

The Child-Soldier: “Another Life is Possible”
“From child soldier to professor...a personal journey”

By
Ewa Unoke, Ph.D.

Abstract

On May 30, 1967, the former Eastern Nigeria seceded and declared its independence as a sovereign state called Biafra. War begins between Biafra and Nigeria. In this essay, Dr. Unoke shares his personal journey as a freedom fighter and ex-child soldier with the Biafra Organization of Freedom Fighters- BOFF. This essay presents a different narrative about the African child soldier who rises from the ruins of war to become a college professor and human rights activist. Professor Unoke is a living example that another life is possible for the child soldier. His case shows that the child soldier and the less-privileged youth can be **SAVED, EDUCATED, and REINTEGRATED** into society.

Introduction

Another life is possible for the children of war and war-victims.

Sometimes, numbers speak louder than words.

The U.N. has disarmed and returned over 400,000 combatants and child-soldiers to civilian life. They are mostly from Africa: 72,000 from Sierra Leone; 100,000 from Liberia; 28,000 from Burundi; 126,000 from Congo (DRC). In Darfur, Sudan and Nigeria, unspeakable genocide and oil-conflict continue to escalate the refugee problem. The victims of these African wars desperately need food, education, shelter and hope. In 1993 the total military spending globally was estimated at US \$790 billion of which US \$121 billion was spent in developing countries. But in the 21st century, is war not an outdated conflict resolution mechanism? Has humanity not matured enough to resolve conflicts through other alternatives to violence and war? In my opinion, war is a primitive culture. In the new century, war most times stands for failure in leadership. It is an example of a leader's lack of intellect and poor judgment in resolving intra-state or international conflicts. The African condition is an example of the major millennial challenges which the global community faces today.

The case of the African child-soldier is indeed a difficult and sad tale of abuse, amputation, blood-diamond, exploitation, killing, rape and violence. In Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, Darfur, Sudan and Nigeria, the atrocities of the child-soldiers are evident. For too long, we have heard or read of the horrific experiences of the child-soldiers. But there is another side to what motivates the youth sometimes to become a child-soldier. Unlike many others, I voluntarily signed up to become a Freedom Fighter after my ordeal in the hands of my captors.

Despite my ordeal, I still believed that another life was possible for the child-soldier. Today, I would like to give my testimony for the very first time since the Biafra-Nigeria war. It is a story which is indeed an enduring metaphor for patriotic nationalism and loyalty to the land of my birth, Igbo land or Biafra, as it was later called.

In January 1968, I was captured along with my uncle and some friends by the predominantly Islamic soldiers of Nigeria. I survived, but my uncle and some of my friends did not. I escaped from jail and joined the Biafra Organization of Freedom Fighters, BOFF in order to fight and to protect my Igbo society. Early enough, therefore, I learned that in war time, a youth is safer as an armed freedom fighter and more vulnerable to adult abuse and exploitation as a defenseless civilian. As a former child-soldier, how can I free myself from what I have done? How can I forget and forgive what was done to me by the very adults who were supposed to protect my innocence and my youth? As a society, how can we free ourselves from what we have failed to do for the victims of violence and war? How can we begin a universal conversation on rebuilding a more just and more humane society today and for the future? My revenge mission, right or wrong, shows that unresolved injustices most times provoke unstoppable vendetta from victims. Today, I am a college professor and Founder of Global Peace. The **Global Peace**, a non-profit organization works to end the injustices and sufferings of the long-forgotten, voice-less victims of violence and war. Since its establishment, Global Peace has been educating, feeding, clothing and offering health services to

the civil war victims in Africa, especially in Nigeria and Sierra Leone. One Sierra Leonean recipient, Lansana Gibateh writes:

“Dear Global Peace, [I am] please[d] to acknowledge receipt of tons of used clothes and shoes from Dr. Ewa Unoke, a representative of Global Peace, to be donated to people of Kabala in Sierra Leone, West Africa. These donations will especially be helpful to orphans who lost their parents during the war, the child combatants that were unwillingly trained to commit atrocities, such as murdering, raping and kidnapping...”

Global Peace currently sponsors hundreds of orphan children, victims of torture and violence, ex-child soldiers and refugees from primary school to college level. We need your help and support to do more for these less-privileged members of the human society. What is common to all of us (ex-child soldiers and I) as victims is our common search for healing, after bearing so much pain in our bodies, minds and memories. Together, both the victors and the victims are seeking to come to terms with a long-troubled past.

Kamenu

The objective of my story, today, is to present a different narrative about the African child-soldier and the children of war. However, because I am seemingly guilty and complicit in the very story I tell you, I will speak from **kamenu**, an African doctrinal and theoretical perspective. Kamenu is the path to natural justice through truth-telling. As a former child-soldier of the Biafra Organization of Freedom Fighters, BOFF, this story is my first public confession since the war ended 38 years ago. By telling this story, I am seeking catharsis and healing in order to come to terms with my past, if it is ever possible.

Deconstruction

As a post-conflict model for rebuilding communities, *kamenu* does not deny the existence of evil in the human society. Nor does it seek to blame any party to the conflict. Rather, its purpose is to give representation and voice to *inweronye*, the non-person, the long-forgotten *margin*, victim of war and a lack of social injustice. From an African *deconstructive* view point, *kamenu* seeks not only to tear down old assumptions and fallacies, but also to continue the critical examination of truth-telling. In *kamenu*, truth-telling is the most important element in post-conflict reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation, without which, durable community peace and security are not possible. Deconstruction as a post-conflict point-of-view believes that most times, the victor's *truth* is neither the vanquished's *truth* nor the victim's *truth*.

Jeffersonian Truth

I like the Jeffersonian truth. As a *kamenist*, or seeker of truth, I am a great admirer of the Jeffersonian democratic ideals as enshrined in the *U.S. Declaration of Independence*. This formal document re-establishes John Locke's natural rights or social contract theory which exists between the government and the governed. On the rights of people to self-determination, Thomas Jefferson states:

“We hold these *truths* to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these [rights] are life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.” Jefferson further states that whenever any government fails in its duty to secure such rights, the people have the right to “alter” or “abolish” it and institute a new government. Like the United States, this is exactly what the long-victimized peoples of the Eastern Nigeria did in 1967. Like the United States with the British Monarchy, Ndigbo chose to fight for freedom, hence, Biafra.

Biafra Declaration of Independence

On May 30, 1967, the former Eastern Region declared its independence from Nigeria. The new Republic of Biafra was principally inhabited by Ndigbo (Igbo people, sometimes known as Ibos). During the mid-1960's, political and ethnic instability characterized the post-colonial Nigerian State. Nigeria had become a very dangerous place for the Igbo people to live. Up to 30,000 Ndigbo were killed by the Muslim-Hausa ethnic tribe of the Northern Region. About 1 million refugees fled back to their homeland in the Eastern Region, now the Republic of Biafra. In September 1966, there was another mass killing of Ndigbo throughout the Northern Region by Islamic *Jihadists*. Like the United States, Biafra's right to self-determination was established by Ndigbo who felt that the Nigerian government had failed to protect and to secure their natural right to life, right to freedom, right to own property and the right to happiness within the Nigerian federation. Biafra's bid for self-determination provoked the Nigerian military regime to

declare war against the new Biafran nation-state. For three years, Biafra became the major proxy war front for European ideological rivalry and Islamic *jihadism*.

During the war, Britain and the Soviet Union gave military support to Nigeria. On the contrary, France, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), South Africa, Portugal and Israel gave economic, moral and minimal military support to Biafra. The United States maintained a seemingly neutral position, but obviously objected to the disintegration of Nigeria.

Recognition

The Republic of Biafra was recognized by Gabon, Haiti, Ivory Coast (now Cote d'Ivoire), Tanzania and Zambia. Under international law, Biafra remains a *de jure* state, despite its *de facto* status as a conquered nation-state. Under international law, Biafra is a juridical state. It has a legal status as a sovereign state, despite its defeat and reintegration with Nigeria. The doctrine of Use-of-force, violates Biafra's right to self-determination under international law.

Sometimes, we, the surviving victims of this war, feel that the gods and our ancestors must be irreconcilably angry with Ndigbo. The international community has also for too long, abandoned the Igbo people on life's highway. Sometimes we feel that our redemptive candles have burnt out too fast and for too long. Like my fellow Igbo brethren, it seems as if Providence has led us onto life's highway and extinguished our fire. Yet, as an *Ezza* warrior, I was not born angry or violent as such. But early enough, life taught me that we live in a world in which the "strong will do what they have the power to do while the weak will endure what they have to endure."

After my escape from the Nigerian soldiers, I trained to become a child soldier. Despite my father's inability to read and write, he had some good advice for me:

Son, in this life, you must be strong in one way or the other. You need to be strong in order to survive in this uncertain world. It could be mystical power, financial power, educational power or network power. Nobody can expect to be successful in life without having one of these powers to lean on. Without it, the first wave of earthly challenges will blow you away off your feet without support.

A Tale of Two Child-Soldiers

Ike, my childhood friend and I joined the Biafra Organization of Freedom Fighters at different locations. Ike grew up hating his paternal uncle who argued constantly with his father. When he became a child soldier, it was pay-back time. One fateful night, "Best" (as I called him) snuck into his uncle's hut and slaughtered him. His short and miserable life was sometimes attributed to the atrocities he committed during the war as a child-soldier. Africans believe in the law of retributive justice. Some societies call it *Karma*. My Father had warned me to beware of blood-guilt and karma. "You will never be successful and happy in life with blood on your head and hands," he advised me. Common-sense told me also that I could not go about killing innocent people and expect to live long without reaping the violence which I meted out to others. I have since learned that when parents prepare the path to truth and an ethical life for their children, they have laid a firm foundation for their future success and happiness. I fought for freedom in Biafra, but I did not kill. Rather, the presence of BOFF of which I was the area commander, helped to save my Ntsokara community from outside attacks, kidnapping, rape and murder. Such was the time.

On his way back from attending his niece's wedding ceremony, the village councilor, Egbe, was ambushed and led to the Okofia forest. Along the way, he begged for his life to be spared. Later, his abductors returned to our village at dawn without him. Up till today, nobody knows where he is buried. All *Stramper Awoma* (nickname) told me was that they cut his throat, dug a shallow grave, covered him with sand and leaves to disguise the spot from Okofia village folks who regularly fetched firewood in the forest. "Everything was done in a hurry to avoid any detection," he confessed before his own death.

The Village Chief, Egbe, had become a saboteur and traitor. True or false, that was the accusation. He associated with Nigerian soldiers during the Biafra-Nigeria war. As BOFF Commander, I knew the truth. Egbe understood and spoke Hausa language fluently (the language of the Muslim soldiers), but he was not a traitor. I knew that Stramper and Mike wanted him dead at all costs. I refused to participate in the killing. If I had not been an armed child-soldier, both of them would have eliminated me in order to conceal the murder. The lesson I learned from this experience is that many child-soldiers join guerrilla warfare in order to protect themselves from adult abuse, exploitation and death.

Of all the *Ezza* villages, Okofia suffered most during the Biafra-Nigeria war. One bleak night, the villagers were asleep when the Nigerian soldiers invaded the village. From hut to hut they massacred women, children, young and old. Early in the morning, virtually everyone was dead. Since 1970 until today, Nigeria has not paid any reparation to the surviving descendants of the Okofia killings. Nobody talks about it for the fear that government could come after one if one opened one's mouth too loudly.

At Asaba, the victorious Nigerian army gave a mandatory invitation to the entire community to come out en-masse to welcome the conquering Nigerian soldiers. Almost the entire community was wiped out as the commanding officer ordered the troops to open fire on the unsuspecting civilian crowd that had gathered to welcome the victors.

From these experiences, I have come to the conclusion that violence and war are bad and harmful to children and society. War takes away our children's right to grow, right to enjoy their childhood, right to go to school and the right to live a normal life. According to Olara Otunnu, the UN Secretary-General's special representative for children in armed conflict, "Today's warfare in Africa, especially the exploitation, abuse and use of children, is nothing short of a process of self destruction...Look at Angola, look at Sudan, look at Somalia, look at Sierra Leone. This isn't a small matter. This goes to the very heart of whether or not in large portions of Africa there is promise of a future for those societies."

The world has long-forgotten Biafra, but not for too long, anymore. A new generation of Biafran Freedom Fighters is now seeking the *actualization* of the self-determination of the Republic of Biafra. In today's Nigeria, Ndigbo-former Biafrans are still suffering from political exclusion and eputation.

My friends, as I said earlier, the objective of my story is not to recreate the long list of the atrocities of the child soldier like amputation, killing, rape and exploitation. Rather, it is a different story which is more concerned with post-conflict reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation. What the post-conflict society needs most is truth-telling, healing and the reintegration of the ex-combatants.

In April 1990, the Apartheid regime in South Africa sent a letter bomb to Fr. Michael Lapsley in Zimbabwe. Father Michael survived with the loss of both hands and an eye. Today, Michael counsels and works with people who have suffered from political violence and torture. According to him, there are many examples in history of nations that tried to bury, rather than face, their past. No nation has ever succeeded. "If we try to ignore or bury the past, it will hunt us and may even destroy us," he argues. I have since learned that we must do away with anger, hate and the desire for revenge. Another life is possible.

Another Life is Possible

After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree, (cum laude) in political science from the University of Liberia, Master of Science degree in political science from University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Doctor of Philosophy degree (summa cum laude) in political science from Howard University, Washington D.C., I am a living example that the child-soldier, the street-gangster, the juvenile delinquent and the children of war can be **SAVED**, **EDUCATED** and **REINTEGRATED** into society as useful citizens. Another life is possible for the 342 children under 18 who are arrested for violent crimes every day in America, for the 6,042 children under 18 who are arrested every day in America, and for the 2,660 babies who are born into poverty every day in America. From my personal experience, I know that poverty-stricken communities are the major recruiting centers for terrorism. When will society learn to self-correct in order to avoid self-destruction?

Finally, the moral world must continue to depend on international law as a preferential option to violence and war. In the post 9-11, corporate bailout global society of today, there is a need to reaffirm the link between world peace and international law. Why did I survive the brutality of the Biafra-Nigeria conflict? Perhaps I survived to serve as a reminder of Nigeria's unpleasant past, or more importantly to show that diversity and multiculturalism are more enduring values than the politics of exclusion and prebendalism. As an unofficial spokesman for the victims of the political injustices of the Biafran-Nigerian War, I advocate for a more inclusive society and just government today. To me, true freedom means the awakening of a true spirit of patriotic citizenry. I am simply heeding to the call of the unsettled memories of the Igbo men, women, and children who died in the cause of freedom.

This paper is a revised edition of my testimony/presentation to the joint conference of the United Nations Association of Greater Kansas City. Its original purpose was to pass on this confession to my six-year-old daughter, Jamike and her older sister Aliuwa with the hope that when I die, it will help them *first*, to understand my deeply-rooted, patriotic spirit for Igbo freedom. Second, is to set myself free from the burden of my unpleasant past.

How to Help

To donate to Global Peace's Education Fund for the victims of the Biafran war, please contact Dr. Unoke at: 913-563-8586. All donations are tax-deductible.

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Courtesy of: Infoplease Website, 10/13/2008