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ILLIBERAL MEMORY POLITICS AND TRAUMA: ECONOMIC BLOCKADE, KWASHIORKOR, AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN POST-CIVIL WAR NIGERIA



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The leftover debris of national pasts . . . will never get cleaned up and animosity will never drain until forgiveness enters these relationships in some political form. To dismiss this concern as a preoccupation with ancient history is to miss all the evidence for the truth that William Faulker put on the lips of his characters: “The past is not dead and gone; it isn’t even past.”¹

The triumph of liberalism at the end of the Cold War in 1990 and new debates over illiberal democracy has brought illiberal memory politics from the margins to the center of contemporary political discourse, especially in the developing countries of the Global South.² Yet war crime, marginalization, and transitional justice as strands of illiberal memory politics are less explored. For instance, in Nigeria, Africa’s largest democracy, there has been growing interest in a number of such salient questions left unanswered since the end of the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970).

While most of the questions are contested on a number of grounds, such as war strategies, economic, ethnic, religious, political, moral, or social perspectives, the idealized narratives of proponents of Nigeria’s “victory” against the “crushed separatist Biafra” in the public space do not suggest that there are no viable critical perspectives. For instance, in 2020 Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka argued that the immediate pre-civil war Igbo genocide in northern Nigeria remains traumatizing yet marginalized narrative of the immediate causes of the civil war.³ Similarly, the transitional-justice component of the economic blockade—a strategy deployed by the Nigerian side in which innocent children were systemically annihilated as a result of kwashiorkor — and the traumatizing memory are less explored.

Although a number of works discuss aspects of the Nigeria-Biafra War, distinct scholarship on the illiberal memory of kwashiorkor has been scant in the more than five decades since the war ended and in the era of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and triumph of the liberal democratic

¹ Donald Shriver, “Forgiveness: A Bridge Across Abysses of Revenge,” in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation*, ed. Raymond G. Helmick and Rodney Petersen (Radnor, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001), 167.

² Fareed Zakaria, “Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November-December 1997): 18.

³ Wole Soyinka, speech delivered to the Never Again Conference at the MUSON Centre, Onikan Lagos, organized by the Nzuko Umunna and Ndigbo to mark 50 years since the Nigerian Civil War (January 13, 2020).

order, which points to the saliency of new scholarship interrogating wartime memory of vulnerable children.⁴

The concept of “memory” is often associated with nostalgia, which could arise from a number of factors such as war experiences. Margaret Matlin describes memory as the process of retaining information over time.⁵ Memory has also been conceptualized as the ability to deploy past experiences to determine the future.⁶

Recent interest in the axes of convergence of institutional legacies of war or violence in relation to memory-making has consolidated a broad consensus on the constraints of long-term post-violence instability, especially in relation to children’s rights.⁷

In the context of the Nigeria-Biafra War, a number of debates have examined wartime memory.⁸ However, there is a paucity of research on the international policy response to some of the salient issues associated with post-civil war memory, particularly wartime child rights, starvation, and malnourishment arising from economic blockade, and particularly with regard to transitional justice.

The scant international humanitarian policy response to the effects of the blockade on civilians—in our context, innocent children who lost their lives to kwashiorkor—in the more than five decades since the Nigeria-Biafra War often suggests that economic blockade evokes a lethal feedback in the critical exploration of the dynamics of the post-civil war studies. This has stimulated recent interest in this area of study.

Economic blockade has a long history in the study of wars, including the First and Second World Wars. Experts on modern wars have examined economic blockade from a number of perspectives.⁹

On the contrary, some war experts link blockade to war crime. Wolff Heintschel von Heinegg argues that although economic blockade could serve a number of purposes, its central aim and long-term effect might contravene humanitarian principles, which could equate economic blockade to a war crime. Von Heinegg contends that an effective blockade allows a belligerent to cut off all maritime commerce between its enemy and the rest of the world. The purpose [is] not only to prevent goods from reaching the enemy (to a large extent that could be done without a blockade in any event) but also to prevent the enemy from exporting to the outside world and thereby sustaining its war economy.” Thus, blockade is often conceived as a belligerent measure.¹⁰

⁴ Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook*, vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press 1966).

⁵ Margaret Matlin, *Cognition* (London: Wiley Press, 2005).

⁶ Kim Zimmermann, “Memory Definition & Types of Memory,” *Live Science*, February 27, 2014, <http://www.livescience.com/43713-memory.html>.

⁷ Legacies of war and similar violence have been discussed in recent literature; see Alessandra Cassar, Pauline Grosjean, and Sam Whitt, “Legacies of Violence: Trust and Market Development,” *Journal of Economic Growth* 18, no. 3: (2013): 285–318.

⁸ Ifi Amadiume, *The Politics of Memory: Truth, Healing and Social Justice* (London: Zed Books, 2000).

⁹ William Medlicott, “The Economic Blockade,” in *History of the Second World War*, ed. W. K. Hancock (London: H. M. Stationery Office and Longmans, Green and Co., 1952).

¹⁰ Wolff Heintschel von Heinegg, “Naval Blockade,” *International Law Studies Series* 75 (2000) (New Port: US Naval War College), 203–30, 204, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/ils/vol75/iss1/16/>.

According to Article 54 (1) of the [Geneva Convention Additional Protocol I \(1977\)](#), “starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited.”¹¹ Under customary international law, the “declaration or establishment of a blockade is prohibited if: (a) it has the sole purpose of starving the civilian population or denying it other objects essential for its survival; or (b) the damage to the civilian population is, or may be expected to be, excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated from the blockade.” If the civilian population of the blockaded territory is inadequately provided with food and other objects essential for its survival, “the blockading party must provide for free passage of such foodstuffs and other essential supplies.”¹² Article 13, part 2 of the Geneva Convention “covers the whole of the populations of the countries in conflict, without any adverse distinction based, in particular, on race, nationality, religion or political opinion, and are intended to alleviate the sufferings caused by war.”¹³

Against this backdrop, this article discusses illiberal memory politics. It critically examines the memory of kwashiorkor and its divergent implications for postwar children, the most vulnerable and less emphasized victims. This puts wartime children at the center of illiberal-memory-politics discourse.

Adopting a novel approach, the article in a distinct manner advances a new research agenda that transcends civil-war narratives and, at the same time, revisits existing viewpoints on war memories and trauma in contexts linked to kwashiorkor, as it traces the origins and purveyors of such economic blockade and its consequences for children. In particular, the article attempts to bring back global policy attention on transitional justice to redress the pains and despicable posture of blockade on vulnerable groups.

Transitional justice, in this article, denotes postwar or conflict-reconstruction justice. It aims to redress all forms of wartime injustice, which includes war crimes, human rights violations, genocide, rape, victimization, marginalization, and so on. This article considers how kwashiorkor could be situated in the context of war crime and possible involvement of the international humanitarian actors in postwar reconstruction. It argues that the paucity of research and policy on the question of wartime children’s vulnerability in developing countries neglects the huge problem of post-civil war trauma and gloomy memory.

The rest of the article is structured as follows: transitional justice—toward a conceptual framework; beyond-war strategy—blockade, kwashiorkor, death toll, and the key actors; blocking humanitarian relief, illiberal memory and the morality question; the quest for transitional justice and radical separatist agitation—the rise of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)—kwashiorkor and its implications for illiberal memory politics; and conclusion.

¹¹ Geneva Convention Additional Protocol, Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) (June 8, 1977), available at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977>.

¹² San Remo Manual on International Law Applicable to Armed Conflicts at Sea, article 93 (June 12, 1994), available at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/san-remo-manual-1994/article-93-108>.

¹³ Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) (June 8, 1977), available at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977>.

Transitional Justice: Toward a Conceptual Framework

Transitional justice has been an important term deployed in development studies, history, economics, sociology and geopolitics of war, human rights, and international humanitarian law. Susanne Buckley-Zistel and colleagues observe that transitional justice has gained global significance as an umbrella term for approaches to dealing with the past in the aftermath of violent conflict or dictatorial regimes.¹⁴ Such a perspective expands the links between kwashiorkor, economic blockade, and illiberal memory politics in postwar transition beyond rhetoric. In particular, transitional justice points to the critical issues of nation building and inclusive development. Transitional justice is the way societies that have experienced civil conflict or authoritarian rule and widespread violations of human rights deal with the experience. With its roots in law, transitional justice as an area of study crosses various fields in the social sciences.¹⁵

While challenging the common assumption that war is a contest between two sides trying to triumph over one another, David Keen argues that war in Africa has become an alternative system of profit, power, and protection, in which adversaries often cooperate in their common pursuit of profit.¹⁶

There has been growing interest in understanding a number of salient questions left unanswered since the end of the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970). While most of these questions are contested on a number of grounds, such as war strategies, economic, ethnic, political, moral and social perspectives, etc., the transitional-justice component of economic blockade, in which innocent children were systemically annihilated as part of war strategy, is less explored.

As a justice and equity framework, transitional justice might offer a more robust means of understanding the interplay between the violation of children's rights, equity, and the patterns of prosecution of the civil war. In particular, with regard to the phenomenon of memory, there is a need for a critical engagement with the question of kwashiorkor on the grounds that studies on wars in most developing countries of the South have not adequately accounted for the inadequacy or otherwise of starvation of children. Such themes have rarely been revisited in contemporary international humanitarian law and transitional justice. In this context, the illiberal memory of kwashiorkor and the key actors in the adoption of the economic blockade, which evokes trauma, has been less explored in both scholarly debates and policy discourses. Such chroniclers point out that the war memory must often represent elements of truth and social justice.¹⁷

Based on this theoretical standpoint, this article makes a new contribution, which demonstrates that the liberal peace complex has failed to secure sustainable peace in Africa in post-conflict contexts. Within the vacuum created by such failure, a "new theory of postwar reconstruction" that underpins a resurgence of postwar agitation is essential to deepen the understanding of why postwar separatist

¹⁴ Susanne Buckley-Zistel, Teresa Koloma Beck, Christian Braun, and Friederike Mieth, *Transitional Justice Theories* (London: Routledge 2013). See also: Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I).

¹⁵ Hakeem Yusuf and Hugo van der Merwe, *Transitional Justice: Theories, Mechanisms and Debates*. (London: Routledge, 2022).

¹⁶ David Keen, "Incentives and Disincentives for Violence," in *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, ed. Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 3.

¹⁷ Chima Korieh and Ifeanyi Ezeonu, eds., *Remembering Biafra: Narrative, History, and Memory of the Nigeria-Biafra War* (Glassboro, NJ: Goldline and Jacobs Publishing, 2010).

agitation has an enduring legacy. And in particular, expanding our theoretical and policy reach to counter instability makes transitional justice a suitable framework for understanding postwar reconstruction in Nigeria.

The present article, therefore, explores how and why a shared historical memory of kwashiorkor should be addressed after more than five decades of post-civil war agitation in southeastern Nigeria and what new meanings the international actors and international humanitarian conventions could make of the revisited questions linked to kwashiorkor. In particular, we consider amenable ways to address the conditions created by economic blockade to redefine, or remedy, such situations to forestall future reoccurrence.

Beyond War Strategy: Blockade, Kwashiorkor, Death Toll, and the Key Actors

The wartime Biafra children experienced starvation, which persistently resulted in malnourishment, kwashiorkor, and death.¹⁸ In popular discourses, both in political and media circles, economic blockade as a tool of extermination of innocent children, which violates international humanitarian principles, is rarely revisited in debates about war crimes. This systemic decimation of children and the key actors is important for both policy makers and researchers seeking to understand foundational aspects of the kwashiorkor episode. The kwashiorkor iconography includes the issues of hunger and the high visibility of diseases associated with malnourishment. This strategy—a nefarious set of broad measures, which the federal side pursued war policies linked to other antithetical repertoires of social injustice, child-rights violation, and war crime—culminated in the systemic annihilation of children.

Indeed, decades after the war, the resonance of kwashiorkor in all spheres of existence has been manifold to date and often reminiscent of hunger-induced child-killing diseases and countless deaths of children. Kwashiorkor became easily associated with all sorts of ailments that afflicted children.

Blockade was claimed as a strategy for victory, and in the face of a war that had dragged on for close to three years, “everything” was justifiable to secure victory. The state and the media became instrumental in propagating complementary remarks about the blockade. Much of this suggested the disappointment of the federal side, which had envisaged that Biafra would be crushed within days. In post-civil war memories, blockade has also become a common stand among anti-Biafra proponents, who strive to enhance their political fame using civil-war narratives or to attract cheap political attention. This perspective is often associated with the key proponent of economic blockade, namely, Chief Obafemi Awolowo.

Ahead of the 1983 general election, Chief Awolowo, the presidential candidate of the Unity Party of Nigeria, hosted a town-hall interview in Abeokuta, where, in addition to other pertinent topics of the day, he spoke on his role in the civil war, the 20-pound policy, starvation as a weapon of warfare, the change of currency, abandoned property, and so on. Awolowo said:

¹⁸ Laz Ekwueme, “Biafra’s Struggle,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1960, <https://www.nytimes.com/1969/07/20/archives/biafras-struggle.html>.

I'm accused of starving the Ibos [*sic*], I did nothing of the sort. You know, shortly after the liberation of these places, Calabar, Enugu and Port Harcourt, I decided to pay a visit. . . . But when I went what did I see? I saw the kwashiorkor victims. If you see a kwashiorkor victim you'll never like war to be waged. Terrible sight, in Enugu, in Port Harcourt, not many in Calabar, but mainly in Enugu and Port Harcourt. Then I enquired what happened to the food we are sending to the civilians. We were sending food through the Red Cross, and Caritas to them, but what happen [*sic*] was that the vehicles carrying the food were always ambushed by the soldiers. That's what I discovered, and the food would then be taken to the soldiers to feed them, and so they were able to continue to fight. And I said that was a very dangerous policy, we didn't intend the food for soldiers. But who will go behind the line to stop the soldiers from ambushing the vehicles that were carrying the food? And as long as soldiers were fed, the war will continue, and who'll continue to suffer? and those who didn't go to the place to see things as I did, you remember that all the big guns, all the soldiers in the Biafran army looked all well fed after the war, its only the mass of the people that suffered kwashiorkor.¹⁹

Another issue was the secret change of currency instituted by Chief Awolowo, then minister of finance, which resulted in loss of livelihoods and undermined the standard of living on the Biafran side, as Chief Awolowo corroborated:

We discovered he (Ojukwu) looted our central bank in Benin, he looted the one in Port Harcourt, looted the one in Calabar and he was taking the currency notes abroad to sell to earn foreign exchange to buy arms. So I decided to change the currency, and for your benefit, it can now be told the whole world, only Gowon knew the day before, the day before the change took place. I decided, only three of us knew before then—Isong now governor of Cross River, Attah and myself. It was a closely guarded secret . . . So Ojukwu said the change in currency defeated him, and starvation of his soldiers also defeated him.²⁰

Chief Awolowo's claim has been contested in several international and local newspapers, diffusing biased narratives about the crisis in general and the effects of kwashiorkor in particular.²¹ For instance, in the *New York Review*, Conor Cruise O'Brien wrote that, "In some areas in the East, Igbos were killed by local people with at least the acquiescence of the Federal forces, 1000 Igbo civilians perished in Benin in this way."²² One of the major massacres took place in the Igbo town of Asaba, where 700 Igbo males were lined up and shot as terrified women and children were forced to watch.²³

¹⁹ "Throwback: Awolowo Speaks on Biafra, Genocide Accusation, Currency, Ojukwu . . .," *The News*, January 17, 2020, <https://thenewsnigeria.com.ng/2020/01/17/158957/>.

²⁰ "Throwback," *The News*.

²¹ Several foreign newspapers and magazines carried the news of genocide and similar trauma in Biafra: "A Condemned People," *New York Review*, December 21, 1967; "Genocide in Biafra," *New York Times*, January 10, 1968; Editorial, *Washington Post*, July 2, 1969; "Asaba Massacre: Terrible Blot on Nigeria's History," *Observer*, January 21, 1968; "The Asaba Massacre," *Le Monde*, April 5, 1968.

²² Conor Cruise O'Brien, "A Condemned People," *New York Review*, December 21, 1967.

²³ S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, "The Asaba Massacre and the Nigerian Civil War: Reclaiming Hidden History," *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 2-3 (2014): 379-99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2014.936718>.

The 1966 genocide of the Igbo in the north took many lives. In Calabar, federal forces shot at least 1000 and perhaps 2000 Igbos, most of them civilians.²⁴ Chief Anthony Enahoro, Nigerian Commissioner for Information, at a press conference in New York in July 1968, maintained that, “it (mass starvation) is a legitimate aspect of war.” Equally, Alison Ayinda, head of the Nigerian delegation at the Niamey peace talks in July 1968, pointed in the same direction: “Starvation is a weapon of war, and we have every intention of using it against the rebels.” The *Washington Post* editorial of July 2, 1969 captured a similar essence: “One word now describes the policy of the Nigerian military government toward secessionist Biafra: genocide. It is ugly and extreme but it is the only word which fits Nigeria’s decision to stop international Red Cross and other relief agencies from flying food to Biafra.”²⁵

More worrisome perhaps was the often-cited media reports of the sardonic remark of venerated Nigerian soldier, Benjamin Adekunle (the “Black Scorpion”):

I want to see no Red Cross, no Caritas, no World Council of Churches, no Pope, no missionary, no UN delegation. I want to prevent even one Ibo (*sic*) from having even one piece to eat before their capitulation. We shoot at everything that moves and when our troops march into the centre of Ibo (*sic*) territory, we shoot at everything, even things that do not move.²⁶

Despite the international media reports, Toyin Falola and Adebayo Oyeboade argue that the federal government’s allegedly genocidal intention toward the Biafrans never translated into the much-expected worldwide support and recognition of the secessionist state. This was partly because the federal government countered the Biafran war propaganda. For instance, in 1968 an international observer invited to the war zone by the federal troops declared that, “there was no evidence of the intent to destroy the Igbo or their property.”²⁷

Among a number of objective scholars, particularly of Yoruba ethnic extraction (Chief Awolowo’s ethnic group), the claims by Chief Awolowo have never gone unchallenged. For instance, Francis Adewale, author of *Over The Mountains*, argues: “we (Yoruba) can either choose to live in denial and pretend that Awolowo never participated in the terrible decision to starve people of eastern Nigeria of foods and medicine during the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970) or own up to the fact that he did it to save Nigeria, apologize for it, and then move on.”²⁸ He further posits that the abuse of anyone who dares to raise the fact that the late Chief Awolowo was culpable for the death of millions of children as a result of the policy will not undo this disastrous policy. Adewale highlights that: “It does not diminish the greatness of the man in terms of what he achieved for his people. We can even disagree on what motivates him to take that decision: ambition? Or statesmanship? But what should not be

²⁴ “Biafra: A Cruel War with No End in Sight,” *New York Times*, March 2, 1969, <https://www.nytimes.com/1969/03/02/archives/biafra-a-cruel-war-with-no-end-in-sight.html>.

²⁵ Editorial, *The Washington Post*, July 2, 1969.

²⁶ “Flashback/Controversy: ‘I have to Kill the Igbo. Sorry!’—Black Scorpion,” *The News*, December 5, 2020, <https://thenewsnigeria.com.ng/2020/12/06/flashback-controversy-i-have-to-kill-the-igbo-sorry-black-scorpion/>.

²⁷ Toyin Falola and Adebayo Oyeboade, *Hot Spot: Sub-Saharan Africa* (London: Greenwood Press, 2010).

²⁸ Francis Adewale, “Awolowo’s Starvation Policy against Biafrans and the Igbo Requires Apology Not Attacks on Achebe,” *USAfrica Online*, <https://usafricaonline.com/2012/10/10/awolowos-starvation-policy-against-biafrans-and-the-igbo-requires-apology-not-attacks-on-achebe-by-francis-adewale/>.

subject to pejoratives and needless harangue is the very fact that the decision happened at his watch.”²⁹ Adewale states:

It is time for Awoists to realize that Chief Awolowo is not infallible. He made some sound decision in governance as well as other horrendous decisions, one of which is this starvation policy. He might have done it to please the northern oligarchy who had promised to install him as president or he might have had a truly altruistic motive; whatever the case this is a sadistic policy that should never have been put in place by any Nigerian leader.³⁰

Unlike many writings either supporting or castigating the Igbo, equally, there are scholars and activists who remained vocal in condemning the mistreatment of the Igbo.³¹

In 1968, American senator Edward Kennedy reported that, “the loss of life from starvation continues at more than 10,000 persons per day over 1,000,000 lives in recent months. Without emergency measures now, the number will climb to 25,000 per day, within a month and 2,000,000 deaths by the end of the year. The new year will only bring greater disaster to people caught in the passion.”³²

In this episode, it is alleged that the Igbo lost all their landed property in non-Igbo-speaking areas such as Lagos and Port Harcourt through “the abandoned property” saga. This partly accounts for the present-day hardship of the Igbo and the absence of post-civil war transitional justice, which often results in perennial agitation by members of the defunct Biafra, as they tend to resort to a revisited platform for post-civil war injustice. Thus, despite the alleged defeat of Biafra as secessionists, this does not imply the absence of critical perspectives that seek to suggest a basis for giving ear to the post-civil war Biafra question: if not a remembering of the war memory, at least some sort of dialogue to address the unaddressed questions. Former president Obasanjo (who was a soldier and fought on the federal side) once described the Biafra protests as a “cry for attention.”³³

In 2017, Obasanjo acquiesced to a dialogue after decades of castigating the Biafra question. On May 27, 2017 at an event in Abuja tagged, “Biafra 50 Years After” held at the Yar’Adua Centre, he stated that “we should even appeal to those saying they want to go, we should not tell them to go, we should make them understand that there is enough cake to share. We should treat the country with care.”³⁴

From either the opposing or proposing perspective, any accurate or objective analysis of post-civil war child rights and illiberal memory must transcend an assessment of the events from either ethnic, political, or religious perspectives, rather than relating more to existential realities (that is, in relation to the facts of the past), to explore how such occurrences as economic blockade affected or linked to present realities in conceptualizing the prevalent political and economic scenarios in Nigeria. The

²⁹ Adewale, “Awolowo’s Starvation Policy.”

³⁰ Adewale, “Awolowo’s Starvation Policy.”

³¹ Several prominent Yoruba progressives, including intellectuals and activists such as Dr. Tai Solarin, Prof. Wole Soyinka, Fela Anikulapo, among others, condemn the post-civil war mistreatment of the Igbo.

³² Falola and Oyebade, *Hot Spot*.

³³ Conor Gaffey, “Biafra Protests a ‘Cry for Attention,’ Says Former Nigerian President Obasanjo,” *Newsweek*, January 18, 2016, <https://www.newsweek.com/biafra-protests-cry-attention-former-nigerian-president-416913>.

³⁴ “Lets Beg Biafran Agitators—Obasanjo,” *Vanguard*, May 25, 2017, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2017/05/lets-beg-biafran-agitators-obasanjo/>.

persistent evidence of Biafran agitation, over 50 years since the end of the civil war and particularly in the neoliberal order, suggests a need for an urgent policy response. This points to the need for a reconfiguration, reinterpretation, and rereading of the past to reshape the present for a better future. The picture of kwashiorkor in the civil war memory is consequently riddled with sadness in the face of present economic and political conditions, especially the often-alleged political and economic marginalization of the Igbo in key political offices since the end of the war.³⁵

Thus, the notion of post-civil war Igbo marginalization often blurs the optimism and equality expected of liberal democracy, transitional justice, and post-civil war reconstruction. In this line of thought, several post-civil war perspectives on kwashiorkor and the reconstruction of the Igbo remain a nebulous conception of social reality and an “ugly past” that could be rarely obliterated. This, as Abdul Mustapha recounts, deepens mutual suspicion, fear, and doubts about post-civil war Biafra as the challenges of reintegration abound.³⁶

For instance, in 2006 former president Obasanjo alleged that he was the first to appoint an Igbo as minister of state for defense since the end of the civil war, namely, ambassador Johnson Aguiyi Ironsi Jnr.³⁷ This perhaps points to the growing trepidation and disdain the Igbo confront.

Blocking Humanitarian Relief, Illiberal Memory, and the Morality Question

Undoubtedly, in wartime, atrocities can barely, if ever, be entirely prevented. These could be committed by either warring faction. However, the experience with kwashiorkor was only on the Biafran side. The resistance to humanitarian relief was often associated with the tactics and strategies devised by Chief Awolowo under the Gowon administration.³⁸ The government in Lagos succeeded in cutting off supplies to Biafra through political pressure on Ahmadu Ahidjo of the Cameroons. At the Fourth Assembly of World Council of Churches meeting in Uppsala, Sweden, in July 1968, which considered the problem of relief supplies to the victims of the conflict, Bola Ige, who was Adviser, Church of the Province of West Africa defended Gowon’s government.

In his account, Frederick Forsyth explains that:

650 refugee camps, contained about 700,000 haggard bundles of human flotsam waiting hopelessly for a meal, outside the camps, was the reminder of an estimated four and a half to five million displaced kwashiorkor scourge, a million and a half children, suffer(ed) from it during January; that put the forecast death toll for another 300,000 children.³⁹ More than the pogroms of 1966, more than the war casualties,

³⁵ Abdul Mustapha, “Ethnic Structure, Inequality and Governance of the Public Sector in Nigeria” (CRISE Working Paper No. 18, Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, University of Oxford, Oxford, 2006).

³⁶ Mustapha, “Ethnic Structure, Inequality and Governance of the Public Sector in Nigeria.”

³⁷ Luke Amadi, Fidelis Allen, and Zainab Mai-Bornu, “Democracy, Separatist Agitation and Militarised State Response in South East Nigeria,” *Review of African Political Economy* 50, no. 175 (2023): 125–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2023.2174846>.

³⁸ “How Gowon Blocked Arms, Food from Entering Biafra-Ofonagoro,” *The Nation*, December 2, 2012, <https://thenationonline.net/how-gowon-blocked-arms-food-from-entering-biafra-ofonagoro/>.

³⁹ Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend* (Barnsley, England: Leo Cooper, 2001).

than the terror bombings, it was the experience of watching helplessly their children waste away and die that gave birth to, a deep and unrelenting loathing.

Falola and Oyebade argue that humanitarian aid from Caritas, the Red Cross, and the World Council of Churches was truncated by the federal side.⁴⁰ Adewale recounts that “Biafra did contract with Caritas but Chief Awolowo yanked the arrangement after visiting the liberated cities of Calabar, Port Harcourt and Enugu.”⁴¹ Chief Awolowo explains: “So I decided to stop sending the food there. In the process, the civilians would suffer, but the soldiers suffered most.”⁴²

As in other national contexts, keeping the economic blockade in memory by saturating the public space with the images and words of several scholars and writers definitely confronts the morality of the actors. For instance, it contravenes the Geneva Convention put in place in 1949, as explicated, which provides that civilians be protected during wars. It requires parties to the conflict in part 2, article 15 to make provisions for food supply to the civilian persons in the war zones, either directly or through a neutral state or humanitarian organization.

On the contrary, the post-civil war Nigerian state remains a key player in propagating and reconnecting with the economic blockade episode both as a hilarious and victorious agenda. In Nigeria, in both media and public circles, Chief Obafemi Awolowo is venerated as an icon who ended a war that defied military intelligence in almost three years and who is idolized by the Yoruba because he was able to transform the South West into an educational and industrial hub in Africa and build a robust political climate.⁴³ However, this does not resolve the moral implications of the extermination of over two million innocent children.

Pictures of malnourished Biafran children became simple iconography used to explicate the intensity and adverse effects of starvation on the children in public glare, both in print and electronic media—sometimes these act as simple platforms to represent the sad memory the kwashiorkor images evoke. But most times point to the evidence of systemic decimation of the future generation. Falola and Oyebade observe that “in due course, pitiful pictures of starving Biafran women and children suffering from severe malnutrition (kwashiorkor) began to appear in newspaper and on television around the world.”⁴⁴ However, international multilateral and bilateral treaties, such as the Hague Convention, Geneva Conventions, and other international conventions, appear ineffectual in policy engagement with this scenario.

Most articles on the economic blockade published decades after the civil war re-echo inhumanity, injustice, or moral bankruptcy in relation to the numerous children who lost their lives to kwashiorkor.⁴⁵ Indeed, at the time of the blockade, it was more than strictly a war strategy shielded tactically from humanitarian intervention and morality: it provided a novel weapon of mass destruction of every creature on the secessionist side. Achebe recounts that “the wartime cabinet of General Gowon, the military ruler, it should be remembered, was full of intellectuals like Chief

⁴⁰ Falola and Oyebade, *Hot Spot*.

⁴¹ Adewale, “Awolowo’s Starvation Policy.”

⁴² “Throwback,” *The News*.

⁴³ “Obafemi Awolowo: Hero of Yoruba, Killer of Biafra, Betrayed by the North,” *Daily Post*, March 6, 2013, <https://dailypost.ng/2013/03/06/obinna-akukwe-obafemi-awolowo-hero-of-yoruba-killer-of-biafra-betrayed-by-the-north/>.

⁴⁴ Falola and Oyebade, *Hot Spot*.

⁴⁵ Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *The Biafra War: Nigeria and Aftermath* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990).

Obafemi Awolowo among others who came up with a boatload of infamous and regrettable policies.” A statement credited to Awolowo and echoed by his cohorts is the most callous and unfortunate: “all is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don’t see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight harder.”⁴⁶

Achebe provides a useful pointer in this direction, linking Chief Awolowo to a presidential ambition should he please the northern oligarchy and scuttle the secessionist agenda. Achebe further states that: “it is my impression that Awolowo was driven by an overriding ambition for power, for himself and for his Yoruba people. There is, on the surface at least, nothing wrong with those aspirations.”⁴⁷ Both Richard Joseph and Obinna Akukwe variously observed that despite the efforts of Chief Awolowo against the Biafra secession through obnoxious and repressive policies, the north betrayed him by refusing to support him to become the post-civil war president of Nigeria.⁴⁸

Equally, the morality question of the blockade has often been dismissive. Also striking is the way in which most references to the war castigate the Igbo as either villains or troublesome. This suggests hatred and resentment for the Igbo,⁴⁹ At the same time, “economic blockade” is rarely used as a derogatory term in some sections of post-civil war Nigeria.

Thus, a set of abstract moral principles is disconnected from the specific historical context of the blockade and reconnected to evidence of extermination “by other means.” In international circles, the disjunction between morality and decimation of vulnerable children makes it possible for the purveyors to capitalize on the strategy to build social relevance and nurture political ambition for the outcomes of their present actions.

The illiberal memory of blockade and kwashiorkor thus fosters an unimaginable disarray, as it claimed the lives of many children. Such pains also evoke a feeling of servitude and numb helplessness. The language of kwashiorkor is still a shared popular lexicon in everyday interactions in post-civil war eastern Nigeria. In the intellectual space, several seminal works, including war memoirs, journal articles, novels, poems, plays, and short stories recall such memories. In literary circles, several works represent the war experience linked to kwashiorkor. For instance, Nigerian poet J. P. Clark in his poem *The Casualties* recounts: “The cases celebrated for kwashiorkor. The unforeseen camp-follower of not just our war.”⁵⁰ Other works are memoirs, novels, plays, and so on.

Traumatic narratives of the deaths of many children and bodily abnormalities are commonly heard among the generations that grew up decades after the war, and they are often compared with the present realities of the country latently balkanized along ethno-religious lines. Such concrete imaginaries of social injustice and inequity, in the form of ongoing hardship, poverty, and youth unemployment, evoke nebulous sets of disaffection among the youths of the defunct Biafra. Economic blockade is thus associated with the “torments” of the “rebels” as the federal troops could not recognize many *at-risk* civilians who were not directly involved in the conflict, particularly the

⁴⁶ Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Penguin, 2012).

⁴⁷ Achebe, *There Was a Country*.

⁴⁸ Richard Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1991).

⁴⁹ Achebe, *There Was a Country*.

⁵⁰ John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, *African Poetry* (London: Longman, 1970), 48.

vulnerable groups. This persisted until late-1969, when many malnourished Biafran children were flown to Gabon by the Red Cross for special rehabilitation.

The blockade strategy not only disarmed the Biafran side but also destabilized both the soldiers and the civilians. However, the older generations with personal memories of the civil war are gradually disappearing, leaving new generations with no firsthand experiences of the war.

The eddies of the blockade not only constituted an endemic source of systemic decimation of the children but also point to the question of morality and the protection of child rights in wartime. Revisiting a shared historical memory of kwashiorkor aims to buttress and redefine the links between civil war and children's rights. For instance, part 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides that the "best interest of a child [is] of paramount consideration in all actions."⁵¹ This appears to be at variance or marginalized in policy discourse and collective debates about post-civil war reconstruction in contemporary imaginaries of Nigeria. Accordingly, this contributes to a contestation of the moral status of the economic blockade. Local and international policy interventions linking the morality of economic blockade to the systemic decimation of Biafran children have not been resolved. Whereas several accounts of the war have been provided, this is not one of such accounts; rather the crux of the matter remains the place of morality in the entire occurrence and how best to salvage the plight of millions of Igbo children unjustly starved to death during the war. Such chroniclers have been rare in international humanitarian discourse, transitional justice, wartime crimes, and illiberal memory studies.

The Quest for Transitional Justice and New Radical Separatist Agitation: The Rise of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)

Those who are negatively affected by the war could only ask for transitional justice and reforms that could foster total reintegration. Where such responses are not forthcoming, further clamor for self-determination is triggered. Since the third wave of democracy, as Samuel Huntington argued, restitution and the restoration of the blighted hopes of all marginalized groups should be effectively addressed.⁵² Ordinarily, there would have been a special redevelopment plan for the defunct Biafra, especially the war-affected children. Yet since 1999, following the rebirth of democracy in Nigeria, reparation and transitional justice have been at the margins of political and social circles. The headlines of most Nigerian newspapers convey the grouse of the resurgent Biafran agitators.

The blockade could constitute an agenda from which child-rights advocates, international humanitarian organizations, and similar global actors could draw to pursue a transitional-justice agenda and construct new policy initiatives that could protect the rights of the child in wartime.

In the zero-sum context of post-civil war Nigerian politics, it appears there is an element of conspiracy within the power elite, which reads something like: "the defunct Biafra will never hold top most political office namely, the presidency." The scenario became inherently characterized as one in which the post-civil war hegemonic elite coalition or group could become an instrument of control

⁵¹ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Children, "General Comment No. 14 (2013) on the Right of the Child to Have His or Her Best Interests Taken as a Primary Consideration (Art. 3, Para. 1)" (May 29, 2013), CRC /C/GC/14, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc/general-comments>.

⁵² Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

and accumulation of political power and the core determinants of who gets what and how in Nigerian politics, to the exclusion and marginalization of the “defeated” group.

Policy discourses and debates about transitional justice and post-civil war reconciliation between the defunct Biafra and Nigeria and similar countries unjustly exterminated should be at the forefront in human rights debates and international humanitarian policy discourses. Beyond the “abandoned property,” the issuance of no more than £20 and similar trends suggestive of the unjust treatment of the defunct Biafra could be revisited and addressed in all similar war-torn regions. The international community, opinion leaders and social commentators, nongovernment organizations, and similar stakeholders strongly involved in the mediation process should recognize that a number of issues remain unquestioned, unaddressed, or unjustly treated in discourses related to the Nigeria-Biafra War. Whereas the war and the “conquest of Biafra” remained sources of heroic narratives for the actors on the federal side, the morality question and injustice remained largely sidelined in policy framings.

This perhaps accounts for the perverse post-civil war agitation of the defunct Biafra, who to date feel unjustly treated, as injustice supposedly does not thrive in a democracy. And peace cannot reign without justice. The Biafran agitation perhaps epitomizes the facades of an amoral war and a rape of justice. Only a few voices accept that the Igbo were not unjustly treated following a frank and explicit account of the events that led to the civil war and in the five decades since. Soyinka has repeatedly argued that there was genocidal attrition against the Igbo at the immediate pre-civil war crisis.⁵³

Similarly, some personalities of Yoruba extraction have argued that the Igbo should forgive Chief Obafemi Awolowo, most notably Femi Fani Kayode, former Nigerian minister of information, who has argued that the Igbo deserve an apology. International and local writers and scholars alike have joined forces in search of answers to unanswered post-civil war questions.⁵⁴

Dominant groups favored the control of power (and resources), while the marginalized Igbo clamor for a separate enclave that would provide space for them to transcend the limitations of post-civil war marginalization and underdevelopment. Thus, the fact that the group that belonged to Biafra or the Igbo ethnic nationality has not had a viable postwar reconstruction, transitional justice, and a shot at Nigeria’s presidency over five decades since the civil war remains an issue of growing concern, largely fueling disgust and separatist agitation. The tag of “marginalization” intensified over the five decades since the civil war and mirrors the concerns of the defunct separatist Biafrans, who felt a sense of non-reintegration into the mainstream post-civil war politics and governance of Nigeria. This sets the scene for organized protests and agitation for self-determination within the context of a political power asymmetry, poverty, and underrepresentation in various public offices in Nigeria—fueling separatist struggles.

Among the post-1999 separatist agitators, the first was the Movement for the Actualization of a Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), formed in 1999 under the leadership of Ralph Uwazuruike, a lawyer, and the IPOB (formed in 2012) led by Nnamdi Kanu—a London-based social activist. Others are the Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM) and the Biafra Independence Movement (BIM), the latter formed by Uwazuruike when he left MASSOB.

⁵³ Soyinka, speech delivered to the Never Again Conference.

⁵⁴ Adichie Chimamanda, *For Love of Biafra* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1998); and Emefiena Ezeani, *In Biafra Africa Died: The Diplomatic Plot* (London: Veritas Lumen Publishers, 2013).

Since IPOB's emergence, every May 30th is observed by its members as a commemoration of the declaration of the Republic of Biafra. IPOB also has its media wing—Radio Biafra—which propagates its philosophy and separatist agenda.

To the separatists, post-civil war reintegration has been less inclusive, while to the Nigerian elite, the “national unity project,” cannot be compromised, as they posit that separatist agitation is not only inimical to the national unity and stability of Nigeria but illegitimate, and, by the same logic, must not be allowed, in order not to undermine the quest for national unity.

Overall, membership of IPOB has been largely youths who put forward a counternarrative that justifies a separate state of Biafra as the way forward. They condemn the Igbo political elite and accuse them of compromise, complacency, and corruption, which they claim have derailed transitional justice and the transformation of old eastern Nigeria.

The central objective of IPOB is the creation of a sovereign state of Biafra through nonviolent means, which includes demonstrations such as sit-at-home events, in the region that belonged to the defunct Biafra.⁵⁵

In 2017, the federal government proscribed the IPOB and tagged it a terrorist organization. Its leader, Kanu, has been detained in Abuja despite a ruling by the court for his release by the federal government.

Conclusion: Kwashiorkor and Its Implications for Illiberal Memory Politics

Since the end of the war, the historical memory of kwashiorkor is reminiscent of anguish and tends to take a traumatic shape—what scholars describe as the “Igbo genocide.” Unlike most postcolonial crises, the civil war memory remains an illusion that has entailed a complex interplay of the intricacies of history and politics. Social exclusion, resilience, organized protests, self-determination, conquest, life, and survival of dissident groups have been a common experience in southeast Nigeria. However, in scholarly circles as well as among common people, in post-civil war narratives both in Nigeria and abroad, kwashiorkor as a disease arising from economic blockade is undeniably inhuman and often linked to the ambition and desire to “win the war” at all costs.

Nevertheless, the numerous challenges associated with kwashiorkor have either been ignored or suppressed, which accounts for its divergent implications for illiberal memory politics. Based on the idea that starvation was a “weapon of war,” economic blockade as a strategy was articulated. This included scuttling all forms of relief and aid coming to Biafra, which was inhuman and equates to war crime. The poor post-civil war policy response to the effects of kwashiorkor does not match the actual importance of the mantra “one Nigeria”; neither does it serve the unifying implications of postwar reconstruction built on the maxim “no victor, no vanquished” and the state building propagated at the end of the war.

⁵⁵ Amadi, Allen, and Mai-Bornu, “Democracy, Separatist Agitation and Militarised State Response in South East Nigeria.”

Generally, civil wars and conflicts take horrific tolls on civilians. However, postwar reconstruction and state building must be just to meet the needs of the affected groups. This is where the question of transitional justice comes into play. The outcome and effects of kwashiorkor as a consequence of the economic blockade calls for postwar policy attention.

Often it is alleged that the “defeat” of Biafra reduced Biafrans to humiliating images or second-class citizens deployed to both humiliate and exclude the “conquered” secessionists in the mainstream politics of Nigeria. Such exclusionary politics are also conceived by some analysts as a reservoir of deterrence against future occurrence—what may also be termed “a deterrent paraphernalia” or “unifying mantra”—from which social collectives, groups, or similar associations may draw to forestall any future reoccurrence. As poorly articulated and erroneous as this perspective might be, transitional justice is essential.

Thus, the popular wartime radio jingle, “the unity of Nigeria is a task that must be accomplished,” is perhaps riddled with moral bankruptcy, which to date haunts the true unity of Nigeria. For instance, the evolution of true federalism and similar national questions that evoke a feeling of marginalization among the southeastern states and the minority oil-bearing ethnic regions of the Niger Delta often connect to the quest for an interrogation of the plausibility and genuine quest of the Nigeria project.

However, the memory and image of the war, however horrific, also evokes an image of heroism despite the defeat of Biafra. Its leader, Dim Emeka Ojukwu, remained tirelessly willing to recount with astounding accuracy the dire incidents and the unapologetic stance of Biafra in waging what he termed an “avoidable war.” Thus, the image of the civil war remained the dominant ethos of interaction and a strong unifying factor among Biafrans, whose alleged claim to unjust treatment by the federal side remains less addressed in policy and social debates.

Rather often seen as “villains” conquered during the war or what the Hausa termed *Nyamiri*—a derogatory remark describing the Igbo as vagrants begging for water at the outset of the war (*Nyem mmiri* means “give me water” in Igbo). This is often articulated and debated in contemporary circles linked to the civil war. Such representation is often fractured by the search for a scholarship devoid of bias and nepotism on account of the civil war. Thus, several scholars argue that accurate accounts of the civil war remain contestable, as most narratives appear to contradict each other and are riddled with prejudice.⁵⁶

The point this article has been making is that after more than five decades of popular expectation that post-civil war Nigeria will remedy the palpable causes of the war and effectively reintegrate the “secessionist Biafra”—and, in particular, provide restitution for innocent children decimated by obnoxious policies—a number of trends suggest the contrary and point out that some of the salient issues remained unaddressed, leaving behind legacies of illiberal memory and trauma.

The gloomy illiberal wartime memory evokes disenchantment, resulting in an incendiary resurgence of agitation by a section of the younger generation of the defunct Biafra since the return to democracy in Nigeria in the late 1990s. Such memories have stimulated curiosity about distributive justice, equity, and fairness. Several works in post-civil war Igbo deploy the term “marginalization” to explain

⁵⁶ Amadi, Allen, and Mai-Bornu, “Democracy, Separatist Agitation and Militarised State Response in South East Nigeria.”

patterns of internal decay, deprivation, and underdevelopment in the region that belonged to Biafra. The rehabilitation, reintegration, and reconstruction promised in the aftermath of the war have been ineffectual despite the widely claimed “no victor, no vanquished” postwar mantra and moral socioeconomic policy.

Post-civil war reintegration of the Igbo has been an issue in the many decades since the civil war. This perennial concern is chronicled in a recent seminal study in which the structure and patterns of political appointments and heads of civil service, ministries, departments, and agencies pointed to the marginalization of the Igbo.⁵⁷ In all, the present separatist agitation of the IPOB and ongoing trial of its leader, Kanu, are key issues that suggest memory and trauma; even more so, however, they suggest a new direction and attention to resolving post-civil war agitation in eastern Nigeria.

⁵⁷ Amadi, Allen, and Mai-Bornu, “Democracy, Separatist Agitation and Militarised State Response in South East Nigeria.”