

Marion Pape

Gender Palava

Nigerian Women Writing War

Susanne Gehrmann, Flora Veit-Wild, Tobias Wendl (Hg.)

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In memory of my parents
and
my mentor and friend Edith Ihekweazu

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INTRODUCTION

1 Nigerian Women Writers Do Have a Mouth

In times of war, women suffer silently – or so goes the myth of war. As their men are out in the field, women stay at home, or at some place deemed safe, and quietly endure hunger and sometimes, when their protectors can no longer defend them, fall victim to rape – all the while waiting for the return of their brave warriors, so that normal life can start again. Of course, it is expected of them, during the war, to accomplish some of the tasks usually performed by men, to support them by producing and providing supplies, food and sanitary services, and to care for the old and the young. But that's about it. Special times call for special responsibilities, yet when peace returns, it's back to square one – and mind you, it's the combatants who have stories to tell, and not the helpmates!

In reality, however, women often refuse to be silent sufferers during wars. At times, instead of selflessly fulfilling the roles assigned to them, they become fighters as well, and ruthless ones as such. If they have to break the law or violate widely accepted social and moral codes in order to survive, they do so, even if it costs them their good reputation. And if they find themselves occupying spaces which had been inaccessible to them before, they may enjoy their new roles, even if they entail risks and tough choices. Afterwards, they have many stories to tell.

Today, women serve (and kill) side by side with their male comrades as privates and officers in some of the world's most feared armies. In the specific context of Nigerian literature that is my subject here, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's war novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, has been compared by the doyen of Nigerian literature, Chinua Achebe, with the narratives of "ancient storytellers." Yet, if times have indeed changed, they did so quite recently. Literature by Nigerian female writers on the Nigerian Civil War, which ended only 40 years ago, was mostly treated by critics as if it confirmed the Beti-proverb from Cameroon, that "women have no mouth" (quoted in Veit-Wild 1996, title).

The Nigerian Civil War, which began shortly after the south-eastern parts of Nigeria declared their independence under the name of Biafra, ended in 1970, and although the war may be mostly forgotten outside Nigeria, it is still a constant point of reference within the country. The recent ascent of the secessionist MASSOB (Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra) is just one indication for the fact that many Igbo still feel like they are being punished for the war and treated as second-class citizens. In the 1960s and early 70s the Biafran War – as it was mostly known in the West – was top news worldwide. It is considered by some as the first fully media-covered war in post-colonial Africa, and the gruesome pictures of starving children and civilian casualties could easily compete with those from the concurring American War in Vietnam.

More than a million people died during the war, most of them civilians in the separatist South-East, and mostly of hunger and illnesses, before the secession was squashed. It therefore comes as no surprise that the war became the most prevalent theme of Nigerian literature. Since it ended, the corpus of civil war literature has grown steadily, and today includes well over a hundred and fifty works encompassing almost every literary genre. Novels and short stories predominate, but poems, plays, memoirs and war diaries form part of the literary war discourse as well. Among the writers are established male and female writers and novelists as well as former army generals, "lowly" housewives and soldiers from both warring factions.

Considering the formative influence of the civil war and its wide-ranging consequences in present-day Nigeria, it is startling that the women's input to the corpus of civil war literature has been so widely ignored. The excuses given by the critics – for instance that women's texts are less well written than those by male writers (cf. Feuser 1984: 792; Ogunpitan 1992: 297) – can easily be dismissed. The literary quality of texts by women varies as does the quality of male texts and the range of treated topics is at least as large.

The real reason for the neglect of women's civil war texts seems to lie in the fact that women's texts disrupt a discourse which men consider their exclusive domain. Not only do they destabilise binaries such as the "peaceful woman" at home and the "combatant man" at the front, they represent the war as "wo/man palava" – a term which I borrow from Chikwenye O. Ogunyemi's eponymous study – to discuss the "sexual disorder" (Scott 1985) brought about by war conditions and thereby enact a literary negotiation between the genders. This study will show how these negotiations are conducted in greater detail in the following chapters.

* * * * *

The Nigerian Civil War broke out after the South-Eastern Province, populated mainly by the Igbo and numerous minority peoples, seceded from Nigeria under the name of "Biafra." The underlying causes of the conflict are to be found above all in the socio-economic and cultural North-South divide of Nigeria which emerged as a result of the colonial invasion. The ethno-regional structures which had shaped Nigerian politics before independence subsequently gained even more importance. As a result of the struggle for power and resources, the political, economic and military elites set in motion a dynamic of ethno-regional competition (cf. Harneit-Sievers 1994: 220). Accordingly, politicised ethnicity became the most important determinant in the political system and the basis of mass mobilisation for political parties (cf. Harneit-Sievers 1992b: 15; see also Nnoli 1978: 140-75). Ethnic distrust and its progressive politicisation intensified the series of political crises that shook Nigeria after independence, beginning with two military coups, which were interpreted differently in the North and