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Playing Politics: The Saga of the Biafran Child Refugees in Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–70



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Politicians and others involved in evacuating Nigerian child refugees to Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire during the Nigerian Civil War were guided more by political than humanitarian interests.

Playing Politics: The Saga of the Biafran Child Refugees in Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–70[1]

George N. Njung

The Nigerian Civil War forced the evacuation of some five thousand Biafran children to Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire, where they were camped as child refugees. History has emphasized humanitarian considerations, but newly declassified archival records reveal that acrimonious political interests determined the involvement of various actors in evacuating the children out of Nigeria and in later repatriating them. This article queries the practices by which politicians and others tended to play politics with child refugees of war. Employing a historical approach to politics and twentieth-century humanitarianism, it intersects refugee studies, politics, humanitarianism, and the war by examining the politics of evacuation, repatriation, and resettlement. In the process, it generates new questions about the children's experiences.

Introduction

During a telephone interview with Philip Effiong,[2] I inquired whether he was aware that the actions of politicians and others involved in evacuating Nigerian child refugees to Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire during the Nigerian Civil War (NCW) were guided more by political than humanitarian interests. Effiong retorted that it did not matter to him that those who came "to our aid had political motives or not": it mattered only that people "came to our aid at a time when the whole world" not only looked elsewhere but seemed complicit in the military government of Nigeria's "genocidal" actions against Biafra. Effiong's position echoes that of Chinua Achebe, the great Nigerian writer, who lived through the war as an adult Biafran: "Whatever French motivations might have been, we were grateful in Biafra to be receiving their support" (Achebe 2012, 102).

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During the NCW, about five thousand Biafran children were airlifted by third parties to Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire and camped there as child refugees. When the war concluded, in 1970, their return to Nigeria became a key element of the postwar reconciliation, as well as a remarkably contested affair. As one official at the British High Commission in Lagos observed on November 17, 1970, the occasion of the repatriation of the children ignited "great publicity," with the Nigerian head of state coming out himself to "welcome the children" back home and to promise them that they would henceforth be "well looked after" as they were "all Nigerians" (The National Archives, UK [TNA] FCO 65/814, Nov. 17, 1970).

This essay does not indict the opinions of Effiong and Achebe—which align with how war refugees tend to appreciate whatever aid they get. Nor does it seek to undermine the support that stakeholders accorded to Biafra by saving thousands of children. Rather, it queries the art of playing politics with child refugees. I use the phrase "playing politics" to bemoan the actions and statements of interested parties that were disguised as entirely humanitarian. While humanitarian considerations partly determined their actions toward those children, a reading of recently declassified records in the British Archives, as well as contemporaneous newspapers, suggests deeper personal and political interests. I argue that individuals, politicians, and leaders such as Charles de Gaulle (France), Raymond Offroy (France), Jacques Foccart (France), Omar Bongo (Gabon), and Félix Houphouët-Boigny (Côte d'Ivoire), who masterminded the children's evacuation, did so because of self-fulfilling political agendas—a fact that became obvious during the process of the children's return to Nigeria.

To contribute to debates on "whether the support for Biafra by Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire was driven primarily by humanitarian and human rights concerns or by political calculations" (Ibhawoh 2020, 281), I provide a detailed analysis of politicians and others who placed political interests above the children's plight. I deploy newly declassified archival evidence to generate useful historical questions about the child refugees' experiences and the possibility of new research on them. I analyze the involvement of the Nigerian government in the process of the repatriation and subsequent resettlement of the children in Nigeria. So far, information on the role of the Nigerian government has often been misleading. An online "Biafran Forgotten Children" project claims that "following the war, the Gowon administration did not take the steps to return these children back to their families" (Jabbar 2014). This study therefore serves as a corrective, since Yakubu Gowon's government did indeed prioritize the children's return. Setting some of the records of the war straight and countering distortions can contribute to a healing effect and ensure that Nigeria gets past the trauma of Biafra (Effiong 2012, 261–76). Furthermore, I pay attention to an aspect of the children's history that has eluded scholarly attention for decades: their repatriation and the resettlement process itself. In doing so, I provide details about these processes, including the parties involved and logistical arrangements. I show that these children were reunited with their

parents after the war in far more organized and comprehensive ways than have been admitted by existing literature and pro-Biafran activists. This confirms the conclusion of the eastern Nigerian scholar Nicholas Omenka, who declares that "the repatriation of children from Gabon was a resounding success" (2018, 51).

Politicians and countries often play politics with refugee issues, and they did so with the Biafran child refugees. The history of this issue demonstrates the limitations of the UN 1951 Convention on Refugees and its effects on conflict areas outside Europe before 1967. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was unable to take full responsibility for the children outside Nigeria and over their repatriation back home on grounds that their status fell outside the agency's mandate.

Finally, I contribute to the existing literature by drawing on a variety of sources and scholarship in English and French. While most of the primary archival sources are from the British archives, I have deployed French primary and secondary sources. These are not easily accessible to most Nigerian scholars and other Nigerians interested in the subject. Moreover, bringing together sources and scholarship in English and French on the subject contributes to a more holistic view of the internationalization of the NCW, considering that Britain, France, and neighboring French-speaking countries of Nigeria were major actors in the conflict.

The article has four sections. The first contextualizes the topic by intersecting refugee studies, politics, humanitarianism, and the NCW. The second examines the politics of evacuation. The third analyzes the politics that surrounded the children's repatriation to Nigeria. The fourth explores the children's resettlement in Nigeria in 1970 and 1971.

Politics, Humanitarianism, and the NCW

Humanitarian bodies, states, and governments involved in humanitarian assistance to refugees have often claimed neutrality, insisting that their actions are purely humanitarian, yet scholarship has shown that this is hardly ever the case, and that humanitarianism is fundamentally political, a form of politics cloaked in explicitly apolitical language and imagery that has served to justify acts of social interventions across the globe since the late nineteenth century (Malkki 1996; Tague 2015, 2019). The birth of the international refugee regime in 1921 was less about providing humanitarian assistance to refugees and more about protecting territorial governance threatened by the disruptive effects of refugee situations (Peterson 2017, 215–16; Shadle 2019a, 173–76; Sogut 1999; Tague 2019).

Historians of refugee experiences in eastern and southern Africa are almost unanimous about the interplay between politics and humanitarianism (Rosenthal 2015; Shadle 2019b; Tague 2019). Joanna Tague shows how American humanitarian assistance to Angolan refugees fleeing to the Congo between 1961 and 74 was never neutral, demonstrating precisely how in the

context of the Cold War, US assistance reflected US political interests (2015, 343–59; 2019, 17).

Similarly, some scholarship on refugee experiences in West Africa and particularly on the NCW has used the war to exemplify the instrumentalization of humanitarian aid by political interests. During the war, humanitarian workers in Biafra remained political and partisan while claiming that their involvement was apolitical and that they were helping innocent civilians and internally displaced persons (Heerten 2017, 9). The evacuation of the Biafran children was cloaked in international politics and internationalism, and even the naming and classification of the children as "temporary evacuees," "refugees," "evacuees," "Nigerian children," and "Biafran refugees" was shrouded in political interests (Ibhawoh 2020, 569–72). But gauged alongside the type of international politics that clouded global humanitarian assistance in the era of the Cold War politics, despite "implicit political considerations," international assistance in Biafra remained a humanitarian project (Ibhawoh 2020, 572). To this, I add detail about how third parties in the NCW tried to promote political interests under the guise of humanitarianism and go beyond it by elaborating the process of evacuation and repatriation and especially the resettlement of the children in Nigeria following the end of the war.

Another recent study on the subject (Omenka 2018) focuses on the participation of the joint churches, especially German Caritas, in the repatriation, rehabilitation, and follow-up assistance programs of the children and other internally displaced children in Biafra. Relying predominantly on sources generated by the church relief agencies in question, it does so almost as if the process had officially been run by the churches, especially the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria. Conversely, I use both anglophone and francophone literature to analyze the politics of individuals, politicians, and governments in the children's affairs and to illustrate the role of the Nigerian government and other international relief agencies in repatriation and resettlement, thus raising new research questions.

Studies on the NCW have rarely addressed the displaced children's plight.[3] The moment the war was over and the children were brought back to Nigeria, the subject became forgotten, yet children had been "the chief victims" (Wolfers 1970), the "most vulnerable victims" of the war (Ibhawoh 2020, 568). Even a study of the nonmilitary aspects of the war and its lingering human costs from the victims' perspective (Korieh 2012) pays little attention to them.

The situation of the child refugee is best understood in the context of the history of the Biafran humanitarian crisis (Heerten 2017). Pointing to the iconographic representations of the children as a successful venture to turn Biafra into a "visual experience" as the chief weapon for humanitarian attention provides a useful global political context from which to gauge the involvement and humanitarian actions of Western individual lobbyists and governments, particularly their actions toward Biafra or the federal

government. This is relevant to how we understand the actions of those who aided the Biafran children.

A study of the war against the Igbos examines the role that religious bodies and local populations played in providing relief to people affected by the war; except for the religious humanitarian organizations, the war reflected "the triumph of politics over humanitarian needs" (Ezeh 2012, 105). That study does not mention the children, though their evacuation constituted one of the most important engagements of the humanitarian bodies in Biafra.

Earlier works (Bach 1980; Baker 1970; Bon and Mingst 1980) studied the specific role of third-party state and nonstate actors in the Biafran-child saga. In Côte d'Ivoire, President Houphouët-Boigny's decision to recognize and support Biafra came only after "his comments on the conflict tended to be characterized by a deep personal concern over the lives being lost in the conflict," yet his decision to recognize Biafra in May 1968, and therefore support it, came mainly because he feared "Soviet penetration in West Africa and saw the Islamic elements in Nigeria as bearers of Communist influence" (Baker 1970, 5).

Meanwhile, de Gaulle's decision to support Biafra was based on France's strategic and political interests and the settling of scores with Nigeria over deteriorating diplomatic relations, caused by its humiliation of France in January 1961, when it expelled the French ambassador to Lagos to protest French nuclear activities in the Sahara (Bach 1980, 263). French intervention in Biafra was largely determined by the fact that a break-up of Nigeria would diminish Nigeria's ability to try to erode French influence in West Africa (Bon and Mingst 1980, 13). Most importantly, France's ultimate goal was to fraction Nigeria, which it saw as "elephant [anglophone] Africa";[4] de Gaulle, like Houphouët-Boigny, preferred the secessionist Odumegwu Ojukwu, a Christian and an anticommunist, over the procommunist federal government of Nigeria, led by northern Muslims (Bruyère-Ostells 2020, 30).

Evacuation

On May 27, 1967, Lt. Col. Ojukwu declared that the eastern region of Nigeria had seceded from the federal government and had formed the sovereign republic of Biafra. This decision had resulted from a politics of austerity, corruption, military coups, and ethnic tensions that had rocked Nigeria between 1960 and 1967. The immediate cause had been pogroms orchestrated against the eastern Igbos in the north, forcing surviving Igbos to flee eastward, and the failure of political stakeholders to resolve the political crisis (Gould 2012). When the federal government of Nigeria under General Gowon attempted to stop the Biafran secession and force Biafra back into the federation, a full-scale civil war ensued. From August 1967, federal forces began invading and seizing towns and villages in Biafra, including Asaba and the River Niger (Gould 2012, 67). Aiming to starve Biafra into defeat, the

federal government imposed a blockade, which landlocked Biafra, depriving it and the people of food and other supplies from outside. The result, coupled with the chaos of war, was widespread hunger, a massive displacement of civilians, and an unprecedented refugee situation.

As of 1968, thousands of children, attacked by kwashiorkor in Biafran refugee camps and hospitals set up by humanitarian bodies, were dying or at least at grave risk. Individuals, politicians, and international humanitarian agencies therefore proposed the evacuation of some of the children out of Nigeria for treatment and rescue. A precedent for this was the Algerian war of independence, and the 1959 UN Declaration of the rights of the child in conflict situations stipulated that in conflict areas, victimized children could be rescued and evacuated. The agency Terre des Hommes had been created in 1959 for that purpose, and, together with others, had been responsible for evacuation and rescue of victimized children from several conflict zones (for example, Algeria) to countries in the West (Denéchère 2010, 3–4). Yet the proposal to rescue and evacuate Biafran children quickly became contentious. Ojukwu's Biafran government, articulated by his attorney general, Sir Louis Mbanefo, was hesitant and cautioned that every decision and process regarding the evacuation had to be examined separately "in the light of who is moving them, where to, and under what arrangements and conditions" (quoted in Omenka 2018, 39). International relief organizations were split on the issue, with the International Union of Child Welfare (IUCW) remaining "noncommittal" about the idea of evacuation and opting for on-the-spot relief, stressing the importance of keeping African children in their ethnic milieu. It argued that transporting the children to another country would stress already limited resources—a view that the United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) shared (Omenka 2018, 40). Other humanitarian organizations in France and Caritas International opposed bringing the children to France and supported evacuation to neighboring African countries, echoing the need for African children to be brought up in their own cultural environment (Denéchère 2010, 5).

By November 1968, Ojukwu reluctantly consented to Caritas International's view of making sure that only the mortally sick children should be evacuated and only to friendly neighboring African countries. The main factors that informed the Biafran government's decision to allow the evacuation of the children were "the lack of adequate medical treatment for the mortally sick ones inside Biafra" and "the constant bombing of hospitals throughout the enclave," which "made it imperative to bring the children out of harm's way" (Omenka 2018, 41). Even so, the Biafran government added the condition that evacuated children must be repatriated as soon as they could be. Once Ojukwu's approval was secured, those who would assist in the evacuation process included individuals, humanitarian agencies, and individual countries supporting Biafra, such as Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire. Gabon readily accepted a large intake, and Côte d'Ivoire agreed to another. Gabon's ability to do so was facilitated by the fact that it was already a link in getting relief supplies to Biafra. France was deeply invested in the project,

and the Gabonese president owed his presidency and political allegiance to the French (Desgrandchamps 2018).

In all, evacuation became the responsibility of a project established by some thirty-five, mainly Catholic and Protestant, relief organizations from twenty-one countries, as well as Oxfam and Save the Children Fund (Seibert 2018, 279–80). The Biafran National Red Cross Society, the Order of Malta, the French Red Cross, the World's Mothers' Movement, and Terre des Hommes played key financial and logisticical roles (Denéchère 2010, 4; Goetz 2001, 13). The French Red Cross started airlifts from Libreville-Gabon to Biafra in September 1968, encouraged and supported by the French president (Desgrandchamps 2014, 291). The evacuation began when Terres des Hommes and French Red Cross planes returning from Biafra began transporting the children, with the Gabonese Red Cross managing the local operations (Bach 1980, 266; Omenka 2018, 41).

According to one doctor's report, children selected for evacuation seemed to be those at the point of death, in severe health and kwashiorkor-ridden conditions in the camps and hospitals, who could have died if not evacuated (Okeahialam 1972, 171–72). Doctors who worked in the sick bays and camps in Biafra reportedly selected those to be evacuated and collaborated with a pediatrician who supervised the evacuation scheme (Okeahialam 1972, 171). The children were thoroughly documented and assigned identification tags for easy retracing and reunion with their parents and families. Such thorough identification was necessary, given that many of the children were babies and hardly spoke a word. First-aid personnel and a doctor accompanied the children to the evacuation planes and throughout the trip to Gabon, where similar personnel from the center in Gabon took over at the airport. The center in Gabon typically received thirty-sixty children at a time (Okeahialam 1972, 172). The center, located at Gabon's capital of Libreville, consisted of a *village d'enfants* (children's village), with a school and a hospital. The construction of this center, with a well-equipped hospital section and a housing section, had been financed and established in December 1968 by German churches. Boys and girls at the center lived separately.

Neither the 1972 report of Dr. Okeahialam, who treated the children, nor the archival records thus far consulted provide statistics on gender composition. What proportion of female children were victimized in the war? The present research cannot answer this question, yet an inquiry into the gender ratio of the child refugees could provide a better appreciation of the gender dimension of the child victims in the war. Were more male than female children in the camps? Were female children affected differently from the male children? What would be the implications if more female than male children had been in the camps? Answers to these questions could reveal much about the children's experiences of the NCW. In an era of rethinking the importance of gender equity, historical studies are increasingly mindful of the importance of employing a gender prism to understanding landmark historical events, as opposed to the androcentric accounts that dominated the twentieth century.

Most health and medical staff attending to the children came mainly from Germany and France (Okeahialam 1972, 171). In Côte d'Ivoire, about one thousand evacuated children lived in camps set up for them in Bouake, Cocody, and Grand Bassam, where they were cared for by the girls of the Service Civique Feminin (Baker 1970, 7). The entire evacuation process saw some five thousand Igbo children being taken to Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire (TNA FCO 65/814, Sept. 23, 1970). The church organizations that oversaw the evacuation of the children were no doubt deeply concerned with rescuing children dying from starvation and kwashiorkor. Dr. Okealialam's report notes that all but 4 percent of two thousand children treated in the Gabon center were nursed back to life.[5]

Despite the humanitarian outcome that saved thousands of children's lives, the actions of the governments of Gabon, Côte d'Ivoire, and France were cloaked in nonhumanitarian interests. Gabon's assistance and facilitation of humanitarian work undoubtedly nursed these children back to life, mainly by providing land and space, but Gabon never invested money in the children and often seized the least opportunity to shelve responsibility for them (TNA FCO 65/814, Oct. 15, 1970). While Gabon did not provide financial assistance to the children, President Bongo made claims to the contrary, openly politicizing Gabon's involvement. In early October 1968, he publicly claimed that he was running the baby airlift with little support from the churches (*West Africa* 1968). We now know that this was false. Bongo had come to power thanks to France, represented by Foccart. By joining France to support the Biafran cause, he hoped to legitimize his place in regional geopolitics (Bruyère-Ostells 2020).

Meanwhile, President Houphouët-Boigny's assistance to the children can be best understood within the matrix of his larger support for the state of Biafra, as one of the four African presidents who recognized it on May 15, 1968.[6] No doubt, his support for Biafra, and specifically for these children, was based on a high degree of humanitarian concerns. One year into the NCW, his comments about the conflict tended to be "characterized by a deep personal concern over the lives being lost" and the children's plight (Bach 1980, 262; Baker 1970, 5). He shared the logic of de Gaulle and Foccart that balkanizing Nigeria would safeguard his own geopolitical interests and those of France (Bat 2012, 342; Bruyère-Ostells 2020). Recognition of Biafra had come in part because the Ivorian president was opposed to large African states and worked with France toward that goal (Achebe 2012, 98). It came mainly because Houphouët-Boigny feared Soviet penetration in West Africa and thought the Islamic elements in Nigeria were bearers of communist influence (Baker 1970, 5).

And what about France's direct involvement in the children's affairs? This is best understood within the larger French support for the state of Biafra (Bach 1980, 259–72; Torrent 2012, 142). On July 31, 1968, France released a statement in support of Biafra, claiming concerns to avert bloodshed and professing sympathy for Biafra's quest for self-determination (Achebe 2012, 101; Rouver, Coco, and Paddock 1994, 148). This masked

France's real agenda. British and Canadian diplomatic officials on the ground observed that France was supporting the disintegration of Nigeria to weaken it, whose dominance in West Africa threatened France's interests and overshadowed France's grip on its client francophone states in the region (TNA FCO 65/814, Oct. 15, 1970; Torrent 2012, 142). Though, at some point de Gaulle was moved by the Biafran desire for self-determination (Bach 1980, 262–64), many agree that de Gaulle's rhetoric about Biafran self-determination appeared more of a pathway to achieving France's strategic and political goals in West Africa (Glaser and Smith 2005, 67; Pérouse de Montclos 2009, 72). One of the main variables that drove French support for Biafra was that "France was threatened by Nigeria's imposing power in Africa, which it was assumed could interfere with France's stranglehold in its African colonies" (Nnamani 2012, 14).

From July 31, 1968, until the end of the war, de Gaulle tried through his actions, public declarations, private meetings, and communiqués, albeit unsuccessfully, to swing other African states and the international community to support Biafra (Bach 1980, 264–65; *Le Monde* 1968[7]). French support for Biafra saw the recruitment of French Red Cross medical teams of twelve doctors and nurses who would be resident in Biafra for approximately three months, starting from September 1968. Once there, the teams worked under the responsibility of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). They contributed to the establishment of two nutritional centers for children and a hospital (Bach 1980, 266). Meanwhile, President Houphouët-Boigny had played a huge role in securing French support for Biafra. In fact, the French communiqué of support for Biafra came after the Ivorian leader had encouraged de Gaulle, met with him in April and again in May 1968, and transmitted to him Lt. Col. Ojukwu's letter that "poignantly sought the help of the French President" (Bach 1980, 262; Baker 1970, 40–43). According to Daniel Bach, "the generous or humanitarian aspect of de Gaulle's support to Biafra was great, but so too was his concern of preventing the development of a Nigerian influence likely to rival that of France in West Africa" (Bach 1980, 271). In January 1969, Michel Debré, France's foreign minister, admitted that de Gaulle had a "profound politics" in the conflict, one that the world was "incapable of comprehending" (quoted in Bach 1980, 269).

Repatriation and Political Interests

On January 11, 1970, the NCW came to an end when Biafra surrendered and Ojukwu fled to Côte d'Ivoire. As Nigeria moved into the peace-and-reconstruction phase, the plight of the airlifted children became an urgent issue. According to the head of the UN Economic and Social Department, a Briton, the repatriation of the children to Nigeria was "an important ingredient in the Federal Government's policy of reconciliation with the Ibos and the re-assimilation of victims of the war into Nigeria's national life" (TNA, FCO 65/814, July/August 1970).

Negotiations for the children's return apparently began in June 1970, when a joint Nigeria-Cameroon delegation to Gabon reached an agreement on a "rapid and dignified repatriation" of the children to their homeland. The Nigerian delegation "expressed their appreciation to President Amadou Ahidjo of Cameroon for the important contribution which he has once again brought to the understanding and amelioration of relations between African countries[,] as well as to the consolation of the African unity" (TNA FCO 65/814, July 6, 1970).[8] Yet it seemed that another Nigerian delegation was scheduled to return to Gabon in July 1970 to work out administrative details and tackle the practical problems involved. Meanwhile, the Nigerian federal government entered an agreement with the IUCW, mandating it to carry out "a systematic survey of the displaced children and orphans while organising registration and information centres as one of the most effective measures for reuniting children with their families or communities" (TNA, FCO 65/814, 1970). The IUCW was empowered to work with several government bodies, including the federal Ministry of Economic Development and Reconstruction, to organize the pertinent logistics (TNA, FCO 65/814, 1970). The choice of IUCW to take charge of the repatriation can be explained by the fact that, as a neutral agency charged with the welfare of children in conflict situations, it was one of the few international relief agencies that had remained in the good graces of the federal government throughout the war. Immediately after the war, the Nigerian government banned the activities of Caritas International and the Joint Church Aid (JCA) in Nigeria, which had been at the forefront of the children's affairs, and it had equally fallen out with the ICRC, accusing it of being pro-Biafra. The IUCW therefore remained the only agency in the eyes of the Nigerian government to be entrusted with the children's repatriation and resettlement (Omenka 2018, 44, 48).

From the inception of negotiations, political discord and interests quickly resurfaced as stumbling blocks. This was first noticeable in the case of governments, individuals, newspapers, pro-Biafran French papers, and interest groups from France, as well as others outside France. One of the earliest reports that threw light on Gabon's attitude was an editorial in *West Africa* (Dyvonne 1970) titled "Round About: Diplomacy and Babies," which pointed out that during early negotiations, Nigeria agreed with President Ahidjo of Cameroon as mediator to negotiate directly with Gabon and pay for the cost of repatriation. It claimed that "Libreville, after first demanding reimbursement from Lagos of the money spent on the children's upkeep and then appearing to use the children in an attempt to restore diplomatic relations, now seems to have yielded to the combined pressure of President Ahidjo and Houphouët-Boigny and possibly France." An article in the *Daily Telegraph* (Kirkham 1970) asserted that Nigeria and Gabon were using the children's repatriation to mend their diplomatic relations.

On July 31, 1970, an article in *Le Monde*, an independent French newspaper, pleaded to "the conscience of the civilized world" not to allow the children to return to Nigeria, claiming that they would be exposed to death. The article insisted that "the fate of these orphans would be for the moment

better assured in a neutral country than one which was formerly the scene of atrocious civil war and where a terrible famine still rages in the areas of the former conflict." Although most of the children were not orphans, they had all, in the eyes of the press, become orphans—emblematic of how the media guide and stereotype refugee narratives. The general postwar situation in Biafra was, no doubt, quite troubling. Soldiers of the third commando unit of the federal Nigerian government had committed atrocities against the Igbos, including rape, looting, and even killings (Omaka 2016, 228). The federal government deliberately implemented a policy of starvation of the Igbos in the postwar arrangement, yet by evoking this general situation in postwar Biafra as if the returning children would be victims of it, the *Le Monde* article failed to appreciate the status and treatment that the Nigerian government was according to these children, even if that was only an attempt to boost its international image. The fate of the children once they returned to Nigeria did not approach the worst of the claims made by *Le Monde*. On the contrary, these children would receive deferential treatment.

As repatriation arrangements continued, a campaign was being waged by the Franco-Biafran Committee, a former Biafra lobby in France, to prevent the children from being sent home (TNA FCO 65/814, Sept. 11, 1970). This lobby was chaired by Raymond Offroy, a former French ambassador to Nigeria, who had been expelled by the Nigerian government in 1961 following a diplomatic fracas between France and Nigeria over French nuclear activities in the Sahara. Appearing to settle personal scores with Nigeria, the Offroy-led group expressed fears and claims that persecution, murder, or death by starvation awaited the children if they were to be sent back. Offroy published a widely read cover article in *Le Monde* on August 1, 1970. He organized the dispatch of a telegram to Maurice Schumann, the French foreign minister, urging him to intervene on the children's behalf (TNA FCO 65/814, Aug. 8, 1970). On August 8, 1970, Offroy wrote in the *Toronto Telegram* claiming that the "4,000 Biafran children now living happily in the Republic of Gabon under International Charity organization protection are in imminent danger of being thrown back into the misery and starvation from which they were rescued by Red Cross planes during the Biafra rebellion against Nigeria" and that "immediate action on international scale [was] necessary" (TNA FCO 65/814, Aug. 8, 1970). He insisted that conditions in Nigeria, especially in Biafra, were "appalling."

Offroy's remarks about the postwar situation in Nigeria undoubtedly resonated with international newspapers' reporting (especially in the United States), as evident in several articles authored by Westerners in those papers.[9] At the time, hearings held by a US Senate subcommittee revealed numerous instances of atrocities and mistreatments meted out against the Igbos in the postwar era by soldiers and personnel of the federal government (Omaka 2016). For Raymond Offroy to speak of Nigeria eight months after the war as if it were still the warzone that had prompted the children's evacuation in 1968 was nonetheless inaccurate. But most importantly, he, like the *Le Monde* article, failed to appreciate that the children in question were in the

international spotlight—a situation that compelled the Nigerian government to accord them special and exemplary treatment. Yet he insisted that if the French foreign minister did not intervene and the children were allowed to return to Nigeria, they would "probably be fated to starve to death" (TNA FCO 65/814, Aug. 8, 1970). This, too, was baseless. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) remarked that such "fears" by the former Biafran lobby were not genuine but were meant to serve "political purposes" (TNA FCO 65/814, Sept. 23, 1970).

Unsurprisingly, the Nigerian ambassador in Paris reacted furiously to French political interests and specifically rebutted an article by Jacques Madaule published in *Le Monde Afrique* on August 1, 1970. The ambassador's rebuttal, published in *Le Monde* on August 11, 1970, pointed out that the children under discussion were not orphans. He enumerated ongoing efforts by the federal government to allot money that was helping normalize the food and famine situation for children, contrary to claims that the children were returning to hunger. He questioned how many children were dying of hunger in the Third World every day, while international humanitarian bodies and France and the developed world—which was at the root of the problems in the Third World—remained indifferent. Such sarcastic remarks had been made a month earlier and published in *West Africa*: "Could not the French government whose facilities . . . were not lacking to assist the children's departure, now show its desire to cooperate by giving financial assistance . . . for the return of 900 children in Ivory Coast?" (Dyvonne 1970).

Politicization of the children's plight by certain groups in France was again later queried by the head of the West African Department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Nigeria on October 22, 1970, who charged that in Paris, "Foccart and others, still smarting at the loss of face which followed the Biafran defeat, were trying to make capital out of the affair." He added that Foccart (who had handled Pompidou's contacts with African heads of state) and his followers were not yet ready to move past their differences with Nigeria. He pointed out that "Gabon's attitude to the return of these unfortunate children has not been entirely governed by welfare consideration" (TNA FCO 65/814, Oct. 22, 1970).

Gabon had initially opposed the repatriation of the children, using them as political pawns, until extended diplomatic negotiations made Gabon change course. In March 1970, before the repatriation agreement in June 1970, President Bongo had detailed a message to international humanitarian organizations, received through the US embassy in Libreville, in which he informed them that "they should not become involved in the question of Nigerian children, who were the sole responsibility of the Gabonese Government" (UNHCR Memorandum of March 10, 1970, cited by Goetz 2001, 15). First, any such claims by Bongo would be inaccurate and misleading because expenses for the children were being borne by relief agencies, not Gabon. Second, and more importantly, his comments belied his own agenda when he presented the question of the children as a political one for the Gabonese government. Instructively, this attitude of governments and

leaders claiming responsibility and expenses for child refugees was neither new nor unique to Gabon,[10] but it is part of how governments play politics with humanitarian issues.

In part due to diplomatic pressures and protracted negotiations, Gabon made a 180-degree turn the moment it realized that assenting to repatriation would once again serve its political and other purposes. This was observed by Roger Westbroke at the British embassy in Cameroon after his visit to Gabon with the UK ambassador in October 1970, when he noted "it is clear that the Gabonese are very keen to see the children leave both for political reasons . . . and because they want the buildings of the main campus-site for a school of Public Administration." To reinforce the point, he remarked that while the children had been in Gabon, the Gabonese had not helped them materially, and "they have not even made tax concessions on charitable imports" (TNA FCO 65/814, Oct. 15, 1970). Although his comments appeared harsh and biased, since the Gabonese government had at least provided land for the construction of the center where the children had been kept, they were not untrue.

With the path cleared for repatriation, in early September 1970, a delegation of the Nigerian National Rehabilitation Commission and officials of the Ministry of External Affairs visited Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire to discuss the modalities and logistics of repatriation with the relief agencies that were accommodating and feeding the children. On the instructions of President Gowon, the Nigerians wanted to have the children back home before October 1, 1970, the day of the country's tenth anniversary of independence, but in view of the impossibility of getting all the children back by then, and taking advice from the UNHCR representatives, the Nigerian delegation and their hosts agreed that the children would be repatriated in multiple trips, and the process would go past October 1970 (TNA FCO 65/814, Oct. 12, 1970). On October 10, 1970, President Bongo signed an agreement with the UNHCR with the assurance that all logistics had been set for the children's reception in Nigeria (TNA FCO 65/814, Oct. 10, 1970).

Mr. Jamieson, UNCHR's director of operations, who was visiting Lagos, was to use UNHCR's good offices for repatriating the children, specifically by assisting with chartered flights (TNA FCO 65/814, Sept. 23, 1970). Several others quickly offered to contribute to the costs of the airlift, estimated by the British High Commission in Lagos at between $300,000 and $500,000, to cover chartering of aircraft, and probably the provision of a small settlement grant. Contributors included the government of Denmark, which redirected $277,000 to the operation, the Sovereign Order of Malta, which announced its readiness to assist if required, and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, which pledged to assist with transport arrangements if called on (TNA FCO 65/814, Oct. 6, 1970).

Based on this financial timetable and the actual execution of the process, I find little evidence to corroborate the idea (Omenka 2018, 36–58) that the German Caritas through the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN) bore the financial brunt of the repatriation and resettlement of the children.

But rather than dismissing this view, I place its analyses and conclusions in context. The IUCW, which ran the repatriation and resettlement operations, is an umbrella relief agency, which receives its funding from governments and other humanitarian bodies. The JCA still found ways to be involved and to contribute, even as it was banned from Nigeria by the federal government and officially excluded from participating in the process. The German Caritas, which had been a major player in evacuating and caring for the children, adopted a pseudonym and was thus able to channel money through the CSN, which ended up in the coffers of the IUCW (Omenka 2018, 55). Nevertheless, the role of German Caritas in the resettlement and rehabilitation process did not translate into assuming the major financial burden, especially when compared to the total amount of money earmarked for the project.

And where was the UNHCR in all of this? It would be a major player in its own right: it would oversee the operations of repatriation and resettlement as run by the IUCW; it had mediated between the federal government and African countries and leaders (notably Gabon) that had recognized Biafra and hosted the children, thereby easing the process of reconciliation and repatriation; its involvement in the affairs of the children would prove to be a pivotal moment, expanding the organization "from its Eurocentric origins into Africa and the global South" (Ibhawoh 2020, 520), yet the narrowness of the 1951 Convention on Refugees, which formed the basis of the UNHCR mandate and operations, posed a stumbling block to the UNHCR's responsibility toward the children. Its mandate was limited to Europe. Only over time did its mandate expand, especially with the 1967 UN Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which extended coverage to Africa by eliminating the agency's geographic and temporal parameters (Tague 2019, 13). Even so, and during the NCW, it "did not consider [the children] to be refugees" and declared that its assistance in the repatriation of the children could occur only within its "good offices" (Goetz 2001, 14). At the early stages of the war, during a meeting with representatives of Biafra on November 9, 1967, High Commissioner Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan had explained to Biafrans that his office could not offer protection or assistance to Biafran refugees because Biafra was not recognized as a separate state by the world powers (Ezeh 2012, 103). This limitation delayed the repatriation and exacerbated the children's plight. When the UNHCR had faced mounting criticism as to why it did not consider repatriation of the children part of its core obligation, an official of it reiterated that the children "cannot be considered refugees under the [1951] Convention" (quoted in Ibhawoh 2020, 584). Ultimately, therefore, its involvement came to be shaped not by its mandate, but by "diplomatic and political considerations" (Ibhawoh 2020, 586).

Resettlement

Children from Côte d'Ivoire arrived in Nigeria first, between November 9 and 21, 1970; those from Gabon began arriving on November 23 (TNA FCO

65/814, Nov. 21, 1970). The first group was scheduled to arrive through Lagos, and subsequent groups would land at Port Harcourt, the nearest airports to their homes in the east. The first group, from Bouake airport (Côte d'Ivoire), arrived in Lagos on November 9 and was personally received at the airport by President Gowon, who reportedly asked one of the children: "Do you know who I am?" to which the child replied, "No sir, would you please tell me your name?" and to which Gowon simplistically replied: "Gowon." Gowon went on to ask another child, "Parlez-vous Français?" (Do you speak French?), to which the child replied, "un peu" (a bit). Gowon then welcomed the children:

> May I welcome you back after two years absence from home. We welcome you back with all our heart and all our love. Arrangements are being made for your parents to receive you. We shall look after you all very well. Nothing will happen to you. We are all Nigerians. You should be good boys and girls because you and other Nigerian children are the leaders of tomorrow. (TNA FCO 65/814, Nov. 9, 1970)

Gowon implored the children to improve their command of French because they would find it useful since "nearly all our immediate neighbours speak French." He thanked President Houphouët-Boigny for having taken care of the children and having made it possible for them to return home (TNA FCO 65/814, Nov. 9, 1970).

The first and only time the children spoke for themselves was when responding to President Gowon, and the media considered this worth reporting. Contemporaneous sources, including media reports, are the first steps of silencing in refugee experiences.[11] The objectification of the children and their representation as mass victims by the available sources, individuals, and institutions that participated in their story render them "speechless emissaries" (Malkki 1996), denying them any form of agency, including their life experiences in exile, their struggles, and their transformations. It is this kind of source construction that informs the way that scholarship frequently represents refugee experiences, but the children's responses to President Gowon shows that they had a voice and an agency of their own and counters the absence of refugee voices in much of the literature. Telling Gowon that they had learned some French while in Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire implies a form of agency. Additionally, they may have made other educational gains beyond those made by children who had stayed in Biafra. My research did not aim to uncover the children's voices or agency in the archival and other primary sources consulted, but it highlights areas for further research. One might, for example, identify and interview some survivors, by now in their fifties and sixties, to get a better appreciation of their experiences. Two of the children, Vitalis Okorafor (male) and Cyrina Elegbe (female), evacuated to Germany by church humanitarian authorities for treatment at the respective ages of ten and nine, were repatriated to Nigeria from Germany in August

1972 (Omenka 2018, 50–51). By now, if still alive, these two individuals will be about fifty-nine or sixty years old, and it would be critically important to get their stories in their own voices.

An agreement with the federal government had mandated the IUCW to take charge of the children's resettlement once in Nigeria. The World Food Program would support them in reception centers with food and other needs and UNICEF with clothing, bedding, and other necessary equipment, while the Nigerian Red Cross would assist in coordinating arrangements. Accordingly, the IUCW established, before August 1970, five resettlement centers in Nigeria: Port Harcourt (for Rivers State), Ekok-Ekpene (for Southeast State), and Mgbidi, Nguru, and Azumini (for East Central State) (TNA FCO 65/814, Dec. 2, 1970). Once in their states, the children became the responsibility of individual state authorities, each state appointing an officer to take charge. Assisted in the main by the IUCW, the officer organized a tracing service, with equipment in the center provided by UNICEF. The IUCW reportedly took on many Nigerian staff to assist them at the centers—a situation that was hoped would enable them to reunite most of the children with their families by Christmas (TNA FCO 65/814, Nov. 7, 1970).

Meanwhile, the UNHCR had been given responsibility to oversee the operations, and in October 1970, its director of operations, Mr. Jamieson, visited four of the reception centers and was persuaded that any doubts about their readiness were unfounded. Three of the centers visited were Port Harcourt (reported to be new, well-equipped, suitable, and ready to take 350 children), the one at Ikot-Ekpene (a former school, badly damaged during the war but now restored and ready for three hundred children), and the one at Mgbidi, located between Owerri and Onitsha (East Central State), which had been a community hospital, occupied by troops during the war and badly damaged, but now rebuilt and ready to receive seven hundred children. Jamieson was reportedly "impressed by the attitude of the personnel provided for these reception centers by the Nigerian government, and by the material arrangements that had already been made" (TNA FCO 65/814, Sept. 23, 1970).

Of all the reception centers, three, including Mgbidi—the largest of them—were in the East Central State, where a majority of the children had originated. As of December 18, 1970, out of about 2,392 children who had already arrived in Nigeria from Libreville, 1,958 were from there, 307 were from Rivers State, and 127 were from South-East State (TNA FCO 65/814, Dec. 16, 1970). Each center had an IUCW center coordinator with as many workers as possible. Only about a thousand of the five thousand children reportedly destined for the two noneastern states were to be taken from the reception centers to their own homes, if the families could manage, and arrangements were to be made to give them supplementary rations and money for schooling for the older children. Paid work was given to members of some of the poorer families as an extra safeguard (Wolfers 1970).

By December 16, 1970, the East Central State's resettlement center had reportedly rejoined as many as 1,100 children with their parents; 90 percent

of the children had been sufficiently well documented to make reunion a relatively simple task (TNA FCO 65/814, Dec. 16, 1970). This speaks to the documentation and identification process when the children had been evacuated in 1968, as observed in Dr. Okeahialam's report. Meanwhile, the remaining 10 percent at the East Central State were to remain at the center until their parents came for them. Also, as of December 16, the center alone had received eight hundred children from Côte d'Ivoire, and only one hundred of these remained at the reception center, some of them ill. Earlier, a federal government source had placed the final number from Côte d'Ivoire since November 2 at 879 children, with only ten children left there to receive special treatment (TNA FCO 65/814, Nov. 25, 1970). The process of repatriation from Gabon was still ongoing as of December 16, with about 120 children having stayed in the reception centers for treatment with tuberculosis (TNA FCO 65/814, Dec. 16, 1970).

In the East Central State (as in others), the state's social welfare division mainly controlled the reunion of children with their parents, many of whom presented letters from voluntary organizations in Gabon indicating that their children were being looked after in Libreville as evidence. To assist the parents with maintenance, the "Federal Government [was] providing $2 for each child to the parents" (TNA FCO 65/814, Dec. 16, 1970). Though available archival records do not provide detailed accounts and expenses of the federal government, this revelation supports the claims made earlier by the Nigerian ambassador to France that the federal government was investing huge sums of money for the children's repatriation and resettlement. After the children's release into the care of their parents, the contract of the IUCW was extended until October 1, 1971 (Omenka 2018, 56), as their personnel followed up frequently with visits to the distributed children's homes to check on their health and recovery (TNA FCO 65/814, Dec. 16, 1970).

Overall, resettlement was not always as smooth as it was made to appear. By December 2, out of a total of 1,585 children who had reportedly returned from Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon, 601 were yet to be reunited with their parents (TNA FCO 65/814, Dec. 2, 1970). Later, a press release from *Africa Concern*, dated December 28, 1970, stated that of more than two thousand children returned to Nigeria from Gabon during the first half of December, 1,383 had reunited with their families, while 1,009 were still in centers awaiting their relatives. The operation was scheduled to resume on January 11, 1971, with a further two thousand meant to be flown home to Nigeria by January 31. Meanwhile, a small number was expected to remain in the hospital in Gabon with Nigerian permission for treatment before repatriation to Nigeria (TNA FCO 65/814, Dec. 28, 1970). This difficulty had been noted by a report from the UNHCR in Libreville dated December 18, which indicated that out of the 2,392 children who had so far arrived in the East Central State (1,958), South East State (127), and Rivers State (307), 1,009 remained at the reception centers. While repatriation continued, "in all, 3,711 of the refugee children in Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire were repatriated by an airlift consisting of 78 flights" (Ibhawoh 2020, 584), and a total of

3,971 children had by December 1971 been repatriated from Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire (Omenka 2018, 52–53). Since the former analysis is based on about four thousand children, about 93 percent of the children had been returned and resettled in Nigeria; the figure of 3,971 translates to 99 percent of the evacuated children. My archival sources, which place the total number of evacuated children at five thousand, failed to provide a specific percentage of the children who were repatriated, but the statistics so far provided and derived from inference suggest that nearly all the children were repatriated, with the exceptions of those who died during their stay in Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as those who had been moved to Germany for treatment.

Conclusion

In this article, I have analyzed the process of the evacuation of thousands of child victims of the NCW to Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire for rescue, treatment, and rehabilitation and their later repatriation and resettlement in Nigeria following the end of the war. I have queried the political interests and agendas of politicians and governments in France, Gabon, and Côte d'Ivoire, which invested in the children's affairs. I have expanded on existing scholarship to showcase the inherently political nature of international humanitarian interventions in twentieth-century conflicts, but my focus on children has brought into view a hitherto neglected topic. Although babies and children were most of the civilian populations most displaced and affected by the war, they have been the least studied.

My focus and range of sources have enabled me to come to conclusions that vary from those of the two most recent studies on the subject. Drawing significantly on the UNHCR archives and focusing on the politics of naming and of the way international relief agencies managed the humanitarian crisis, Bonny Ibhawoh (2020) has concluded that international assistance in Biafra, particularly regarding the children, remained a humanitarian project. In contrast, by focusing on the JCA and relying extensively on its archives, Nicholas Omenka (2018) has argued that the JCA bore the financial brunt of the effort, although its activities had been prohibited in the immediate postwar Nigeria and it could not operate in any official capacity. However, by drawing on a different kind of archives, as well as on anglophone and francophone literature, and putting a spotlight on individual politicians and governments invested in the project, I have arrived at different conclusions. I have emphasized the political interests, illustrated the role of the federal government and the IUCW, and demonstrated that repatriation and resettlement were far more organized and successful than have been previously recognized. Nevertheless, all three perspectives and conclusions are important. Together, they provide multiple perspectives on the children's story and a holistic and deeper understanding of it.

Detailing the children's evacuation, repatriation, and resettlement based on the archival sources has prompted me to raise questions that

merit further research. One of these is the need to tell the children's story in their own voices—which the existing literature on refugees has failed to do. Questions arising from the response of two of the repatriated children when they met President Gowon in November 1970 point the way to further research along these lines. Finally, the article has provoked new questions about the children's gender composition and dynamics. An inquiry into implications of refugee status regarding children of different genders might tell us how differently they experienced the war, and what effects this might have had on the sociology of sex and gender in postwar Nigerian society, particularly in the erstwhile Biafran region.

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NOTES

1. This article was accepted for publication on August 21, 2021.
2. Effiong, Philip. 2020. Interview with author, January 4. East Lansing, Michigan. Currently a professor at Michigan State University, he survived the Biafran war as a child refugee. His father, General Philip Effiong, was the Biafran second in command, the last Biafran leader to surrender to the federal government, on January 12, 1970. At the end of the war, Effiong was less than ten years old. As a son of a Biafran general, together with other children, he was evacuated to Côte d'Ivoire four months after the war. From Côte d'Ivoire, he was moved to Ireland under the care of foster parents. He has written extensively as a scholar, including his own biographical account of the NCW.
3. Although this study focuses on the child refugees sent to Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire only, many other children were sent to other African countries and beyond, including São Tomé, Equatorial Guinea, Zambia, France, and Ireland.
4. All translations of quotations from non–English language sources are mine.
5. This report, which establishes a 4 percent death rate in Gabon out of 1,952 children treated there, counters a claim (Seibert 2018, 289) that by mid-April 1969, the mortality rate among a total of 264 children who had been evacuated for treatment in São Tomé was 4.5 percent, compared to the figure of 10–15 percent for the recuperation center in Libreville.
6. Other African countries that recognized Biafra were Tanzania, Zambia, and Gabon. Haiti was the other non-African country that recognized Biafra. Meanwhile, France supported Biafra to the end of war, but never officially recognized it.

7. Extracts and summaries from this article of September 10, 1968, were in the National Archives, UK (TNA FCO 65/814).
8. The circumstances under which President Amadou Ahidjo of Cameroon came to play such a key arbitration role and gained the gratitude of the federal government of Nigeria can be explained. Ahidjo was the first president of modern Cameroon, which, even more precariously than Nigeria, comprised a francophone majority, where Ahidjo came from, and an anglophone minority, which Ahidjo was subjugating in the name of unity. He was aware of the plight of the anglophone minorities and especially their dissatisfaction in the Cameroon union. Anglophone Cameroon shared a vast border with Eastern Nigeria, the Biafran territory. Aware therefore that the success of Biafra might spark secessionist tendencies among the Anglophones of Cameroon, Ahidjo promptly supported the Nigerian government against Biafra. He closed the border with Biafra in November 1967, and even Igbo refugees from the north could not get to the east via Cameroonian territory. Ahidjo made sure that no arms, medicine, or foodstuffs were allowed through Cameroon to the Igbos—prompting the French ambassador in Yaoundé to declare that Ahidjo had become "more Nigerian than the Nigerians." Placing politics above humanitarianism, Ahidjo went as far as denying permission to church organizations in Cameroon that had wanted to receive children being repatriated from Biafra because they were dying and needed treatment. For more on this, see Omenka 2018 and Torrent 2012, 140–42.
9. For detailed deployment of the articles, see Omaka 2016, 228–48.
10. There is, for example, the Kindertransport story of Jewish children brought to Great Britain before World War II as child refugees by the efforts and expenses of private, religious, humanitarian organizations and individuals and NGOs, but which later came to be claimed by British leaders and politicians and ascribed in public British memory in recent times to the state.
11. For more on archival historical source silencing, see Tague 2019 and Trouillot 1995.

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