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*Review of Mercy Angels: Joint Church Aid and the
Humanitarian Crisis in Biafra, 1967-1970:
International Human Rights and Joint Church Aid by
Arua Oko Omaka*

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REVIEW

Mercy Angels: Joint Church Aid and the Humanitarian Crisis in Biafra, 1967-1970: International Human Rights and Joint Church Aid. By Arua Oko Omaka. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. 2016. Pp. xiv + 189

Several works have been written on the Nigerian-Biafra War. Yet several aspects of the war and its domestic and international dimensions remain unexplored. In *Mercy Angels*, Arua Oko Omaka explores the humanitarian crisis that occurred in Biafra in the wake of the war focusing on the role of the Joint Church Aid. Grounded within the discourse of human rights, the author draws attention to what has been described as the first genocide in postcolonial Africa refocused attention to humanitarianism and a new consciousnesses to state induced violence.

Employing local viewpoints and newspapers as well as archival sources, the book offers refreshing insights into an episode that still shape Nigerian politics. The book has an attractive immediacy.

While the widespread participation of many voluntary agencies in the war is well covered in the literature, the author focuses on the Joint Church Aid, the humanitarian crisis facing Biafra, the means Nigerian authorities used paradoxically to reinforce hegemony as well as to mobilize other nations and resources, the ways Biafran authorities sought to deal with the crisis, the ways local people resisted federal aggression, and the contradictions inherent in war-time humanitarian efforts, especially in the context of the Joint Church Aid. These are all interesting points and make the work worth considering.

The introduction and second chapter provide a broad overview of the political conditions preceding the war. As the author rightly reveals, the post-colonial problems in Nigeria were deeply rooted in the colonial past. British amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria, the subsequent application of indirect rule and the divide and rule policy of Great British in Nigeria created a state which was unable to reconcile its differences and deep divisions after independence in 1960. The events that culminated in the declaration of independence of Biafra following the failure of the efforts to reconcile the Eastern Region with the federal government of Nigeria had their roots in the colonial past. The failure of the diplomatic effort at Aburu in addition to the wide-spread killing of the Igbo and other easterners in northern Nigeria created the conditions that eventually lead to war. The author draws attention to the role of international politics especially British interest, the failure of the federal effort to prosecute a short war and the

enormous human toll the rigorous enforcement of food blockade by Nigerian state took on men, women and children in Biafra. The effective use of propaganda by the Biafra side which was executed by Markpress, a Geneva-based public had tremendous effect in galvanizing public opinion in Europe and North America.

The author addressed how the war aroused the world's conscious leading to the development of a global humanitarian response at the individual and community and organizational levels. The book explores individual and collective motivations for humanitarian aid as well as the role of Christian missionaries in Biafra. Perhaps for the first time in the post-war world II era, the world mobilized across religious line and racial lines for humanitarian support for Biafra. The author argues that the appeals by missionaries and the media campaign that followed set in motion a humanitarian movement that eventually led to the formation of the JCA. The controversies surrounding the role the JCA's the author show is particularly interesting in the debate over the role of humanitarian aid in conflict situations.

The book devotes attention to the formation of the JCA and the organization of humanitarian aid for Biafran civilians in chapter four. The JCA was formed as emergency humanitarian organization in response to the great suffering and death that was occurring on the Biafran side. The moral ideals that drew the attention of church groups and their intervention in the Biafran humanitarian crisis was underpinned by the "biblical principle of neighborly love, care for one another, and respect for the sanctity of life, which is the cornerstone of the principle of human rights."

The last chapter examines the controversies and debates surrounding the humanitarian response and politics of international aid in Biafra. He argues that that humanitarian aid in Biafra was controversial and deeply contested. The most critical issue revolved around the role of international organization and in some cases religious based organizations within a sovereign state. In the debate over sovereignty, the author argues that the belligerents' claim to sovereignty over humanitarian aid "contributed in prolonging the suffering of the masses. The struggle to assert national sovereignty on both sides of the conflict impeded the capacity of the JCA to carry out its humanitarian work." Perhaps a highly debatable argument by the author is the claim that the relief effort of the JCA as a humanitarian agency "had certain unintended consequences that reinforced opinions about its neutrality in the conflict . . . including the perception, particularly on the Nigerian side, that by providing foreign exchange for the Biafran government, the JCA unnecessarily prolonged the war." Yet perceptions are different from facts. The federal perception and the "negative impact on the public reputation of church organizations in Nigeria during and after the war" as the author claims neglect the perception on the other side of the conflict. What is the moral compass with which the impact of the war

would be measured? The church organizations were not driven by an ideology that derived from the sanctity of the sovereign right of the state; rather they were driven by a moral outrage that was created by a state that had lost its legitimacy to claim such a right over a group it was seeking to annihilate.

Overall the book offers a fresh and critical approach to the Nigeria-Biafra War and provides a significant contribution to the Nigeria-Biafra war literature and the emergence of international humanitarian organizations in general.

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