

NEH Application Cover Sheet (FA-252384)

Fellowships for University Teachers

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INSTITUTION

George Washington Univ.

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APPLICATION INFORMATION

Title: *'Keep Biafra Alive!' Religion, Global Media, and Popular Humanitarianism in Nigeria's Civil War*

Grant period: From 2017-07-01 to 2018-06-30

Project field(s): American Studies; Diplomatic History; History of Religion

Description of project: This project explores how the civil war in Nigeria (1967-70) became an international cause that helped forge a new form of popular humanitarianism—one that exhibited both the promise and the dangers of humanitarian intervention during and after the Cold War. As the province of Biafra struggled for independence, powerful images of starving children dominated news coverage in the US and Europe. This study analyzes how religious communities (Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish) mobilized as part of a larger movement that included hundreds of local groups as well as transnational organizations like the World Council of Churches. Their work did not save Biafra, but it reshaped citizen activism and enhanced arguments for aggressive humanitarian intervention in future crises. *Keep Biafra Alive* provides a new interpretation of Biafra that is genuinely transnational and uniquely attentive to religion, highlighting the role of visual images and affect in shaping international support for Biafra.

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NEH Supplemental Information for Individuals

This form should be used by applicants to the NEH Fellowships, Fellowships for Advanced Social Science Research on Japan, Awards for Faculty, and Summer Stipends Programs.

Field of Project:

Field of Project #2:

Field of Project #3:

Project Director Field of Study:

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Institutional Affiliation

Are you affiliated with an institution? (If yes, provide information below.) Yes No

Institution Name:

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Status: Senior Scholar Junior Scholar

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Nominating Official (Summer Stipends Applicants Only)

Are you exempt from nomination? If not, provide information below. Yes No

First Name:

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Melani McAlister

**“Keep Biafra Alive!”
Religion, Global Media, and Popular Humanitarianism during Nigeria’s Civil War**

The cover of *Time* from January 26, 1970 was jolting: an orange skull with huge eye sockets set against a lurid green background. A group of African men were sketched in the foreground, their faces drawn. The headline, splashed across a corner: “Biafra: End of a Rebellion.” The US media had covered the civil war in Nigeria intensively, and the skull on *Time*’s cover evoked the images of starving children that had galvanized US public opinion. Activists had trumpeted their call to “Keep Biafra Alive!” on flyers and in newsletters, and Americans and Europeans alike had embraced Biafra’s struggle as a humanitarian crisis and political cause. Now, *Time* reported, Biafra was officially dead.

From 1967 to 1970, the Nigerian civil war riveted the world’s attention as a secessionist movement in the eastern province struggled to create an independent state. Militarily, the war between Nigeria and Biafra was hardly a match. Within six months of the start of the war, the tide had already turned against Biafra. Nigeria’s victory seemed all but certain. But when Nigeria began to blockade Christian-identified Biafra, both secular activists and religious communities—Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish—were horrified. Images of dead civilians and starving children were everywhere in the news, and the cause seemed straightforward: a draconian Nigerian government was intentionally starving a rebellious region into submission. In response, a transnational coterie of advocates, together with an activist global media, embraced Biafra’s struggle as a humanitarian crisis and, ultimately, as a political cause.

My project, *“Keep Biafra Alive!” Religion, Global Media, and Popular Humanitarianism during Nigeria’s Civil War*, explores how Biafra became an international cause that helped forge a new form of popular humanitarianism—one that exhibited both the promise and the dangers of humanitarian intervention during and after the Cold War. The movement to “Keep Biafra Alive” was built on transnational networks that had been politically activated by the Vietnam War, civil rights, and opposition to apartheid. This book examines the activities of national and local groups in the US, UK, Ireland, and France, as well as transnational organizations such as Oxfam and the World Council of Churches. Although most groups initially declared themselves to be apolitical, interested only in humanitarian relief, that stance often changed as the war progressed. The World Council of Churches, for example, began to deliver aid, under cover of night, in violation of Nigeria’s blockade. Other groups advocated for policy changes by governments. The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive raised money, held vigils, and ultimately lobbied, unsuccessfully, for US recognition of Biafra. The organization’s name was intentionally multivalent: to keep the *people* of Biafra alive, the world must provide food and medicine, but to keep the *nation* of Biafra alive would require great political will. Specifically, it would require a willingness to accept the division of Nigeria, Africa’s great postcolonial success story.

The transnational movement left a complex legacy. In the years following the conflict, the Biafran experience became what Alex de Waal has called the “totem and taboo” of modern humanitarianism. On the one hand, the extraordinary response in Biafra showed the capacity of both ordinary people and international NGOs to respond quickly to large-scale crises. Yet, in hindsight, if the world’s passionate support for an underdog prolonged the unwinnable Biafran struggle, then citizen activism may have cost more lives than it saved. This was what de Waal meant when he referred to Biafra as a “taboo” for humanitarians: it was a triumph of mobilization that may also have been party to a great tragedy.

Research and Contribution

As a transnational study of non-state actors, the book is unique in its exploration of how religious sensibility, media reporting, and grassroots movements intersected to forge an argument for both humanitarian and political support for Biafra. “Keep Biafra Alive!” argues that the war transformed the international humanitarian movement, creating a more politicized model of response. Aid work with a political agenda was not new, but the popular humanitarianism centered on Biafra was distinctive, energized by religious networks that had long worked to “feed the hungry” but were now willing to address issues of race, foreign policy, and global inequality.

Scholars of humanitarianism have only begun to pay sustained attention to Biafra, although the war has long been understood by practitioners as a touchstone, a compelling yet dangerous legacy. This project shows how the work of humanitarianism in Biafra was built significantly around the powerful meaning-making practices of religious communities, melded with the affective power of the images coming out of the war zone. The book complicates our understandings of what it meant for Americans or Europeans to support decolonizing African nations in the context of a possible division of Nigeria on the grounds of self-determination for Biafra. I show how this reality was particularly difficult for African American leaders, who were torn between sympathy for the suffering of Biafrans and pride in Nigeria's economic and political success. "Keep Biafra Alive" is the first full-length study that takes into account the intersecting roles of grassroots activists, transnational religious organizations, NGOs, and the news media in reshaping the meanings of humanitarianism for European and American publics. It was during the Biafra war that humanitarians and activists began to develop the idea of a "responsibility to protect," a call that would shape world responses to events from Kosovo to Syria.

Overall, "Keep Biafra Alive" makes three key interventions. First, I argue that non-state, grassroots actors are central to the history of the international responses to the war. These activists did not, in general, manage to significantly alter state policy, but they profoundly shaped public understanding and mobilized a constituency for humanitarian action. In this approach, I join historians who have expanded the study of diplomatic history to include non-state actors and their transnational networks. Many of the organizations I examine were either local or national, from the Britain-Biafra Association to the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, but they were linked across borders, through newsletters and religious networks, via speakers' tours, or merely by reading about each other in the media. In addition, the basic arguments these groups made were transnational and universalist; even when they lobbied for changes in a government's foreign policy, the organizations did so in the name of human rights and a fundamental opposition to human suffering. This, they believed, was elemental, not to be undermined by Nigeria's assertions of sovereignty. This claim to universalism allowed many of the pro-Biafra groups to maintain a self-image as apolitical, even as they campaigned for more muscular, state-led humanitarian intervention.

Second, the book brings visual culture into the heart of the story. Affect is a central category of my analysis; people *felt* the Biafra crisis as much as they thought about it—all the more as images of children, bellies distended by protein deficiency, circulated broadly. I explore how all parties vied to control the representations of the war. Race and colonialism were key to these images, as US and European media built on a long history of representing Africans as abject, prone to violence, and in need of rescue by the West. Central to my analysis, however, is the role of Biafran leaders in actively shaping public awareness. While they lacked the military power and political influence to directly impact US or European policy, they did have, and use, the visible evidence of their own suffering. Making sure those images reached American and European homes was a war strategy for Biafra.

Finally, this project analyzes religion as part of a larger transnational history, showing the profound impact of religious sensibility on political action and humanitarian impulse. Foreign policy history has too often interpreted "religion" as a distinct, rather exotic category of special interest politics. I take a different approach. Rather than focusing on the religious views of policymakers or the policy statements of denominations, I build on religious studies scholarship that highlights "lived religion" in order to show the affective power of humanitarian work that was experienced as sanctified. Groups like the World Council of Churches freely mixed lobbying and financial support with prayer services, press releases, and emotional testimony from Christians in Biafra. Tracing religion as simultaneously numinous and ordinary, I examine religious networks as key to the cultural work that reshaped humanitarian politics in the second half of the twentieth century. I take up the French case as comparative, because the pro-Biafra movement there was part of the self-consciously secular of the French Left. (That activism ultimately led to the formation of *Médecins sans Frontières/ Doctors without Borders*.) Highlighting religion, visual culture, and the politics of affect, "Keep Biafra Alive" is a cultural study of political transformation.

Methods and Work Plan

I am a cultural historian specializing in the intersection of religion, popular culture, and foreign policy. For this project, I focus on three types of archival documents. First are those for specific

organizations such as the American Jewish Committee or Oxfam; these allow me to see how different organizations worked, what issues they debated, and how their understandings of the war evolved. Second are the national archives in the US, England, and Ireland; these often hold government correspondence with activist groups and commentary on their influence. Third are the newsletters and ephemera held at the Nigerian National Archives at Enugu and Ibadan, which allow me to explore Biafrans' production of representations that would circulate at home and abroad. In addition, I will examine published documents, including newspaper reports and memoirs. In my final chapter, I will explore the construction of the popular memory of Biafra, focusing on the US and UK reception of Chimamanda Adichie's 2002 novel *Half a Yellow Sun* and Chinua Achebe's 2012 memoir *There Was a Country*.

I have already done significant work with the State Department's Central Files and the papers of the Clearing House for Nigeria/Biafra Information at Swarthmore. In summer 2016, I will examine the records of the National Council of Churches, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the American Jewish Committee, all in New York. The NEH fellowship will allow me travel to Europe to consult the National Archives of the UK, the papers of Oxfam in Oxford, and the World Council of Churches archive in Geneva. For the French case, I will use both secondary sources and the French documents in the UK and WCC archives. My research will be enhanced by a conference that I am organizing for spring 2017, "Remembering Biafra." I am working with two other scholars (historian Nemata Blyden, who specializes in West Africa, and political scientist Michael Barnett, who has written extensively on humanitarianism) to bring scholars and humanitarians from around the world to analyze the causes, legacies, and lessons of the war. In early 2018, I will begin drafting my book. It will be a shorter and more focused project than either of my first two, and I expect to have a full manuscript by September 2019.

Competencies Skills, and Access: I have an excellent record of scholarship on religion, culture, and international affairs. In addition to my first two books, I have written twelve scholarly articles that address these issues, tracing US cultural and political engagements with the Middle East and Africa. In my first book, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (rev. ed. 2005, o. 2001), I explored the multiple vectors through which Americans became "interested" in the Middle East, examining popular culture texts as part of the discourse of international affairs. *Epic Encounters* has sold more than 20,000 copies in two editions.

In spring 2016, I completed the final manuscript for *Our God in the World: The Global Visions of American Evangelicals*, which is forthcoming from Oxford University Press in 2017. An interdisciplinary study of the ways that US evangelicals have engaged global issues since 1960, it seeks to explain the historical transformations that brought internationalism to evangelical communities once known for their insularity. I worked on *Our God in the World* for ten years, beginning after the second edition of *Epic Encounters* was published in 2005. My research included travel, interviews, and/or archival work in Sudan, South Africa, Kenya, Israel, Lebanon, and Egypt, as well as archives across the US. Thus I have background and experience in researching the role of US non-state actors in Africa as well as the transnational politics of religion.

Final Product and Dissemination: This is a multi-year project with several products. The first, the "Remembering Biafra" conference, will be completed before an NEH Fellowship would begin. The second product is the book described here. My goal is for "Keep Biafra Alive!" to be accessible for undergraduate classes and an educated general audience. (b) (4) has expressed great interest in it a possible trade book. The third product is my work as an advisor to GW's new Institute for African Studies as it plans for a digital history project, "The Death and Long Life of Biafra." That resource will bring together essays by scholars and primary sources such photographs onto a platform that will be suitable for teaching. The 50th anniversary of the start of the Biafra war in 2017 is likely to stimulate interest in its history, and recent international humanitarian crises may lead more people to try to learn the lessons of previous interventions. Overall, the book and other projects will, I hope, play their own role in keeping Biafra alive—in our scholarly understanding of the history of struggle and international intervention in Africa; as part of the history of religion; and as a key moment in the development of modern, transnational humanitarian activism, with its limits and its promise.

“Keep Biafra Alive!” Bibliography

Primary Sources: archives and sample published sources

African Activist Archive, Michigan State Univ.; American Jewish Committee; Clearing House for Nigeria/Biafra Information; National Archives of Ireland; National Archives & Records Admin. (US), Department of State Files; National Archives of Nigeria, Enugu and Ibadan; National Council of Churches; Oxfam archives; Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archive; RTE Irish Television archive; UK National Archives; US Conference of Catholic Bishops; World Council of Churches; World Vision.

US serials, beyond major papers and magazines: *Baltimore Afro-American*; *Baptist Press*; *Christian Century*; *Christianity Today*; *Chicago Daily Defender*; *Commonweal* (Catholic); *Commission* (Baptist); *Jet*; *Moody Monthly*; *Negro Digest*; *Saturday Review*; *World Vision*; *Voice of Missions* (AME church).

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Ph.D. American Civilization, Brown University, May 1996.
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Organization of American Historians, Distinguished Lecturer, 2013-2019.
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Larry E. May Study Grant, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archive, 2013.
Visiting Scholar, University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg School of Communication, spring 2010.
Visiting Fellow, Davis Center for Historical Studies, Princeton University, fall 2007.
Visiting Fellow, Princeton University Center for the Study of Religion, 1998-99
R. H. Gabriel Dissertation Prize, American Studies Association, 1996.

Books, Journal articles, and Book chapters

Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, o. 2001. Revised and expanded edition, 2005.

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Professional Activities:

Co-Chair, Program Committee of the conf. of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, 2016.

International Working group on Global Evangelicalism, 2013-present funded by the Luce Foundation, convened by the Centre for Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies, University of Southampton, in co-operation with Keele University, King’s College London, and the Roosevelt Study Center, the Netherlands.

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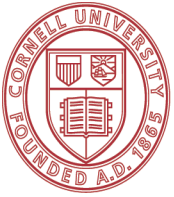


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