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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**DOUBLE TRAGEDY: THE MBEMBE AND BORDER COMMUNITIES DURING THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR.**

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**Abstract**

Since 1970, many contributions in the form of reminiscence, biographies and books by politicians, military officers and civil servants have been written on the Nigerian civil war. These writers were either participants in the war front, observers, or held critical positions in Nigeria during the civil war era. These works have shed light on the events preceding the civil war, especially the two military coups, problems of military relationship, organization and leadership. Mention must also be made of the contributions from literary collection on the war. These works are mainly perspectives from the top and ignore the effect of the war on the majority of the people. What happened to ordinary people in border communities who found themselves plunged into a war they did not bargain for? This paper attempts to fill this gap with 'real stories and experiences' of ordinary people in three Mbembe communities in south – eastern Nigeria. They found themselves in wars within the civil war with other border communities. The primary aim of these wars having no bearing with those formulated by the major adversaries of the civil war. The paper concludes that the experiences and scars of the war time betrayal by border communities have not helped to foster inter group relations in post civil war era.

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**Introduction:-**

The name "Mbembe" is given to a number of communities 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, Ikom Local Government Area. Traditionally these communities 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" communities they have adopted the term in those contexts in which they wish to express a sense of unity among themselves.

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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 Ofumbonga (5,499) (Population Bulletin, 1985). Okum population here does not include the Okum in Akam. Among Adun, Okum and Osopong, diverse elements have come to settle and these various elements have been so fused that within one community it is possible to see a common pattern among the villages. This is not so among the Ofumbonga which include diverse elements of various languages as will be demonstrated with the case of Isobor.

All the people of these communities 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 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 debunks the claim by Eastern Nigeria Consultative Assembly that minorities within Eastern Region supported Biafra Republic (David Omena, June, 2013). When the war broke out, the Mbembe thought that the war was going to affect them in no more ways than it was affecting the Biafra nation as a collective entity. They did not envisage that theirs will be a double tragedy, that of fighting a war (communal) within the war (civil war). In this context, the civil war was used as an immediate cause to cover up for remote causes of inter-communal conflicts which had existed long before 1967. This was the tragic experience of the Mbembe communities as their neighbours used the war situation, especially their access to the Nigerian soldiers (vandals) to settle long standing scores by reporting them as Biafran (rebel) supporters. This paper represents the perception of most people in the grass roots which did not fit into official policies and books written over time on the war. Forthwith, vandals are used to refer to the Nigerian soldiers and rebels for the Biafra troops as they were called during the war.

To understand this situation, one needs to appreciate the importance of 'land' to these traditional communities whose economic life is tied to the land, and farming its most pervasive/viable occupation. Land ownership has played a crucial role in determining relationships over the years in these communities. One is readily struck by the vast amount of simple/empty land. But if a great deal of land is physically unoccupied, hardly any at all is unclaimed since chiefdoms cover the greater part of the area and their boundaries are normally well defined and contiguous in spite of land rotation. The importance of land as a major factor determining relations has been summed up by Robin Palmer:

Losing land... means losing the graves of one's father and the home of one's childhood; the sense of community, of the ordered pattern of nature, of the continuity and meaning of life, are destroyed. When people lose their land, there can only be deep and bitter resentment (1977:34).

Thus the paper will demonstrate the importance of land to the economies of these people and the extent individuals/communities went during the civil war to retain their land and acquire more from their neighbours.

### **Akam vs Okuni/Okangha**

Geographically, Akam is located in Ikom Local Government Area, but linguistically, it is 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 by these two other communities and their languages are mutually unintelligible. By 1963, 2409 inhabitants lived in the three wards - Ogbebet, Igbadung and Ovon that make up Akam (Population Bulletin, 1985:47). The land conflict between Akam and Okuni started between 1918-1922 and by 1938 Okuni people had sued the Akam people to court. The case was settled in the West Africa Court of Appeal (WACA) in Accra, Ghana in favour of the Akam people (WACA Papers 1940). On their part, the Akam people lay claim to settling in the area between 1680 and 1700 along with the Yala - Nkum (Talbot, 1926:227). Their closest neighbours at that time were the Ekpokpa people (an Ofutop group). At this time, their present immediate neighbours to the southwest- the Okangha people were still at Ata-Ata (Amin-Amin) (Council of Chiefs; May 2013) while the Okuni people were still with their Yakurr neighbours at Onughi, where they got the chant - 'Okuni eburutu, Yakurr (Ugep) eburutu' (Council of Chiefs: May 2013). Ubi Abam (2004:42) asserts that Okuni and Yakurr were staying together at Onughi. In his own account, Fellows (NAE, 1934)

also wrote of Okuni wandering towards the coast for a considerable time before they finally settled in their present location around C. 1780.

The events that culminated in the 1959 political campaigns and elections saw Akam become participants in National Council of Nigerian Citizens in which they gained a stronghold. The federal candidate for Ikom constituency, Mr Phillip Ejukwa was an Akam indigene and he won the elections (Ejukwa 1986:55). The events that followed after independence in 1960 up to 1966 need not delay us here because they have been the subject of many studies. What is important is that the Akam people were aware of the massacres of Ibos in the north, the coups and counter coups, the general resentment of the Ibos of a country in which they were not safe and the culmination in the declaration of the sovereign state of Biafra and the subsequent declaration of war by the federal government on Biafra.

Like many other communities in Biafra, the first military troop to register its presence in Akam around September of 1967 was the rebel soldiers. The assertion that "the Akam people were disposed toward Biafra soldiers and consequently used them to harass Okuni community, which caused the loss of some lives in the process" (Inah: 2012:87-88) has been debunked by Chief Ekperebi (May, 2013). He argues that the attacked on the rebels by the Okuni people in the course of their intrusion into the Olulumo clan in a farmstead known as *Obioko* caused the rebels to unleash violence on the Olulumo clan, in general. By early 1968, the rebels had settled down in Okuni and Okangha which had more hospitable accommodation and built a dispensary in Okangha Nkpani. (Council of Chiefs; May 2013). Thus, apart from this initial setback, Akam people recall the history of the whole clan relationship with the rebels as friendly.

On February 10<sup>th</sup> 1968, the vandals entered Olulumo clan from the Cameroon axis (Chief Ekperebi; May 2013); the Olulumo clan welcomed the vandals as the rebels retreated. The vandals called the clan together the next day and declared their mission. They all marched out in a file with palm fronds chanting 'ONE NIGERIA'. When they got to the field the commandant addressed them stating that: "We are Nigerian army, the owners of the land and we stand for one Nigeria. We have come to save you. are there any Biafra here? Bring them out if not we will kill you. We said no and they told us we are secured"(Okim Arong, May 2013).

But unknown to the Akam people, the other two communities chose to host the vandals 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 issue that the court had refused to settle in their favour over the years. Inah (2012:87) has also mentioned land and political issues as reasons for the betrayal of Akam by the Okuni people. As a linguistically different community from her neighbours, the Okuni and Okangha went ahead to report to the vandals that Mr Phillip Ejukwa from Akam and the NCNC candidates for Ikom, Mr. James Ogo, Mr. Leo Arong and Mr. Clement Ebi had incited Akam people to join the rebels. They also claimed that Madam Iya Agbor Egbebiri, a woman leader and a traditional healer had aided the rebels with fortifications for the war (Chief Ekperebi, May 2013).

Consequently, Chief Awuri okey of Ogbebit ward, Chief Sampson Ayang of Ovon-Ovat ward and Chief Arong Nhep of Igbadug ward were invited for questioning. The invitation was sent through Ofuka Njom and Alobi Ndoma both of them hunters from Okuni (Council of Chiefs; May 2013). The chiefs denied the allegations, but they were asked by the vandals to invite all Akam sons and daughters from the farmstead and the plantations to return to the village for a general clean up on the 19<sup>th</sup> February which will lead to their final liberation by the vandals.

Chief Ekperebi has argued in defense of the Akam sons invited for questioning that since Phillip Ejukwa was an NCNC candidate, it was natural that he should tow the line of the rebels. He argued further that the rebels had long settled in the area before the vandals and nobody could defy them not with the memory of the violence unleashed by the rebels on the Olulumo clan still fresh in their minds. He asserted further that "after all Lt. Col. S. M. O. Akpet in the rebel high command, charged with the operation of recapturing Ikom from the vandals and stationed at Obubra was an Okuni son, why was Akam the only community singled out as Biafra supporters?" (May 2013).

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 1968 at about 10 am, the vandals led by Ofem Nyambi from Okuni advanced from Okuni and Okangha simultaneously, towards Akam. Chief Awuri Okey of Ogbebit ward out of fear, told the vandals that his ward were Nigerians. To the vandals this meant that the other two wards were Biafrans, hence they became the target as the vandals unleashed their venom on innocent and defenseless civilians they were supposed to protect. With this commotion most of the people escaped back to the plantation as others found their way to their Akam brothers in Obubra. Most of them were waylaid by the Okuni and Okangha men, beaten up and taken to Ikom as

prisoners, and the women raped. The first victim to be shot was Obia Edim, thirty other men were gunned down (Adekpe, 1990:13-17).

With the fleeing of Akam indigenes, Okuni and Okangha people organized themselves into bands of vandals entered Akam, burning and pulling down permanent buildings and ravaging the yam barns (Inah, 2012). This destruction targeted with precision at only Akam area could not have been committed by the vandals who did not know the yam barns and farmsteads of the Akam. The land was occupied by the remaining Olulumo clan and declared as the location for the central market of Olulumo clan. Ekpokpa took over Tuesday which was originally Akam market day (Council of Chiefs; May 2013).

For the likes of Chief Ekperebi who watched his father shot down by the vandals, ran away to Apiapum and joined the rebel army in an attempt “to avenge my father’s death” (Chief Ekperebi, May 2013). After the war, he came back to take care of his eight siblings, his father’s six widows and twelve other dependants. This was the case with all other able bodied men who died and left behind children, wives and dependants (Adekpe, 1990:13).

The vandals must have had confidence in the ability of Okuni and Okangha communities to protect the clan from pro Biafra forces since unlike other communities they did not leave some vandal to check the rebels recouping. Chief Njar Okey (May 2013) recalls that most of the ladies picked up that day ran back to the plantations informing them that there were let lose as the vandals advanced towards Ofutop area. These ladies might have constituted a burden or a distraction for the unknown journey ahead.

At this point Mr. Philip E. Egbun a civil servant working in Ikom and other Akam sons resident in Ikom took steps to stop the hostilities and return their people back to their land. They took their case to Winifred Inah the new District Officer (DO) sent to Ikom (Council of Chiefs; May 2013; Inah, 2012:84-90). The DO called on Chief Ogaji Orem, the clan head of Olulumo clan at that time to see that peace returned to his clan. But this was not to be since three months later another incident was to threaten the lives of the Akam remnants. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of April a band of armed Ofutop men came to Okuni demanding the remnant of Akam people who were taking refuge in Okuni. Knowing that no Akam son could take refuge in Okuni, the remnants who lingered around Akam escaped for their lives and reported the threat on their lives in a letter titled “Save Us Now or We Perish” to the DO the next day, April 20<sup>th</sup> 1968. The letter went further to challenge

Chief Ogaji Orem and Okpokam representing Okuni and Okangha respectively that the events of February 20<sup>th</sup> in which 32 Akam indigenes were killed because they were accused of supporting the rebels, and their constant reminder that Akam was the home of the dead and Cross River their common grave because of the February deaths which were thrown in the river was still fresh in their minds. What then was to be done to the Okuni people who had an officer, Lt. Col. S.M.O.Akpet in the rebel high command, stationed in Obubra, charged with a mandate to lead the operation that will recover Ikom from the federal troops? Or is it the Okangha case where Okpokams two sons Dr. Simeon and Joseph are top rebel officers. (Adekpe, 1990: 5-9).

Before the war ended in 1970, the Akam were to send another letter with the caption “Save Us From Further Molestation” to the DO on September 25<sup>th</sup> 1969. The letter showed that the hunt for Akam indigenes especially prominent ones was still on as some of Akam sons were arrested on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1969 (Adekpe, 1990:10-12) by the vandals on the allegation that they were rebel soldiers. Their appeals to the sergeant major that they had never been soldiers fell on deaf ears. They were stripped, beaten and remanded in police custody for two days. Winifred Inah has mentioned how he had heard about some persons in detention and he had to visit the Divisional Police Headquarters to see them. He calls that:

I was shocked to see more than thirty detainees crowded there, and all scantily dressed. I found out later that all except three were indigenes of Akam village. Reports allegedly made by Okuni people led to their arrest and detention. I recognized only one detainee among them... Mr Leo Arong. He and the others were put at ease with the assurance I gave that they were not going to wait for long before regaining their freedom. (Inah, 2012:88).

On further investigation, they were discovered to be civilians and Mr Okim Basse who gave the false information was arrested and charged to court, where he was subsequently convicted. After these events, the DO made sure that the Akam returned to their settlement. The war ended a few months after their return.

**Onyan Okpon vs Okosara/Abaragba**

Onyan Okpon with a population of 3,660 as at 1963 (Population Bulletin, 1985:88) represents different things to the four contending parties – rebels; Okosora who share boundary with Onyan; the vandals and lastly the Mbembe people. The war was declared in July 1967 and by September of the same year, the rebels had assessed Onyan Okpon through Ikom River using speed boats. Chief Federick Agbor who was in his thirties, and married to his first wife before the war remembers their first encounter with soldiers:

We woke up 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 (Chief Federick Agbor, May 2013).

With this information, the rebels under the leadership of colonel Uche, informed the chiefs that they had decided to settle in Onyan Okpon and use it as a sub-headquarters for their battalion (Chief Frederick Agbor, May 2013). To the rebels, Onyan Okpon occupied this position firstly as it was in the interior hence not easily accessible it was hoped, especially to the vandals who were advancing. Secondly and most importantly, the rebels saw Onyan Okpon as central to their Ikom and Obubra operations. From here, the rebels hoped to access and control both areas (Ohorodo Bob Mbina; Chief Agbor; May 2013). As a sub-headquarters, they established a dispensary, and recruited rekey boys as well as soldiers which were sent for training in Apiapum. They asked for cooks and attendants and they were given.

One of the most dramatic recruitment stories is that of Ohorodo Bob Mbina. Originally from Apiapum he had to go and live with his uncle in Onyan Okpon after the death of his father. It was here, at the age of about 13 that the war met him. He recalls that life was normal as people went about their normal activities irrespective of the presence of the rebels. He and his cousin usually sold their uncles palm wine. On this fateful day, his uncle sent him alone to sell palm wine and on his way back home from the farm road which was along Onyan Orangha, the next village to Onyan Okpon, he ran into the rebels. This encounter with the rebels culminated in his recruitment as a soldier in the Biafra army at age 14. He recalls:

As he ran into them, a young lady was advancing towards them to fetch water in the river. They asked him whether he knew the lady and if she was married. He responded by giving her name as Magdalene and confirming her married. But when Magdalene got there, she said she was not yet married (Ohorodo Bob Mbina, May, 2013).

When asked why he lied about the lady's status, he said that he did not lie; rather he thought the girl married since she was always discussed in connection with a guy who was always in her company. In his childish mind, he understood it as married. The rebels then seized his palm wine, beat him and said to him "you this boy, you can be bad Biafra" (May 2013). This beating in his word "created within me a determination to be a soldier so that I could beat other people too" (May, 2013).

Two weeks later, when one of the superior officers came for inspection, he went and asked him if a boy of his age could not be recruited into the army. The superior officer handed him over to colonel Rowland who he kept visiting as his big friend. A month later, colonel Rowland informed him of admissions into the military school. Two days later, he went out with his cousin to sell palm wine, and ran into colonel Rowland who showed him the speed boat that had come to drop supplies and could pick him up for the recruitment, since they did not know when next the speed boat will bring supplies. "I dropped my wine with my cousin, told him to inform his father that I had left for the military and that I joined the speed boat. I was taken through Ikom, to Umuahia and then Okigwe." (Ohorodo Bob Mbina, May, 2013). It was at Okigwe he got recruited and sent to school of infantry for only two weeks at Orlu where he was trained in camouflage and guerrilla tactics. He remembers being recruited with one John Koromah from Sierra Leone.

When asked why his training was so short, and if it had anything to do with the rebels' limited manpower for the war? He retorted "the war became so rough that the school had to close down, the same day that Nkalagu fell to the vandals." (Ohorodo Mbina; May 2013). With the closer, he became a regular soldier in 55 brigades, under captain Iheanacho and it was at Umuahia he gave him the name of Captain Zoro or Black Zoro.

Another important paramilitary operation although voluntary that was assigned to young boys by the rebels was that of raking/combing. This meant searching the bushes for saboteurs but most importantly to could the advancing vandals. Chief Theophilus Ngbongha joined the rebels as a “rakey boy” when he was eleven years old “Our job was to go spying for any trace of the vandals. I was chosen to rake Ekpokpa, Ekosa, Itako and other areas around Ikom since i knew much of the area as my mother was from this area. I was also the one who saw the vandals advancing towards Okosara and went back to Onyan Okpon to alert the rebels” (Chief theophilus Ngbongha; May, 2013).

Madam Mary Agbor and Njan Agwu were 30 and 28 years old respectively, and both recall their services in the rebel camp as dispensary attendants. They had the privilege of being trained to treat and take care of wounded rebels. They learnt so much that Njan wished the war had ended on the rebel side. His reason being that, he would have been absorbed into the mainstream of the health ministry.

Fidelis Ogaji on the other hand was 24 years when the rebels settled in Onyan Okpon and he was not happy with the treatment the rebels mated on them the young boys as militias. He was angry with the rebels because “they treated us like boy-boy” (Fidelis Ogaji; May 2013). When asked to explain further he said that they were treated roughly, as they had to act as guides, carry the rebel troops war equipment, some very heavy, to other communities or where ever they wanted them to. He remembered challenging one of the rebels that “ I will be like you one day” (Fidelis Ogaji; May 2013) because he detested the menial jobs assigned to him. He coped with this treatment because “the rebels took special interest in me and made sure I reported for duty whenever they needed me” (Fidelis Ogaji; May 2013). He coped with this treatment from September 1967 when the rebels settled in Onyan Okpon to the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 1968 when he was able to escape to Ugep and successfully got recruited as a soldier for the vandals.

The generality of the people remembered that they continued to live their normal lives never believing that the war will ever get to them especially as Biafra news reached them in Mbembe language. The rebels lived with the people as one big family until the vandals entered Onyan Okpon. Madam Alice Agwu and Madam Felicia Ovat are best friends and age mates. They were 16 years at the time the rebels 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 rebels showed up. She recalls that “before the war come reach us, Biafra don come stay for here first, na dem tell us say war don start and e fit reach us anytime” (Madam Felicia Ovat; May 2013). Madam Felicia also thinks that the rebels spent close to eight months in the community before the vandals showed up. Her reasons eing that less than two months after the rebels came and settled in, she got married to Emeka Okena a rebel soldier with two strips. She was emphatic about the fact that she was not forced to marry, rather when she was chosen as one of the girls to tend to their needs, they met in the primary school when she resumed for work, fell in love and decided to marry him in spite of the war. His boss, colonel Uche stood in as his father as they looked forward to the end of the war so that she could meet his people.

Madam Alice on the other hand did not get married to any rebel. She rather kept herself busy and doubled as a dispensary attendant when wounded cases were brought back for treatment. The food cooked for the rebels was supplied mostly by the rebels and these foodstuffs were got from plundering Ofutop communities farms, especially the neighboring Okosara farmlands. She mentioned that they lived with the rebels as one big family and there was no problem until the vandals showed up.

As the vandals advanced towards Ikom from the Cameroon area, an order came for captain Zoro and others to cross to Obubra. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of February 1968, the vandals entered Nsofang. It must have been from around here that they advanced to Olulumo clan on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February, and 10 days later, they assisted the Okuni and Okanga communities to wreck havoc on the Akam people. 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 sell them out to the vandals as supporters of Biafra because the rebels had continuously plundered their farms.

Like the rebels, Onyan Okpon was important in the war strategy of the vandals since it was here that the vandals shared themselves into three sections for a total overrun and subsequent liberation of Obubra. The first group moved eastward from Onyan Okpon towards Ofombongha axis, while the second group moved westward towards Iyamoyong, Apiapum and Adun axis (Ohorodo Bob, May, 2013). The third group moved into Onyan Okpon to repeat what they had done in Akam. The Okosara people showed the vandals the way into Onyan Okpon but failed to inform them that unlike Akam, they were going to meet with formidable resistance as the community played host

to a rebel garrison. If not how could the vandals have underrated the challenges they were to face in Onyan Okpon and reduced the fighting force? Thus 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 farm had deserted the place, and the rebels had taken cover. Their first victim according to Ohorodo Bob was a food vendor who sold food to the community including the rebels and was nicknamed 'Mama Biafra'. She seemed to have been ignorant of events going on for as soon as the vandals met her, they asked her where everybody was. She said they had gone to farm. When asked her name, she said Mama Biafra and immediately, she was shot dead (Ohorodo Bob Mbina; May 2013).

Young Captain Zoro who had been monitoring the vandals hurriedly retreated from Onyan Okpon to Apiapum. A day later, the rebels' armour tank arrived in Apiapum and Captain Zoro was asked to escort it to Onyan Okpon. The armour tank was made from parts of a caterpillar vehicle. It was mounted with 10 Heavy Machine Guns (HMG) at each side of the amour tank, 2 at the back and 2 in front and it carried 14 rebels.

We entered Onyan Okpon through Onyan Orangha, This was so because we were aware of the vandals' presence in Onyan Okpon. I was asked to come down and take cover, it was from my vantage position, I watched the war progressed for three days and two nights (Ohorodo Bob Mbina; May, 2013).

The appearance of the armour tank in such an interior place was a great shock to the vandals and it destabilized them. The rebels on their own part, reinforced and for two days, the war tide was in their favour as the vandals died in their hundreds. Ohorodo Mbina thinks that apart from Afikpo there was a great loss of lives on the part of the vandals, the next place with such a record was in Onyan Okpon, but because of its unknown status people are not aware. It was towards the evening of the third day that a vandal successfully fired a grenade from a tall tree and destroyed the fuel tank while 12 out of the 14 people inside the armour tank successfully came out unhurt. With the destruction of the amour tank, the rebels were forced to retreat and for fear of being surrounded by the vandals, they destroyed the bridge, that linked Onyan Okpon to Ikom – Calabar high way through Ohana and rendered Onyan Okpon and Onyan Orangha landlocked (Chief Ngbongha, May, 2013). This singular act by the rebels stands as the only set back in their relationship with the Onyan Okpon people.

The clan head, Ovar Ngbongha who did not run away with his subjects was asked by the surviving vandals to send for the civilians to return back as Onyan Okpon had been liberated. The people returned and met the whole village destroyed and a lot of dead soldiers especially vandals. They spent the next day cleaning up the village after burying the dead.

For Mbembe communities, Onyan Okpon is significant for two reasons. Firstly, this was where the vandals paid for the lives of the innocent Mbembe souls they killed when they took sides with their neighbours against them. Secondly and most importantly, one of the lessons of the civil war remains the ingenuity of the Biafra engineers to manufacture an amour tank without foreign help in such an uncondusive environment like war situation. Almost all informants were quick to mention the amour tank in Onyan Okpon and wished that the federal government could have taken steps after the war to perfect this creativity, bearing in mind that it has been almost 45 years since that tank was burnt by the vandals but it is still recognizable as an amour tank. Chief Ekperebi commenting on the amour tank has aptly pointed out that: "Nigeria will not take up anything initiated by Biafra, even if it will help us develop. That is why we are the way we are because the people who can cause a technological revolution are marginalized." (Chief Ekperebi, May, 2013).

With the appearance of the vandals in Onyan Okpon, peoples' lives took different turn. Madam Alice chose to retreat with the rebels when the vandals showed up in 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 by her husband to Apiapum from where they crossed the river to Ikwo in present day Ebonyi State with other rebels dislodged in Onyan Okpon. At Ikwo, he had to leave her there and join others in the war front. He never came back with 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, 1971 she and her friend madam Alice ran into each other at Afikpo and together they returned home. She had to re-marry and start a new life since she did not have any child with Emeka.

The vandals were known to leave a portion of their army in any liberated place to checkmate the rebels in case of a planned return. For the people of Onyan Okpon, relationship with the vandals was not as smooth as that of the

rebels. Their daily actions reminded them that they were the occupational army and most people interviewed think that they suffered because they were considered by the vandals as full fledged Biafrans. In their view, this was why they allowed the rebels gained a foothold to the point of making Onyan Okpon a sub-headquarters. But did the people of Onyan have what it took to resist the rebels? One cannot forget the reprisal attack suffered by Olulumo clan in the hands of the rebels when the Okuni attempted to resist their advance into the clan. This must have spread to other communities as a warning against resisting the rebels.

The people remember that they lived in constant fear. Chief Frederick recalls how after the liberation of Onyan Okpon, many males who had been recruited into the rebel army returned, while others came to stay there awaiting the liberation of their communities. But unfortunately for them, most of them were to fall into the hands of the vandals. This was so since the vandals formed the habit of inspecting the soles of unsuspecting males for any trace of boot marks. Any found with these marks was killed. When asked how this was possible, Chief Frederick said "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" (May, 2013). These men who relocated came back after the war since the marked soles was another ploy used by the vandals to kill young males who could fly the Biafra flag anytime. Women were not left out of these traumatic experiences as their sex exposed them to severe abuse from the hands of the vandals. They had to find different ways to survive. Madam Mary Awudu who was 16 years would have wished she had made better choices. She stated that: the Biafra no force us to do anything. Anything they want, them go ask the chief, and the chief go tell the community people to arrange for them. But, not so with the army (vandals). They force everything- our food, fowl, goats and women. The ones wey don marry and the ones wey never marry (Madam Mary Awudu; May, 2013).

In her case, she avoided the rebels and refused to assist them in anyway, even when she was asked to either cook or work in the dispensary. She avoided contact with the rebels until the vandals bombarded Onyan Okpon and 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 vandals left behind and this was the beginning of her ordeal. In less than one week that they returned, Colonel Nuhu abducted her, forced her into marriage and immediately left with her to Enugu, and not too long, he was reposted to Minna. The marriage produced four daughters but in spite of this madam Mary still decided to come back home because she felt like a war booty. She had to report her husband to his boss to allow her return home since "e no bin gree make I come see my people and e no won come pay my bride price." She discovered also that Colonel Nuhu had been married to two women long before the war. Colonel Nuhu's boss granted her wishes and they shared the children equally. She returned home with her two daughters although one is now late, and other married and living with the husband outside Onyan. Madam Mary Awudu remarried and had six other kids. But since she left Minna, Colonel Nuhu had visited twice when he had to give out his daughters in marriage.

Madam Catherine's case was worse than madam Mary's since at least her people knew her captor, knew she was alive even though he did not pay her bride price. After the liberation of Onyan Okpon and its environs, Madam Catherine went to sell farm products in Onyan Orangha market day as markets had resumed and was abducted by the vandals and taken to Edo 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. It means that she was abducted 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. It was in Akwangha for the first time since her abduction she felt a little bit at home. Here she met another lady from ofonopan (Ofombongha Number Four) who was also abducted from Ofombongha No. 4 and forced to marry a certain Bullama who treated her badly because of her inability to give him children. This lady's predicament filtered into the ears of Bullama's boss and he sent for her. The boss asked her if she was legally married to Bullama? She responded in the negative 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 boss made the arrangements but before she left, "I gave her a picture of mine and some names of people to forward the picture to either during Onyan Okpon or Onyan Orangha market day respectively" (Madam Catherine; May, 2013).

When she did not get any feedback she assumed that the picture was never delivered. By 1972, her husband was posted to Lafia. One day, she was just at home when she heard a knock on the door. She opened the door and was shocked to see her brother, sister and uncle. She said she suddenly felt free and her joy knew no bounds. They hugged, wept and then sat down as they relayed the details of: how they looked for me when I did not return from the market. They were told of how the vandals showed up in the market and picked up girls. When I still didn't

return when others did, they concluded I had been killed. When my picture reached them last year, everybody was filled with joy and the community came together to raise money to send my family to bring me back home. They told me of how they went to Akwangha and where informed of our transfer to Lafia (Madam Catherine; May, 2013).

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 the Ofonokpon woman went straight to her husband's boss and reported her predicament. The boss intervened in the matter, 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 me go empty handed. But his boss was kind enough to take care of their transport back home by giving her his one month salary in advance. She came back home settled down, got married and had six children. It is interesting to note that Madam Catherine did not have any child for Usman Buba. When asked why, she just went sober and said "woman wey no happy, no fit give pickin place to grow" (Madam Catherine; May, 2013). This, she explains was not her husband's fault since he loved her. But she was just unsettled with the whole process that resulted in the marriage. 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. Evil here probably has to do with children outside wedlock.

### **Ofombongha vs Ajin, Nta Nselle**

Like Akam and Onyan Okpon before it, Ofombongha Number Four did not have good pre-war relations with their neighbours- the Ajin Nta Nselle communities (Chief Oyira Ogar, June, 2013). The issue at stake was land. But like other Mbembe communities, the rebels came first and settled. This was their first contact with an army but not with the Igbos' who had been living with them. The declaration of Biafra brought great fear to the people of Ofombongha. Elder David Omena recalls that:

We were not happy about being in Biafra since we know how selfish the Ibo men can be. They were living among us and they were already beginning to take our lands. So the fear of a Biafra country with the Ibo in the majority and we in the minority meant that we would become slaves to them. (Elder David Omena, June, 2013).

The quote represents the general fear that gripped the community with the declaration of Mbembe as part of Biafra. But when the rebel troops entered the community, the people could do nothing other than welcome them since they were armed, and the community had been called together and informed that they came for peace except the community thought otherwise.

Elder Omena who was 27 years old at the beginning of the war said he was a rakey boy combing the Ikom axis from the Nta-Nselle area for the vandals advance towards his community. He also remembers the creation of a civil defense which was not mentioned in Akam and Onyan Okpon. The civil defense which is like today's vigilante was created by the rebels to guard the town. They were mostly elderly people who could not go raking for saboteurs and the vandals.

Ofombongha Number Four was unique to Mbembe communities because their son Ayah Obongha who was a member of the Zikist movement along with Michael Okpara (Chief Ogar, June, 2013), later joined the Biafra radio and kept the Mbembe listeners abreast with the issues on the new country and especially the rebels advance with the war. The radio it has often been mentioned was the most powerful mobilization and propaganda tool efficiently used by the Biafran government. The importance of the radio during the war period is mentioned by the Mbembe informants since it was one of the languages spoken at specific times of the day, with update on the war. As long as Ayah Obongha came on air, it gave the people a sense of belonging with the Biafran cause. One therefore wonders why the people did not prepare for war since the vandals appearance kept taking them unawares. The reason must have been to keep their loyalty, since for the Mbembe listeners, Ayah made them understand that the rebels were winning the war so the vandals advance came as a shock to them. But at this point one could not have expected more details from a broadcaster who was stationed in a place and informed the listeners' details that were communicated to him.

This advantage of having access to information in Mbembe as their son was one of the crew in Biafra radio was to be Ofombongha Number Four's greatest undoing. As their neighbours the Nta group was to sell them out to the vandals as part of Biafra for two reasons. Firstly, like their Okuni, Okangha and Okosara before them, they hoped to

settle their land issues ones and for all. Secondly, the rebels had plundered their farms, so they mentioned Ayah Obongha to show the vandals that Ofombongha Number Four was supporting the rebels.

On the night of 11<sup>th</sup> March 1968, the vandals entered Ofombongha Number Four led by men from Nta group. Every one ran to their plantations. Only Chief Okpa the village head stayed back. He came out and surrendered himself as a Nigerian loyalist. It was chief Okpa that was to inform the community later that it was not the vandals that burnt the community down, and plundered their yam barns and farms but rather the Nta guides that led the vandals into the village. He even told them that the vandals were angry with them and rebuked them. But since 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 Omena, June, 2013).

By mid day on the 12<sup>th</sup> March, Chief Oyama was asked to call the people from the plantations to return to the community. On the 13<sup>th</sup>, the people returned back 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 vandals asked them after the broadcaster and rebels 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 rebels had retreated when the vandals entered the village.

Ofombongha Number Four was liberated and some vandals were left behind to check mate the rebels. But the relationship with the vandals was full of fear, as the people were constantly threatened. It was in Ofombongha Number Four that mention was made of vandals 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 – e don red' became the general signal in the community to alert young girls that the vandals were approaching. When this chant was heard from any area of the village, young girls were to run into the bushes since most times, the vandals could burst into homes of unexpected families and desecrate young girls who resisted, take others away and silence any resistance with the gun.

To avoid these harassments on young girls, mothers had to adopt some form of disguise to make their girls less desirable to the vandals. Madam Fanny Okora who was 15 years old remembers how her mother rubbed her with leaves and lit a big fire which Fanny sat by. The vandals entered their house, saw her under the hot fire decided to come back on a later date. Two days later the mother took her and they relocated to their extended family in Apiapum. Comfort Mbina relayed how her mother told her that cam-wood was used all over the bodies of young girls, claiming that an epidemic which attacked only women had just hit the land. As strangers it was difficult for the vandals to detect the disguise since they came from different cultural and linguistic areas. This was a 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 Number Four. In her case, she left Ofombongha Number Four after the war because of the insecurity that young girls faced. She left for Ohana to stay with her sister. It was on the way she was abducted, forced to marry a northern soldier and taken to the north. The marriage produced a son who is now a medical doctor. Madam Grace returned in 1995 because her husband, who had retired from the army, became the chief of his village. At this point, it became difficult for her as a foreign wife to survive. Since her return the son has visited her twice (Madam Grace Enung, June, 2013).

### **ISOBO vs. OFOMANA /OGURUDE**

Isobo's original homeland was within the areas of the northeast Igbo present day Ebonyi State of Nigeria. Their initial migration according to Otu Ubi Abam can be credited to "the Aro organized aggression of the land grabbing northeast Igbo of Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo" (Abam, 2004:64). The Isobors were forced to migrate to the eastern bank of the Cross River. It was here that the Imabana who had a war with the north east Igbo village of Okpitu were sacked on the west bank. The Imabana crossed over the river to their present settlement in Abi Local Government Area where they conquered and sacked Isobo ethnicity. The Isobo on leaving split into two waves, with one group migrating northeast to Ofodua (Adun) and the other migrated southeast to Ugep and settled in a place called Nsobo as refugees.

It was only in 1923 that the Colonial Administration in Obubra decided to rehabilitate them to a place they could live together. Two settlements were found at the northeast of Ogurude on the western bank of the Cross River. The Ofodua refugees were resettled at Isobor, Itaka, and Ugep refugees at Isobor Biko Biko (Abam, 2004). This

relocation did not go down well with their immediate neighbours especially Ofomana and Ogurude who felt they should have been taken back to be with their kith and kin in Ezza, Izzi and Amagu and Ekpaomaka communities all in Ikwo area (Chief Irek, July 2013). Informants in Apiapum recall there were still remnants of Isobo in an area given to them which they called Ezemezo, and also in Izoda an area they occupied in Adun clan (Mrs Omom Irom, Ekari Isua, July 2013).

1960 ushered in independence and like other communities, Isobo people looked forward to settling down to attend to community development, especially as there seemed to have been relative peace as they carried on with educational and economic projects. But this was not to last long since they became the envy of their neighbours especially as a new comer to the area. This peace “was a veneer covering a thick smoke of hate.... The opportunity offered itself during the thirty months of genocidal blood bath that was the Nigerian civil war” (Ogwa, 2000:4).

Like other Mbembe communities, the tales of the war were like tales to the people since it seemed far off. But by 1968, the vandals’ advancement was becoming obvious as they were successfully occupying the south eastern areas, especially the non- Igbo areas under Biafra. The Igbo mostly the Item, Ohafia and Ariba living in Adun and Okum clans left for home for fear of what would happen if the vandals got to them. The Isobos in Ezemezo and Izoda had to leave too, but in their own case, where was home. Mr. Ogwa notes “that not even their neighbours whom they had lived and shared many things together... soften their fears. They were made to understand in no certain terms that they were not accepted and their Igbo brothers who had left for home” (Ogwa, 2000:4). But what did the Isobo expect their neighbours to do at such a time when it must have become news, the reaction of the vandals to the mention of the word Biafra as shown in the Akam, Onyan Okpon and Ofombongha Number Four cases, much more harbouring Igbos. Most informants in Apipum and Adun are apt to recall that long before the civil war, the Igbos in the area had made bold their plans to wipe out these original inhabitants and take over the land. So for them the civil war especially the fear of the vandals helped them do what they did not want to result in a fatal communal war (Chief Henry Orim Adam, July, 2013).

With the reprisals Mbembe communities suffered from the sell out by their neighbours, Johnson Ogwa has written passionately in his work that “the civil war was being made to look as if it was exclusively directed towards the Igbo speaking group of Nigeria And confirmed Colonel Adekunle - ‘Black Scorpion’ statement that it was the hunt for anything Igbo” (Ogwa, 2000:4) .

The Isobo’s joined their brothers at Otaka and Biko Biko where they were warmly received. On March 11<sup>th</sup> 1968, two bombs were dropped from a plane that passed through Isobor. In a lighter mood, some rebels remarked that “the eagle has dropped two eggs” (Johnson Ogwa; July, 2013). The bomb killed seven people and destroyed a section of Otaka. Isobo had finally started experiencing the war and with this development, a lot of people relocated their properties into the bushes assuming it was safer there. By mid April 1968, the rebels were forced to retreat from the Osopong area by the advance of the vandals and on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, the vandals set foot in Osopong and camped in Ogurude. Isobo joined other communities in the area in the reception for the vandals. But the three men sent to represent Isobo did not return back as they were seized and locked up at Ofomana. The motive behind the arrest was not clear but the three men were released and returned home three days later when a report finally reached the vandals that the three Isobo men sent to welcome them unbehalf of the community had been seized by Ofomana people.

When on Friday the 26<sup>th</sup> of April the vandals set foot in Isobo soil, many felt that their security was finally guaranteed so they brought back their belongings from the bush. This was a miscalculation as two days later, on Sunday the 28<sup>th</sup> the vandals assembled the people of Isobo who did not go to church or farm in the market square and started shooting then down. Johnson Oqwa who was about ten years old did not go to church but stayed back at home to look after the community meat which was in his family custody for drying. He recalls that

All of a sudden I heard gunshots from the market square and I saw the Chief advancing towards the square with palm fronds chanting ‘ONE NIGERIA’. On impulse I ran away from the scene of the shooting towards the road that led to Ikwo (Johnson Ogwa, July 2013).

Ogwa further explained that, from the square they proceeded to the houses of some wealthy Isobor men including Chukwu Awuku, broke in, ransacked the house and found Biafra currencies and turned to the chief and asked him if this was not the evidence that they were Biafra. Like every other community discussed it is worthy of mention here

that the preciseness of the vandals in knowing the homes of the wealthy is evident that the Ofomana and Ogurude neighbours were not innocent. This date has become known as Black Sunday in Isobor history and marked annually to remember the eighty-nine people shot down. The day is also remembered as the day when even the heavens wept with them since there was a heavy down pour after the killings. Isobor were once again displaced and became refugees, but this time into the waiting arms of their kith and kin in south west Ikwo- today Amagu community comprising Ndiofoke, Agaligu, Abina, Orona, Item, Ekwunekwune and Igbudu. But their nearest Igbo neighbours Echara, Inyimagu among others refuse to open their homes to them (Ogwa, 2000:6). The fear of the vandals was enough to make anyone or community catch cold, irrespective of whether or not the vandals target was your kith and kin.

Since the people had fled without food, they had to risk sneaking back to fetch food from the yam barns. It was in one of such trips that three persons- a man and two women from Otaka were captured by Ofonama people. The man was killed and the two women taken to Ugep where the vandals sub-station was located. It was the women that later gave the account of how they met their village in ashes with the Ogurude and Ofomana in charge. Isobor case here is similar with that of Akam were the vandals trusted the neighbouring communities enough to act as a check on the rebels.

Micheal Ideni Usang a leader of Otaka at that time made concerted efforts to get the women released. But rather than get the women released, he was advised to initiate a move to return Otaka and Biko Biko Isobos' to their home. Three months later, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July "the same vandals who put an end to the lives of some Isobo people also led the survivors back to their homes". Michael Ideni Usang summed up the tragedy of the war thus: it was a moment we became less than humans... we suffered incredible disasters. We went through intolerable humiliations and sustained unparalleled betrayals. We were in fact flung into the deepest abyss of grief. When I look back on those horrible days, I shudder in disbelief. We survived based on two things; God's unqualified mercy and our unqualified determination to survive (Ogwa ???/2000:9).

When the Isobo people returned, world humanitarian organizations like United Nations (UN), United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), World health Organization (WHO), Norwegian Church Agricultural Project (NORCAP), the Red Cross Society of Nigeria and the Presbyterian Church represented by Rural Improvement Mission at Echara Ikwo set to work to give back to them a worthy life. After the war, a Police station was built in Isobo Itaka in 1971, (Ogwa, 2000) as a measure towards checking the incessant harassment of the Isobos' and to help restore peace and order in the area.

### **Starting Again**

The Mbembe communities returned to their homes before the war finally ended. The loss of lives and property to rival neighbours aided by the vandals, and their inability to fight back meant that they had lost the war as Biafra's defeat was to translate to a double tragedy for them. As they returned to their communities through community labour and self efforts, these communities were able to reorganize their lives. 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 "No Victor, No Vanquish proclamation. But none of the Rs impacted on the lives of these Mbembe communities. Most informants recall that there was so much hunger in the post war years than during the war time. In Akam, Onyan Okpon and Ofombongha Number Four the people never heard of any kind of food relief. The Isobo seemed to have thrived better as they enjoyed the support from humanitarian agencies in their starting again, this included the food relief. The Isobo might have benefited from these because their Igbo kith and kin where there for them.

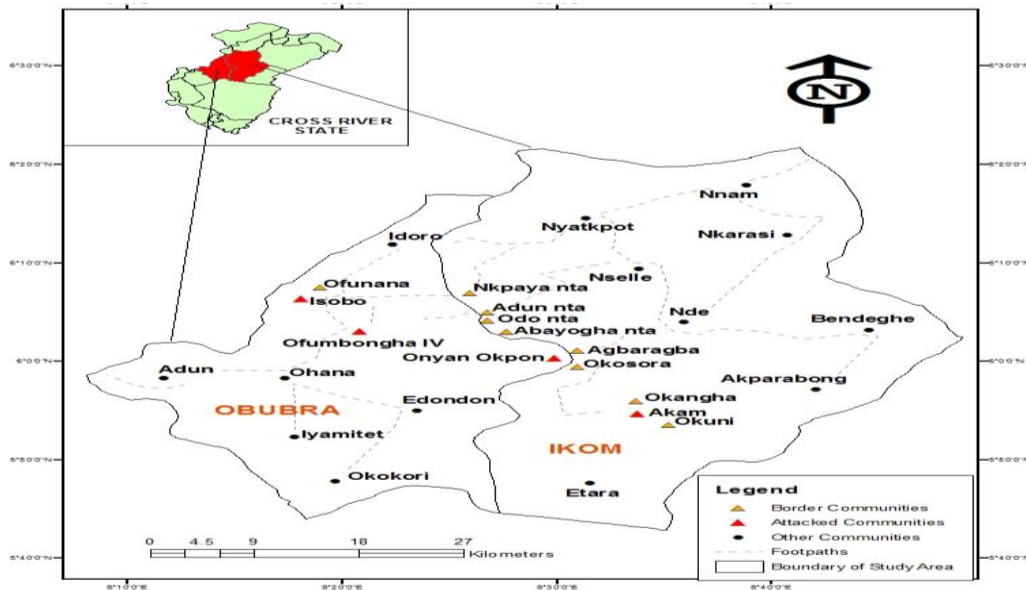
One of the post war reforms that all informants readily remember was the Federal Government's promise to return the sum of twenty pounds any depositor of Biafra pound in their custody. The knowledge of what was done to unarmed defenseless people by the vandals in these communities did not foster much hope that submitting their Biafra pounds will make them survive the Federal Government. They saw the policy as a trap so they rather chose to lose all and continue from where they had started, rather than exchange their lives which had survive the onslaught of the vandal for a paltry sum of twenty pounds.

It had been mentioned that the only set back in the relationship between the rebels and the Onyan community was the destruction of the bride, the only link to Calabar-Ikom highway. It was only in 1979, almost 10 years later that

Chief Frederick Agbor got the company he worked with to grade a road from Onyan Okpon to Ochon, from where they got linked to Calabar-Ikom high way again.

**Conclusion:-**

The paper has showed the experiences of ordinary people –men and women from Mbembe communities who suffered during the civil war, not because they were of any strategic importance to the vandals in their campaign to liberate the south eastern flank held by the rebels. Rather, they suffered because of the cravings for more land by their neighbours, even if this craving meant the destruction of other innocent people. Post civil war relations amongst the Mbembe and these border communities have not improved. Rather, the quest for land has become more intense and conflicts more rampant especially with population increase. But more worrisome has been the reliance on economic strength and political power by their neighbours to resolve these lingering land issues.



Appendix 2:-Ikom LGAs Showing the Study Areas



Plate 1:-Biafra Armoured Tank at Onyan Okpon, 1968- 2013

**Plate 2:-**14 Years old Captain Zoro of the Biafran Army.**Works Cited:-**

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10. Chief Egbe Agimmogim, 80+ Years, Male, Farmer.
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