war since the marked soles were another ploy used by the vandals to kill young males who could fly the Biafra flag anytime.

Women were not spared these traumatic experiences as their gender exposed them to severe abuse at the hands of the Nigerian soldiers. They had to find ways to survive. Madam Mary Awudu (personal communication, May 22, 2019) who was 16 years old in 1968 wished she had made better choices. She stated that

Biafra soldiers did not force them to do anything rather, anything they needed they communicated with the council of chiefs who in turn passed the message to the community through the town crier and it was arranged. But the Nigerian army forcefully took what they wanted. From our food, fowl, goats and women both married and unmarried. In her case, she avoided the Biafra soldiers and refused to assist them in any way, even when she was asked to either cook or work in the dispensary. When the Nigerian troops bombarded Onyan Okpon, she fled with others to their farm settlements. On their return after the liberation, around March 1968 she was immediately noticed by one of the Nigerian troops left behind and this was the beginning of her ordeal. In less than one week that they resettled back from the farm settlement, Colonel Nuhu abducted her and immediately left with her for Enugu. Not too long after they got to Enugu, he was reposted to Minna (Niger State). Although she gave birth to four daughters for him she still decided to come back home to her people in Onyan Okpon when the opportunity created itself.

Her reasons included firstly, that ‘he refused to find my family and sort out what will be my bride price.’ Secondly, on getting to Minna with him, she got to know that she was his 3rd wife, Colonel Nuhu had been married to two wives long before the war. Thirdly, she was forced to embrace Islam and its obligations to women. For example, she had very limited access to the outside world, and when she did she had to wear a hijab. How then was she going to get the needed help to reach her people back in Onyan Okpon?

Her lucky day came when she struck up a conversation with her husband's colleague Oga Titus who was an Igbo man and lamented her plight and the circumstances that brought her to Minna as wife number three. After listening to her ordeal, oga Titus informed her that they had a new oga who he was sure will not only

listen to her but will solve her problems. With Oga Titus' assistance, she made an appointment to see the new oga. When she met her husband's oga, she told him her story, and out of sympathy he agreed to help her fulfill her wishes. With her husband's boss's intervention, she left Minna with the two younger daughters while the two elder ones remained with their father. She returned home to the welcoming hands of her family, settled in, remarried, and had six other kids. When asked if she was in contact with her two elder kids? She replied in the affirmative and stated further that since she left Minna Oga Nuhu has visited twice to see his daughters but she has not gone back there to see her daughters for fear. Madam Mary Awudu (personal communication, May 22, 2019).

Madam Catharine Patrick Okpikor's experience was worse than Madam Mary's since at least her people knew her captor, and knew she was alive even if he did not do anything on her head. After the liberation of Onyan Okpon and the environs, Madam Catherine (personal conversation, May 22, 2019) went to sell farm products on Onyan Orangha market day as markets had resumed and were abducted by the Nigerian troops and taken to Edor barracks in Ikom where she spent the night. The next day, she was taken on a trip to a far place she later got to know was Kaduna. Here, she was handed over to a big man in the army called Usman Buba from Bornu State. She remembers that she had almost spent a year in Kaduna when the war ended. This means that she was abducted in early 1969 while Onyan area had been liberated by ending of March 1968.

With the end of the war, her husband was transferred to Akwangha (Nassarawa State). It was in Akwangha for the first time since her abduction she felt a little bit at home. This was because, for the first time in a strange land, she ran into Theresa who spoke the same dialect as her. Theresa was from Ofonokpan, one of the Mbembe villages in Ofombongha IV and like Madam Catharine, she also had been abducted from Ofombongha No. 4 and forced to marry a certain Bullama who treated her badly because of her inability to give him children. Madam Theresa's predicament had filtered into the ears of Bullama's Oga and he sent for her. The Oga asked her if she was legally married to Bullama. She said no and he asked her what she wanted him to do for her. She said she would like to go back to her people. Bullama's Oga made the arrangements for her to go back to her people. But before she left, 'I gave her my picture to show to the yam sellers either on Onyan Okpon or Onyan Orangha market day. I was sure that one person in that section will recognize me since I was a yam seller too. I also hoped that from there the news that I am alive will be taken back to my family who by now must have given u hope about my being alive.' Madam Catharine (personal communication, May 22, 2019).

When she did not get any feedback she assumed that the picture was never delivered. In February 1972, her husband was posted to Lafia still in Nassarawa state, but for her, this posting meant that she had lost her only opportunity to connect with her roots. In May the third month of their stay in Lafia, she went to respond to the knock on the door and she was shocked to be greeted by her brother, sister, and uncle. When asked how she felt at that moment she exclaimed 'e wooo I felt like a heavy

load was just lifted off me.’ They hugged, wept, and then sat down to catch up from when she did not return from the market. Her brother told her how

The Onyan Okpon people who went to Onyan Orangha market that day and who were able to escape returned home and recounted how the Nigerian soldiers bombarded the market and made away with young girls. Although most of the girls returned home after some days, few did not. Since I did not come back it was assumed that I had died. When my picture reached them last year, my family members as well as most of my community people were ecstatic. It was the community that came together, raised money through donations, and delegated my sister, brother, and uncle to come to find me and bring me back home. When her family members reached the address that Madam Theresa had given them, the neighbours informed them of their posting and gave them the new address. That was how they located me in Lafia.

Her husband did not welcome her people, he refused their request to take her back home or come home and pay her bride price and he even threatened to shoot them if they did not leave. She took a cue from Madam Theresa, went straight to her husband's Oga, and reported her predicament. The Oga intervened in the matter and asked her husband to let her go since he had not married her legally, but he refused. It was only the threat of an immediate retirement that made him allow her to go empty-handed. It was the husband oga that took care of their transport back home.

Madam Catharine had this to say when asked how many children she and Usman Buba had. In a sober mode, she said that ‘an unhappy woman cannot create a comfortable womb for a child to grow.’ (personal communication, May 22, 2019). She noted further that her relationship with Usman Buba was a unique one in which she had to endure, physical, mental, emotional, psychological, economic, and financial torture as he made her feel like a war captive at any given opportunity. Along with this, she was just unsettled with the whole process that resulted in the union and she missed home. When she finally resettled with her people, she also mentioned that this unsettled feeling must have been the result of her mother’s prayers who had asked that their gods protect her from any kind of evil. In her understanding, evil here meant not having children outside wedlock and with such a man.

OFOMBONGHA No. 4

Ofombongha No.4 shares some peculiar features with the two communities already discussed. Firstly, pre-war relations with their neighbours including Ajin Nta Nselle communities were not cordial because of land tussle. Secondly, Biafra soldiers were the first military to arrive and settle. For them, this was their first contact with an army but not with the Igbos' with whom they had shared a long history of intergroup relations that preceded independence. The declaration of Biafra brought uneasy feelings to the Ofombongha communities (Ofombongha No. 1, 2, 3, and 4) in general

because 'One of the major strains in our relations with Igbos had been the issue of land grabbing. So, the fear of belonging to a Biafra country with Igbo in the majority and them in the minority meant that they would become landless in their own ancestral homes.' Elder David Omena (personal communication, April 11, 2019). John de St. Jorre (1972, 117) confirms this general fear of Igbo domination thus, "the thing that worried the minorities was less Enugu's political domination...but the powerful grips that the individual Igbo living among them had over their economies, as traders, administrators, professional men, and artisans." Both quotes above represent the general uneasiness that gripped his community with the inclusion of the Mbembe clan as part of the seceding Biafra country. When Biafra troops entered the community, the people welcomed the armed troop. The next day, the town crier assembled the people in the village square and they were informed by the Biafra troops that they came for peace except the community thought otherwise.

Ofombongha No. 4 was unique to Mbembe communities because their son Ayah Obongha a member of the Zikist movement along with Michael Okpara later joined the Biafra radio and kept the Mbembe listeners abreast with the issues on the new country and especially the Biafra troops advance with the war. Chief Irek Okorn (personal communication, April 11, 2019). Apart from the radio being the most powerful mobilization and propaganda tool efficiently used by the Biafra government during the war, its importance to the Mbembe clan was that the presence of Ayah Obongha made Mbembe language one of the languages through which the updates of the war was transmitted to listeners.

This advantage that Mbembe derived from having their son as one of the crews in Biafra radio was to be Ofombongha No. 4s' greatest undoing. On the night of 11th March 1968, Nigerian troops entered Ofombongha No.4 escorted by men from the Nta group of communities (Ajin and Nta Nselle in particular). As their neighbours who first came in contact with the Nigerian troops, Ajin and Nta Nselle communities saw an opportunity to settle old scores. Firstly, like the Okuni, Okangha, and Okosara brothers before them, they hoped to settle their land dispute once and for all. Secondly, although Biafra soldiers had plundered their farms, they intentionally mentioned the broadcaster Ayah Obongha to the Nigerian troops to demonstrate the degree of Ofombongha No.4 loyalty to the Biafra cause.

On seeing the Nigerian troops, the people relocated immediately to their plantations and left behind Chief Okpa the village head that came out and surrendered himself to the Nigerian troop as a Nigerian loyalist. It was Chief Okpa that informed the community later that it was not the Nigerian soldiers; it was rather the Nta escorts that burnt the community down and plundered our yam barns and farms. Because it was the dry season and most of the houses were made with mud walls and thatch roofs, it did not take long for the whole village to be razed down. Elder David Omena (personal communication, April 11, 2019).

By midday on the 12th of March, Chief Okpa was asked to recall the people from the plantations. On the 13th, the people returned with palm fronds in a single file chanting 'ONE NIGERIA' as they were asked to go to the village square. It was

there they noticed the destruction on their land. The Federal troops asked them after Ayah the broadcaster, his family, and Biafra soldiers from the community. Chief Okpa replied that the broadcaster's family had long left the village to live with him in Ibo land, while the Biafra soldiers had retreated when the Nigerian troops entered the village. Like other communities around there, Ofombongha No. 4 was liberated in 1968 and some soldiers were left behind to checkmate Biafra soldiers.

The relationship between the soldiers left behind and the liberated Ofombongha No.4 was not rosy as the community lived in constant fear because of threats from the soldiers. It was in Ofombongha No.4 that mention was made of soldiers not only abducting and raping young girls, but forcefully abusing wives in the presence of their husbands, and killing husbands that resisted. Women, both married and single were not spared as they lived in constant fear of rape, abduction, and abuse. The chant '*kokorao* – which means 'it is red' became the general signal in the community to particularly alert women and young girls that the soldiers were approaching. When this chant was heard from any area of the village, women, and young girls were to run into the bushes since most times, the soldiers laid ambush on unsuspecting homes, burst in on families, and desecrate women and young girls in the presence of family members, took some especially those women and young girls who resisted with them to their camp and silenced especially male resistance with the gun. This was the way the people lived from 1968 to January 1970 when the war was officially declared to have ended with the official surrender of Biafra (Osaghae and Onwudiwe 2002,4)

To avoid this harassment of women and young girls, families but especially mothers had to adopt some form of disguise to make their girls less desirable to the soldiers. Madam Fanny Okora (personal communication, April 11, 2019) who was 15 years old when Ofombongha was liberated recalls how her mother found a permanent solution to her constant running away with the others when the soldiers were approaching. She rubbed Fanny with leaves and lit a big fire which Fanny sat by with the hope that when the vandals see her they will think she had an infection and leave her alone. But the reverse was the case because the soldiers on entering their home, informed her mom that they will be back on a later date to see how Fanny was faring. This of course spelled doom for Fanny, two days later Fanny's mother took her and they relocated to their extended family in Apiapum. They only returned to Ofombongha in 1975.

Comfort Mbina (personal communication, May 21, 2019) relayed how her mother told her that in Apiapum another Mbembe-speaking community, camwood was used all over the bodies of young girls, claiming that an epidemic which attacked only women had just hit the land. As visitors to the land from an entirely different cultural and linguistic zone (most of the soldiers on the Nigerian side were of northern extract), it was difficult for them to detect the disguise. This was repellent to the vandals since a lady with a deadly disease could not be desirable to anyone.

If the likes of Madam Grace Enung had known, they would have stayed back in Ofombongha No. 4. In her case, her parents decided to send her away to Ohana

(another Mbembe-speaking community) to stay with her elder sister because of the insecurity young girls faced in Ofombongha No. 4. It was on the way she was abducted by a northern soldier named Major Aliyu, and she was forcefully taken to Kano with him when he was going back. Madam Grace returned in 1995 because Oga Aliyu retired from the army and became the chief of his village. At this point, it became difficult for her as a foreigner to cope with the demands of being the wife of a Muslim chief. Her marriage with Oga Aliyu was blessed with a son called Danladi who is a medical doctor. Danladi has visited her twice since she returned. On her part, she decided not to remarry when she came back.

With the end of the war in 1970, the then Federal Military Government of General Yakubu Gowon embarked on the programme of three Rs'- Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation in line with its broadcast to the nation termed 'The Dawn of National Reconciliation. The "No Victor, No Vanquish Speech" (Tamuno 2015, 76-78) was delivered on the 15th of January 1970. The 3 R's did not in any way take into account such kinds of peculiar war situations that most females encountered, hence there was no provision for re-integrating these women back into their communities. Although the narratives discussed here seemed like they had been accepted into the communities, most of the personal communications mentioned cases of some women and girls who were not that lucky but met with 'censure rejection' (Meertens 2001, 186). They have been rejected as unclean, immoral, or even whores who had compromised their community and family honour. Most other women returning with kids found greater resentment and isolation in the communities as it was difficult for them to remarry. Most of these women left the communities and to date, no one knows where they are.

The study of Nigeria about fifty years after the war and the 3R proclamation policy of the government still leaves cries amongst the Igbos of marginalization and renewed calls for a non-violent secession from the rest of the Nigerian state. The resurrection of a Biafra state through the instrumentality of the Movement for Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) is anchored based on neglect by the Nigerian government since the end of the civil war, thereby suggesting the failure of the post-war 3R policy of the government (2008). If the Igbos as part of the 'Big Three' complained of the failure of the post-war policies, what about the three minority communities discussed above. Embarking on a trip to any of these communities, one can readily see that there is no significant government presence since after the war. While there is no evidence anywhere to demonstrate that the 3R policy re-integrated especially women and girls back into their communities.

CONCLUSION

These narratives do not imply that the women in these three communities represent the experiences of all Mbembe women or minority women in the Nigerian civil war as a whole. The paper attempted rather investigate how the sum of individual experiences can say something about femininity as a socially constructed

identity. Against the background of these women's testimonies what is emphasized is gender-based violence of especially rape and sexual captivity. They were not targeted because they were in any way of any strategic importance to especially the Nigerian soldiers in their campaign to liberate the southeastern flank held by Biafra. Their greatest crime was their gender, they were girls and women. The women discussed represent a generation of girls who have already been disseminated by the crisis especially as they were once the future mothers, caregivers, and family anchors within their communities. These narratives demonstrate that during the war armies systematically and intentionally employed gender-based violence or violence that targeted women and females disproportionately as an effective instrument of warfare. The conclusion that comes out from this narrative is a 'victimized femininity' (Skjelsboek 2001) since these women described themselves as utterly helpless during and after the war.

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Appendix 1: Map of Cross River State Showing the Mbembe-Speaking Area

