

The Dance of Death

by Philip Emeagwali

emeagwali.com

Walk with me down memory lane. The time: 1968. In 30 months, one million dead. The setting: a dusty camp in Biafra where survivors waited and hoped for peace. The survivors: Refugees fleeing from the “Dance of Death.” My mentor: One of the refugee camp directors, whom I called “Teacher” out of respect.

“Martin Luther King has been killed,” Teacher said, with a pained voice and vacant eyes. I looked towards Teacher, wondering: “Who is Martin Luther King?” I was a 13-year-old refugee in the west African nation of Nigeria, a land then called Biafra. Martin Luther King. What did that name mean?

Eight out of ten Biafrans were refugees exiled from their own country. Two years earlier, Christian army officers had staged a bloody coup killing Muslim leaders. The Muslims felt the coup was a tribal mutiny of Christian Igbos against their beloved leaders. The aggrieved Muslims went on a killing rampage, chanting: “Igbo, Igbo, Igbo, you are no longer part of Nigeria!” In the days that followed, 50,000 Igbos were killed in street uprisings.

Killing was not new to us in Biafra. I was 13, but I knew much of killing. Widows and orphans were most of the refugees in our camp. They had survived the Igbo “Dance of Death” — a euphemism for the mass executions. One thousand men at gunpoint forced to dance a public

Comment: Our camp’s coordinates: St. Joseph Refugee Camp Saint Joseph’s Primary School, Awka-Etiti, Biafra

Comment: The camp’s soccer field used as training grounds for Biafran Rangers and BOFF (Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters).

Comment: The camp boss was an elderly man we addressed as “Mr. Okadigbo.” He was the father of well-known Nigerian politician Chuba Okadigbo. My father volunteered as the camp nurse and I his assistant.

Comment: My Cousin Ifeajuna January 15, 1966. Gbenoba Street, Agbor, Midwest Region, Nigeria

Dad came home (from his job as a nurse at Central Hospital, Agbor) and informed us that some young army officers have overthrown the elected government. Their leader was Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna, whom my mother referred to as her “handsome brother Emmanuel,” even though he was merely her distant cousin.

“Cousin” Emmanuel killed the Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa while Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu killed the powerful and revered Premier of Northern Nigeria Ahmadu Bello.

A few days later, their boss Major-General Johnson Thomas Ummunnakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi took over in a counter-coup. According to popular legend, Aguiyi-Ironsi possessed supernatural powers. Some believed that his walking stick is a magical charm that he used to redirect bullets during when he was commander of the United Nation’s peace-keeping forces in the Congo crisis. My childhood friend explained that Ironsi did not take cover in the Congo crisis. In the heat of battle, Ironsi stood tall and courageously using his magical walking stick to redirect bullets aimed at him.

A few days later, I enrolled in St. ... [1]

Comment: July 29, 1966 Military ruler Aguiyi-Ironsi killed in a coup d’etat led by officers from northern Nigeria. Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon becomes new ruler.

Comment: Dance of Death Asaba, Nigeria On October 5, 6, & 7, 1967: Residents of Asaba were ordered by Nigerian soldiers to attend a public dance. Thousands of unarmed civilians who showed up were shot and buried en masse in shallow graves. One man was buried with his hand protruding above his shallow grave. The public execution, it ... [2]

dance. Seven hundred were then shot and buried en masse in shallow graves. When told to hurry up and return to his regular duty, one of the murderers said: “The graves are not yet full.”

Comment: This genocide took place on October 5,6,&7, 1976 in Asaba, Nigeria. For details, read:

Blood on the Niger: The First Black on Black Genocide, The Untold Story of the Asaba Massacre in the Nigerian Civil War
by Emmanuel "Emma" Okocha

A few days later, with only the clothes on our backs, we fled from this “Dance of Death.” That was six months before Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Teacher and I were eventually conscripted into the Biafran army and sent to the front, two years after our escape.

Comment: The Day of the Long Night

We fled Agbor in May 1967 and a few weeks later my father, James, fled Agbor as Nigeria's foremost Man of War and Merchant of Death, Lieutenant Colonel Murtala Mohammed, in *Radio Midwest*, Benin City, Nigeria, circa September 21, 1967 warned:

After the war, Teacher – who had taught me the name of Martin Luther King – was among the one million who had died. I – a child soldier – was one of the fifteen million who survived.

“My destination is Onitsha, brothers and sisters. Let nobody stand on my way, for anything that stands on my way would be crushed.”

Comment: We fled my hometown, Onitsha, which was the Ground Zero of the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War.

Africa is committing suicide: a two-decade war in Sudan, genocidal killings in Rwanda, scorched-earth conflicts in Ethiopia, Somalia, Uganda, and Liberia. The wars in modern Africa are the largest global-scale loss of life since the establishment of the Atlantic Slave trade, which uprooted and scattered Africa's sons and daughters across the United States, Jamaica, and Brazil.

Comment: Giwa Amu, former Solicitor-General of Midwestern Nigeria, reflecting on the civil war in the March 16, 1983 issue of the *Sunday Observer* said:

“For record purposes, however, let me state fearlessly that I saw hundreds of unarmed [Igbo] civilians being shot at sight in Benin City when [Nigerian] Federal troops arrived to liberate the city from [Biafran] rebel soldiers.... There appeared to be a fleeting period of lunacy in which Midwesterners gladly identified their Igbo compatriots to be shot down by Federal troops.”

Africa's wars are steering the continent toward a sea of self-destruction so deep that even the greatest horror writers are unable to fathom its depths. So, given our circumstances, Martin Luther King was a name unknown, a dead man among millions, with a message that never reached the shores of Biafra.

Comment: I was conscripted in early August 1969 into the Biafran army, while working as an Onye Mburu (human head porter) at the banks of the River Niger at Ndoni. Within minutes, I was matched to the front at Oguta.

Comment: Nickname conferred by foreign correspondents on Colonel Benjamin Adekunle, Commander of the Federal 3rd Marine Commando Division

Neither did his message reach the ears of “The Black Scorpion,” Benjamin Adekunle, a tough Nigerian army commander, whose credo of ethnic cleansing knew nothing of Martin Luther King Jr.'s movement: “We shoot at everything that moves, and when our forces move into Igbo territory, we even shoot things that do not move.”

Comment: April 26, 1968: In an article entitled “Nightmare in Biafra,” *Sunday Times* (London, 4/26/68, p.12), a war reporter wrote: “I have seen things in Biafra this week which no man should have to see. Sights to search the heart and sicken the conscience I have seen children roasted alive, young girls torn in two by shrapnel, pregnant women ... [3]

As we heed Martin Luther King Jr.'s call, and march together across the world stage, let us never forget that we who have witnessed and survived the injustice of such nonsensical wars are the torchbearers of his legacy of peace for our world, our nation, and our children.

Philip Emeagwali has been called “a father of the Internet” by CNN and TIME, and extolled as “one of the great minds of the Information Age” by former US president Bill Clinton.



[Philip Emeagwali](#)

Excerpted from speeches delivered by Philip Emeagwali on April 2 & 4, 2008 at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia at the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.

Emeagwali was inducted into Morehouse College's first-ever Hall of Fame honoring exceptional individuals who have made significant contributions in the spirit of the late Dr. King's philosophies. He was also inducted into the Gallery of Prominent Refugees of the United Nations.

Comment: Philip Emeagwali was inducted into the first class of Martin Luther King International Board of Renaissance Leaders Hall of Fame.



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<http://biafra.info/>



A Biafran a few days after the war was over.



Philip Emeagwali recalled: “With only the clothes on our backs, we fled from this ‘Dance of Death.’”



Biafran Soldiers Training in Umuahia

Philip Emeagwali recalled: “Teacher and I were eventually conscripted into the Biafran army and sent to the front, two years after our escape.”



Benjamin Adekunle (above) said: “We shoot at everything that moves.”



Benjamin Adekunle inspecting his troops. Adekunle said: "When our forces move into Igbo territory, we even shoot things that do not move... "



Benjamin Adekunle (October 12, 1970)

Memorable Quote

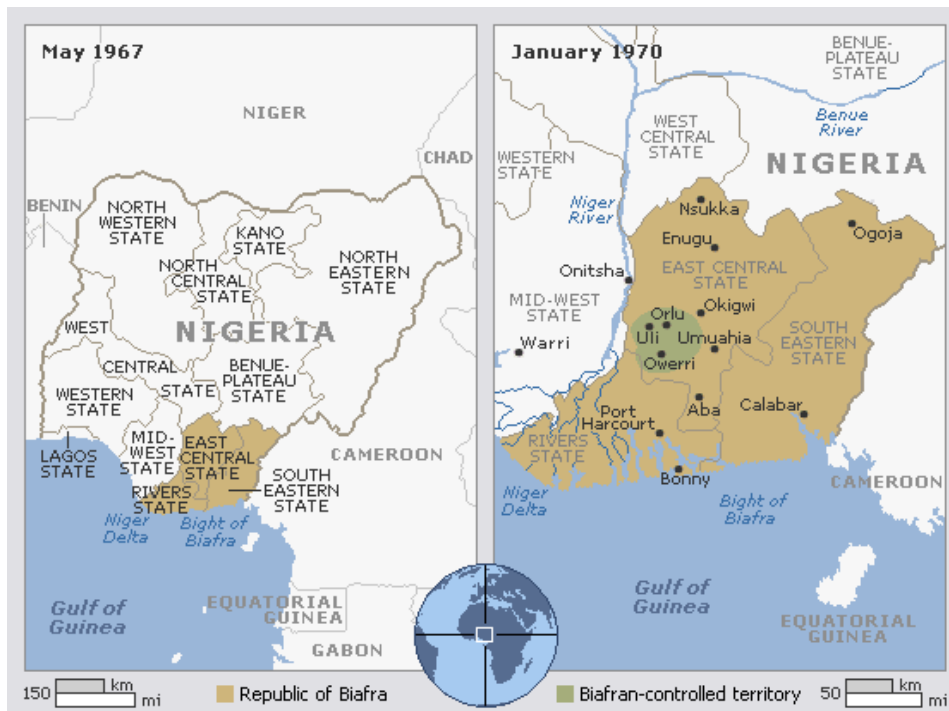
"I want to see no Red Cross, no Caritas, no World Council of Churches, no Pope, no missionary and no UN delegation.

I want to prevent even one Igbo from having even one piece to eat before their capitulation. We shoot at everything that moves, and when our forces move into Igbo territory, we even shoot things that do not move... "

Benjamin Adekunle, a.k.a. "Black Scorpion," Commander, 3rd Marine Commando Division, Nigerian Army.



Biafran refugees fleeing from Owerri, October 1968.

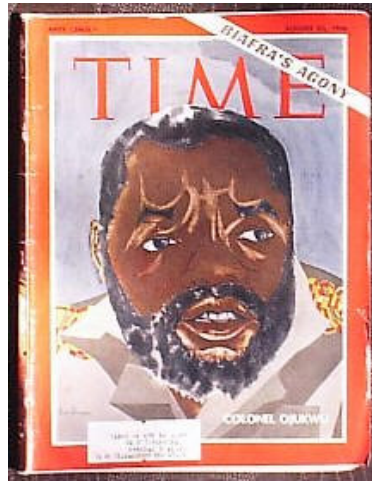


Emeagwali: “Eight out of ten Biafrans were refugees exiled from their own country.”

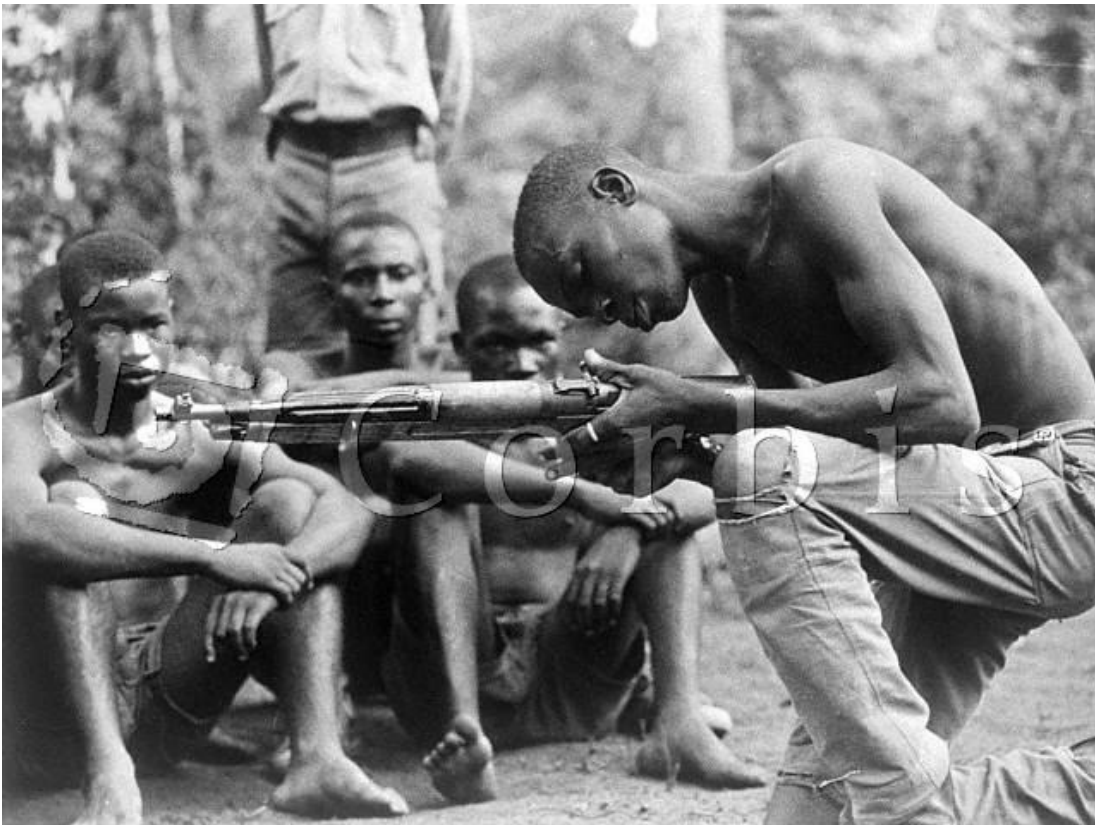


Philip Emeagwali (1973, Onitsha, Nigeria)

“After the war, Teacher – who had taught me the name of Martin Luther King – was among the one million who had died. I – a child soldier – was one of the fifteen million who survived.” – Philip Emeagwali

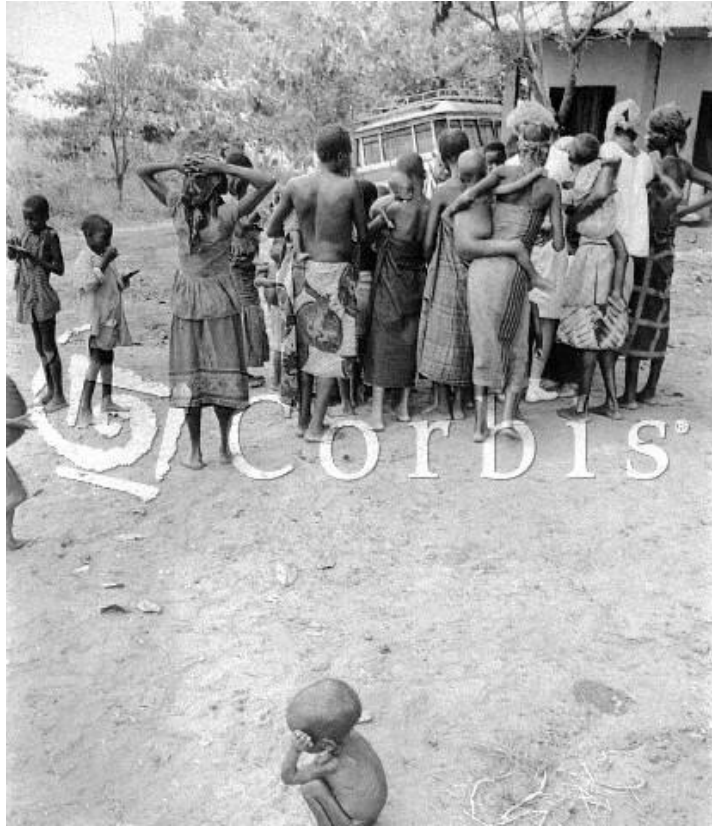


August 23, 1968 issue of Time (Emeagwali's 14th birthday)



Training Camp in Owerri, Biafra

Emeagwali: “Teacher and I were eventually conscripted into the Biafran army and sent to the front, two years after our escape.”



Biafran Refugee Camp (July 23, 1969)

Emeagwali: “A dusty camp in Biafra where survivors waited and hoped for peace.”

Comment: Our camp's coordinates:
St. Joseph Refugee Camp
Saint Joseph's Primary School,
Awka-Etiti, Biafra

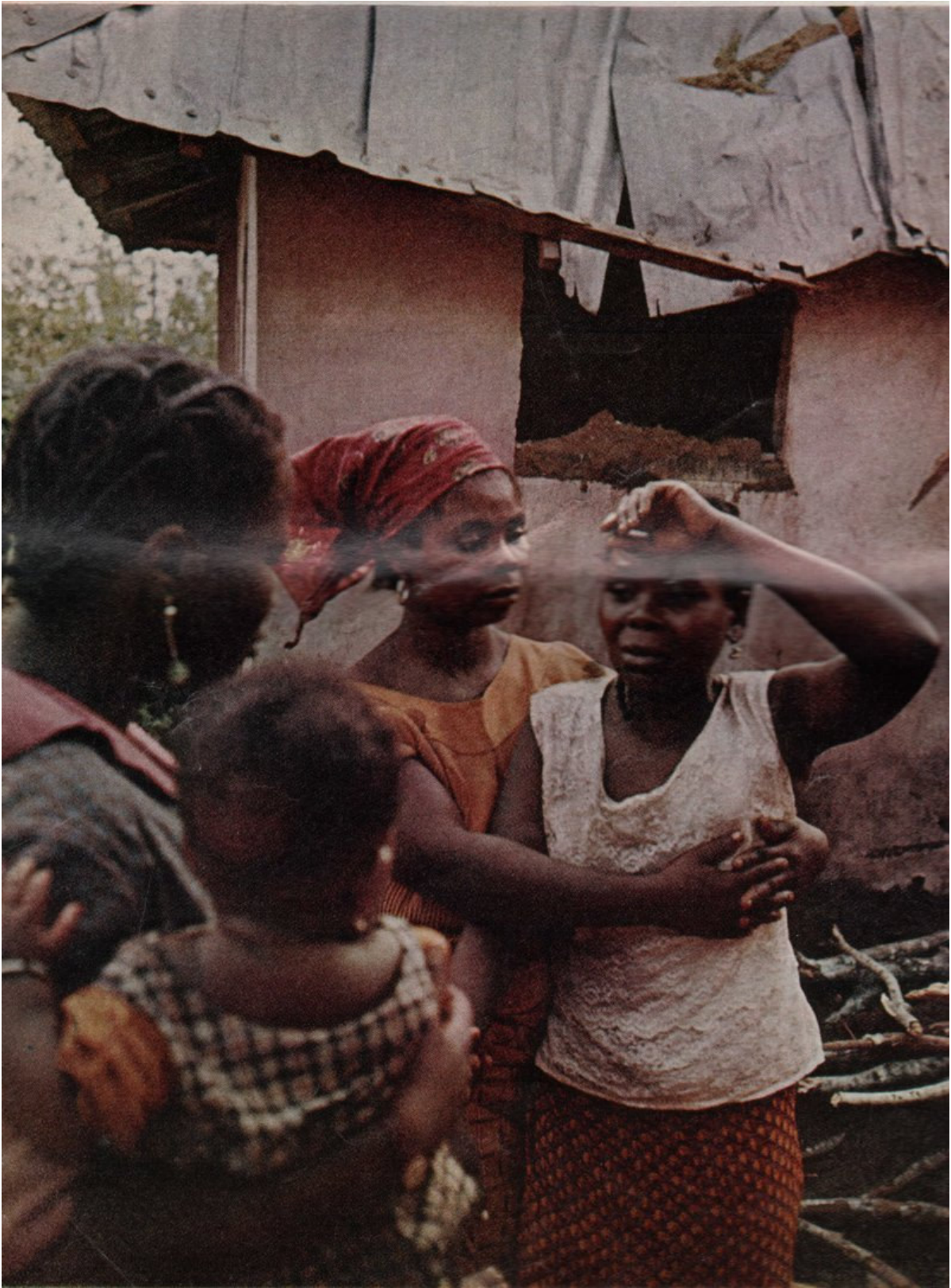


Philip Emeagwali was part of this Biafran crowd fleeing heavy artillery attacks on the day Awka was captured. (Life Magazine, July 12, 1968)



Nigerian Bombing Raid on Biafran Civilians
(Life Magazine, July 12, 1968)

Emeagwali recalled: “One thousand men at gunpoint forced to dance a public dance. Seven hundred were then shot and buried en masse in shallow graves. When told to hurry up and return to his regular duty, one of the murderers said: “The graves are not yet full.””



Woman searching for her lost daughter after a Nigerian bombing raid on Biafra.

(Life Magazine, July 12, 1968)

good day prof. i was doing something on google search and i stumbled on peoples reaction to your story on biafra. i want to read the story, thats why i am asking for your web address. i am ikem asika from onitsha and my e.mail add. is ikemasika@yahoo.com

Hi Bro Philip,

You're such of a man of integrity; we the sons of Igbo land respect your reputation, especially me Henrymoore, Keep your heads up brother.

Brother.....what is still holding the republic of Biafra to manifestation? What are the hindrances? Are we still going to be liberated? Can you come and contest for a president? Please answer all my questions and put more light in me, have a nice day and remain blessed.
Henrymoore Okechukwu

Dear Philip, i just read your letter to martin luther king.i stay and work in swaziland a tiny kingdom boardered with south afdrica.i was born during the biafra war and have heard a lot of brave stories from relative and have read a bit about.i never knew you were a child soldier but now i know.if you do have the time would you share a bit more of your experience with me. i am really intrested in putting up a book not directly linked to the biafran war but a book that could help our igbo people redirect their marginalization stories into a more positive ways of helping ourself.i do hope you will find time in your busy schedule to write to me.do have a good inguration week.
chijioke okerue

Dear philip,

I read your write-up in SUN newspaper of 17th january 2009 and it made me to be afriad.The reason is that at 4 yrs during the war,i heard stories about the war but the picture you created in your piece is horrodous.I did not believe that such genocide took place in this land.

The greatest surprice is to know that you experience this.Now you will agree with me that apart from the civil war IGBO genuises are been wasted in this nation using you as an example.

I am a clergy who believein nigerian unity but still will be happy if the igbos will as a body be united to form a formidable wall against the destruction of their rich human

resources. I will appreciate getting more of this historical resource from you.

thanks
your sincerely
pastor francis chinweze

Dear Sir,

I read your article on the Sun newspaper and I was moved.

It's a sorry story. Hearing it from a first-hand witness made it more pathetic. 1 million died in that war, the death match, brothers killing each other; it's a pity.

I wonder where we are heading to? Africa is backwards and that is sad because that's not where she should be. What is the problem? Is history hunting us? Or is it because we are using government instrument and structures strange to us?

"Africa is committing suicide." This is one of the sadest lines I have ever read. I am sorry for Africa, I am sorry for Nigeria. Any way out? I wonder.

We won't be long here so let's use all the time we've got to prepare for eternity

Written by Paschal Aguinam

Dear Philip Emagwali,

Father of the internet! Without your birth, I may not have had the opportunity of writing you via this medium (Internet) at this very moment. I thank Almighty God for your survival in the excruciating, agonizing and dehumanizing Biafra War. I wonder what the world of Science would be like if a genius like you were lost in such a war. Indeed, the loss would have been a slaughter and inimical to the development of science in the world. You have made invaluable contribution to mankind.

I am Chukwuemke Ezeaku by name, a student of Enugu State University of Science and Technology. I want to use this opportunity to thank you immensely for your contribution in the field of science, especially in the development of the Super-Computer. Indeed, you are more than a super-Human.

Each time I browse the ever slow internet connection here in Nigeria, I will always remember you. I will always ponder on the amount of time you have save humanity by your work.

On the other hand, I feel bad ironically. Why? I can't believe that your motherland Nigeria will still be suffering slow internet connection. Sometime it takes me more than 48 hours to upload a 10mb size of data to my web server. Can you come and rescue your mother land, Nigeria?

We really need support from people like you to enable us develop our ideas and perhaps the ultimate capitals as you have taught me.

Today, in Nigeria, I live in darkness. I do not have the basic power supply to power my personal computer.

Today, I am faced with the challenge of finding alternative, environmentally friendly and cheap power supply to help me solve the problem of epileptic power supply in Nigeria.

I do not want to blame anyone for the problem. I think the best thing I will do is to find solution to my problem and work towards solving the problem.

In summary, I am working towards setting up a scientific foundation called "Famous Gurus", a forum where talented/gifted Nigerian Youths will develop their talent for betterment of Africa. I want you to know that your speech of May 11th 2008 on the African Day at Spain is Great Inspiration for all Africans across the world. I strongly agree with you "Africa Must Produce or Perish" Today I am starting Famous Gurus with nothing but idea. Your concept, "Idea is Capital" which I once read in Celtel Magazine will remain inspirational, motivational and indelible in my mind.

I am trying to raise capital with my idea to help build this foundation here in Nigeria. But to be frank, it has not been easy. One of the projects I recently setup to help me raise capital is being handicapped by slow internet connection and epileptic power supply here in Nigeria. I have launched a blog called tellmeonline.net, an informative blog where anybody will be free to share information.

I will also like to use this medium to seek permission for publication of most of your articles and speeches in the website www.tellmeonline.net

I just need your support.

Thanks and extend my greetings to your lovely family.

Dear Philip Emeagwali.

Please, due to your articles I read in sun newspapers on Saturday, January 17, 2009.

With due respect, I know you talked about global peace and security in the world and making some references about wars in African continents and your genocidal experiences

as Biafran child soldier during Nigerian genocide and ethnics cleansing against the Ibos in Nigerian. In Iboland today we have people of different ideologies towards Ibos in Nigerian and many organsation in place in Ibo land now to free the Ibos from Bondage the found themselves. In this note I want to know your stance, the way forwards for the Ibos.

Iam Robert Iwu. from Imo state and everyday worried how to help the Ibos in Nigeria. Weighing many optiions to take to move on in libration of Ibos. But not options of hursting flags on the trees, no. or peaceful demonstration no, because history had shown it never worked anywhere in the world. Although I never be part of the Ideas. I have not seen you but I heard of you as a proud Ibo son, and you have made history in IT tech. in America. I wish you more grease to you elbow am writing you from far east Asia [Cambodia] .

Please mail me back,
Robert Iwu

MASSOB/Biafra Provisional Government (BPG),
Office of Foreign Affairs.
E-mail: biafranforeignministry@yahoo.com
9th September 2008

Dear Sir,

REQUEST FOR YOUR OBSERVATION AND PRESENCE IN BIAFRALAND (EASTERN NIGERIA) ON OUR MASSOB 9TH YEAR ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION ON 13TH SEPTEMBER 2008

We the entire MASSOB/Biafra Provisional Government (Biafra Shadow Government and Biafra Government in Exile) bring to your notice of our 9th year anniversary of our movement for the actualization of the Sovereign States of Biafra (MASSOB) through the leadership of Chief Ralph Uwazulike on 13th September 2008 with the cultural dances and Biafran Football Competiition throughout Biafraland which is in line with the celebration of our 41st year Biafra Independence Anniversary in conjunction with the United Nations resolution and support for indigenous self-determination or political autonomy on the September 12 and 13, 2007.

Biafra is our only solution and hope from Nigeria genocide, incarcerations and threats.

Finally sir, we plead for your obsevation, solidarity support to dissuade Nigeria government from their continued and uncountable genocidal killings, incarcerations, threats and terrorism against Biafrans. We also plead for your support for the release of all the MASSOB freedom fighters detained in all Nigerian cells, prisons since October 25 till date and to lead in partitioning and boundary adjustment of Nigeria/Biafra territories peacefully.

Best regards,
Mazi G.S.A. Okoro,
MASSOB/ BPG Foreign Affairs Officer,
For Chief Ralph Uwazulike
(MASSOB Leader)

Dear brother,

I read your piece (column) "death dance" in the Sun newspaper of Saturday 17th January, 2009 with most sincere compliments. Your brilliance is faster and beyond time. I am most delighted you were not forced to dance the "death dance" during the Biafran war. God knew that you are one of the chosen ones so much so that He prevented you from dancing in the "death dance" hall. God has raised you above your equals in that He wants to use you to do physical science for humanity. God is really glad that He has made you the father of internet and will still go ahead to take you higher in knowledge. Do you know indeed that you are amongst the chosen ones? If you have not known, this writer wants to make you realize this truth.

Do not be surprised when I use the title "brother" to address you with this mail. You are my brother so long as you are Igbo and Biafran by nature. I am afraid I would like to ask you this question! Have you prayed or been praying to God with Igbo language? Please I need an urgent answer to this question.

I pray that God will in less than no time accord you the universal recognition in Jesus name, amen. Halleluyah!

Your brother,
Bildad Chukwu



imeagwali.com

My Cousin Ifeajuna
January 15, 1966.
Gbenoba Street,
Agbor, Midwest Region, Nigeria

Dad came home (from his job as a nurse at Central Hospital, Agbor) and informed us that some young army officers have overthrown the elected government. Their leader was Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna, whom my mother referred to as her "handsome brother Emmanuel," even though he was merely her distant cousin.

“Cousin” Emmanuel killed the Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa while Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu killed the powerful and revered Premier of Northern Nigeria Ahmadu Bello.

A few days later, their boss Major-General Johnson Thomas Umunnakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi took over in a counter-coup. According to popular legend, Aguiyi-Ironsi possessed supernatural powers. Some believed that his walking stick is a magical charm that he used to redirect bullets during when he was commander of the United Nation's peace-keeping forces in the Congo crisis. My childhood friend explained that Ironsi did not take cover in the Congo crisis. In the heat of battle, Ironsi stood tall and courageously using his magical walking stick to redirect bullets aimed at him.

A few days later, I enrolled in St. Georges' Grammar School, Obinomba.

Dance of Death
Asaba, Nigeria
On October 5, 6, & 7, 1967:

Residents of Asaba were ordered by Nigerian soldiers to attend a public dance. Thousands of unarmed civilians who showed up were shot and buried en masse in shallow graves. One man was buried with his hand protruding above his shallow grave. The public execution, it was believed, was in retaliation for Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu's, a son of the soil, killing of the Premier of Northern Nigeria Sir Ahmadu Bello in January 1966.

April 26, 1968: In an article entitled "Nightmare in Biafra," Sunday Times (London, 4/26/68, p.12), a war reporter wrote: "I have seen things in Biafra this week which no man should have to see. Sights to search the heart and sicken the conscience I have seen children roasted alive, young girls torn in two by shrapnel, pregnant women eviscerated, and old men blown to fragments, I have seen these things and I have seen their cause: high-flying Russian Ilyushin jets operated by Federal Nigeria, dropping their bombs on civilian centres throughout Biafra ... At Onitsha - the 300 strong congregation of the Apostolic Church decided to stay on while others fled and to pray for deliverance. Col. [Murtala]

Mohammed's Second Division found them in the church, dragged them out, tied their hands behind their backs and executed them."

Sounds like fiction? Another eyewitness, William Norris, wrote in "The Times" of London of Thursday, April 25, 1968: "There is ... a young English doctor, Dr. Jan Hyde and his wife who worked in a hospital near Onitsha until they were forced to leave when the Federal troops moved in. The Hydes tell a horrifying story of the Apostolic Church near their home, where the congregation decided to stay and pray for deliverance instead of fleeing before Federal advance ... "