Humanitarianism and Sovereignty: Notes on a Defeat of the Postcolonial State

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> The only reparation that must be made is **to the nations of sub-Saharan Africa**, for the total state of underdevelopment into which the slave trade first plunged them: the **nations of the Western world** do not have a debt to repay here, but rather an immense crime whose consequences must be mitigated, **not in the form of charity and donations**, but within the perspective of new forms of **solidarity** that must be fostered between the world's archipelagos and continents. (Glissant, 2007)

> Starvation was a Nigerian weapon of war. Starvation broke Biafra fame and made Biafra last as long as it did. [...] Starvation made Zambia and Tanzania and Ivory Coast and Gabon recognize Biafra. (Adichie, 2007)

> The humanitarian NGOs were the first international organizations who sought to use the terminology of human rights in an attempt to justify political choices in the language of ethics. (Chandler, 2006)

Introduction

Named after the deputy from French Guiana who was its main proponent, the so-called Christiane Taubira law recognizes the slave trade and slavery as crimes against humanity. Sovereign France, through its president and national legislature, initiated and adopted the so-called Taubira law. The French government entrusted commissions, chaired by Maryse Condé and Édouard Glissant, with the task of defining how this law should be implemented. May 10 was chosen to symbolize the sovereignty of the French Republic in coming to terms with its past and to initiate a process of recognition toward a part of its people wounded by the slave trade, slavery, the abolitions,

and unresolved issues of historical memory. Sovereign France has chosen to heal still-unhealed wounds through this measure, both legislative and symbolic. In the passage quoted above, Glissant addresses the issue of reparations for crimes against humanity from a perspective of sovereignty involving both the nations of Black Africa and Western nations. In *Memory of Slavery* (*Mémoires des esclaves)* (2007), a book prefaced by Dominique de Villepin, then Prime Minister, Glissant rejects the humanitarian logic as a means of reparation for a crime against humanity. He thus dismisses the idea of reparation as a form of charity and instead calls for the activation of a logic of solidarity. In this regard, he rejects, in the case of Liberia, what he calls “calculating philanthropy” (Glissant, 1981). The example of Liberia, a nation founded by the American Colonization Society, an American NGO, highlights motivations that are not always as altruistic as some humanitarian endeavors suggest. Humanitarianism was the founding principle of Liberia’s political sovereignty. It also serves, in certain contexts, as a pretext for the destabilization of sovereign states. The narrative of humanitarianism as a force destabilizing sovereignty is particularly evident in The Congo of Patrice Émery Lumumba and in the Biafran tragedy.

Humanitarian intervention during the Biafran War invites us to question the relationship between humanitarianism and sovereignty. However, before addressing the case of Biafra, it is necessary to revisit the disintegration of the Congo and the death of Lumumba. We propose, as a working hypothesis, that the ghosts of the Congo haunt Biafra. The Biafran tragedy raises several questions about the conception of sovereignty. The Federal Republic of Nigeria advocates an absolutist conception of sovereignty. This sovereign absolutism grants the state all powers, including the power to starve and massacre the populations of Biafra, who were fought as secessionists, that is, as fellow citizens. In response to this logic, Biafra and its defenders invoke the sovereignty of the right to life as a moral principle justifying the severing of all allegiance to a state incapable of ensuring their protection. Biafra’s allies complicated this humanitarian equation. Humanitarianism in Biafra blurred the lines between the duty to save lives, politicization, and militarization (Achebe, 2012; Adichie, 2007; Emecheta, 1982). Our reflection will examine all these controversies. We begin with a brief history of the rise of humanitarianism in the political sphere. This brief historical overview of the associative movement traces the transformation of the humanitarian movement from the margins to the center of international relations. A historical overview shows that Afro-descendants, enslaved in the American colonies and Africa – more as a testing ground than as agents of history – played a role in the birth and reconfiguration of the humanitarian movement.

Non-Governmental Organizations: The March Toward Power

The institutionalization and internationalization of ethical obligations from the 19th century, under the dual influence of Enlightenment principles and Christian reform movements, contributed to the emergence of a human-rights logic as a prerequisite for an ideology of progress. (Barnett & Weiss, 2008, p. 19). Humanitarianism stems from this human-rights logic as the fundamental bond of a universal human community. The campaign for the abolition of slavery corresponds to the emergence of a transnational non-governmental movement. In 1775, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery was established, followed by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (Great Britain) in 1787, and the French Society of Friends or Black People (Société des Amis des Noirs (France)) in 1788. The associative movement converged at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to pressure governments by submitting 800 petitions demanding the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. At this stage, non-governmental organizations were groups operating outside the centers of decision-making. They operated as external forces exerting pressure on state actors. Gradually, this mode of operation changed with the participation of non-governmental organizations in the development of the normative framework governing the protection of fundamental rights. Thus, in 1863, Henri Dunant and the Red Cross defined the contours of humanitarian law aimed at humanizing warfare. In 1907, a parallel forum of associations was held at the Hague Peace Conference at the initiative of the International Council of Women. Non-governmental organizations demonstrated significant activism during World War I. As a logical consequence of this activism,

more than 200 associations participated in the peace negotiations held in Paris in 1919. The massive violations of human rights during World War II gave NGOs an ever-increasing moral influence in drafting the United Nations Charter. Article 71 formally recognized the existence of the associative movement (United Nations Charter, Chapter X, Art. 71).

Associations became increasingly involved in the development of the normative framework governing human rights. They also played an increasingly significant role in monitoring these norms. The institutional formalization of what had previously been an "informal mechanism for consulting associations" (Rubio, 2003, p. 729) of international civil society went hand in hand with the introduction of human-rights provisions into the UN treaty. By involving associations more directly in the development of universal norms, the institutional infrastructure also led to the politicization of the associative movement. "Human-rights diplomacy" (Rubio, 2003, p. 731) resulted in the moralization of international relations. This reflects a form of politicization of humanitarian law (Harouel-Bureloup, 2005, p. 489). The rationalization of modern philanthropy after World War II and the Holocaust led to the creation of an institutional infrastructure to respond to humanitarian disasters (Calhoun, 2009, p. 85). At the heart of the fundamental principles of humanitarian law, as defined by the Convention of 22 August 1864, impartiality, neutrality, independence, volunteerism, and universality are prominently featured.

The breach of neutrality led to the emergence of a humanitarian sovereignty, or sovereignty of humanitarian protection, which often conflicts with the sovereignty of states. For now, let us remain within the context of the abolition of slavery, considered by many scholars as a decisive step marking the transition from charity to humanitarianism (Archer-Straw, 2000; Calhoun, 2009; Pétré-Grenouilleau, 2004).

Pétré-Grenouilleau (2004) seeks to capture these logics through a comprehensive approach that allows the articulation of the relationship between slave-trading and slavery practices, the logic of mercantile capitalism, African logics of captive production, colonial plantation logics distinct from metropolitan circuits, and abolitionist logics integrated into the Enlightenment movement. The author asserts that the abolition of slavery was "imposed from outside on colonial and African societies that depended on it closely" (p. 219). Among the reasons explaining the non-existence of abolitionism in Africa, he cites the underdevelopment or absence of the nation-state concept. We note that the author invokes the absence of the nation-state to justify the moral and intellectual sovereignty of the West in the abolitionist process. He introduces a form of fragmentation of political sovereignty by separating what he calls colonial societies from the colonial metropoles.

In a way, the political sovereignty of France, the Netherlands, or Portugal over their slave-holding colonies is put in parentheses in order to preserve the image of a humanitarian West as the only agent of abolition. Ideological sovereignty (understood as all the ideas attributed to the Enlightenment) leads to a negation of political sovereignty. European colonies are excluded from the sovereignty of the metropoles in order to advance the thesis of a Europe whose Enlightenment abolishes slavery. This humanitarian-infused schizophrenia reproduces the demarcation between the colonial racism of European circles and the metropoles, which were immune to discriminatory practices prevailing in the colonies (Vergès, 2006, p. 48). The distance placed between slaveholding colonies and enlightened, abolitionist metropoles is part of a broader movement: the sovereignty of the voice of the Enlightenment, which can only radiate from a metropolitan position.

British ships patrol the seas to track now-clandestine slaving ships. National sovereignty thus becomes obsolete in the face of the military power of supranationality:

> Abolitionism, therefore, not only foreshadows the current ideology of humanitarianism with its ethic of urgency, its injunction to intervene and interfere in the affairs of sovereign states; it constitutes its first true manifestation, as well as a key step in the gradual affirmation of universal human rights. (Pétré-Grenouilleau, 2004, p. 286)

Supranationality, as a sign of modernity's ethics, foreshadows humanitarianism as a signifier of an ideology of progress. Colonization, which denies the sovereignty of colonized peoples, amplifies the surplus sovereignty of colonial empires. Colonization is defined as a humanitarian (or civilizing)

mission. The so-called Belgian Congo provides one of the most accomplished codifications of this form of conquest-oriented humanitarianism (Banning, 1877; Harms, 2019; Miers, 1967; Morel, 1906). What would later be codified as the duty to intervene fits into this logic. We know that this duty to intervene justifies what are called just wars (Péan sur Bernard Kouchner).

The duty to intervene has been invoked by the United Nations Security Council to justify the overthrow of regimes in Libya and Côte d'Ivoire. Humanitarian sovereignty relies on gunboat diplomacy to override the sovereignty of states perceived as hostile to the so-called international ethical order. We will not dwell here on the right to intervene, which is now enshrined in the UN Charter. What matters for our understanding and analysis is to follow the evolution of the relationship between sovereignty and humanitarianism. The struggle for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery constitutes a pivotal moment in the transformation of charity into humanitarianism. Afro-descendant peoples thus played a historical role in this reconfiguration of giving and receiving practices. Biafra represents a critical moment in the irruption of humanitarianism into a sphere previously occupied by politics. Once again, African peoples serve as a testing ground for a new conception of humanitarianism.

The Sovereignty of Humanitarianism?

The neutrality adopted by the Red Cross, described as a "quintessentially apolitical agency", has been called into question by the emergence of a "more rebellious and rowdy humanitarianism" (Barnett & Weiss, 2008, p. 37) embodied by Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) since its founding in 1971. Humanitarianism, in addition to assisting victims, takes a stance in conflicts. Since the end of the Cold War, a new rhetoric, structured around the duty to intervene, has challenged the principle of sovereignty in the name of the rights of individuals or groups:

> Discourses surrounding rights, sovereignty, and justice have slowly but impressively created new standards for states, provided new metrics of civilization, and suggested a new rhetoric of justification for intervention on behalf of the weak and powerless. (Barnett & Weiss, 2008, pp. 20-21)

These new parameters form the basis of the right to intervene, as we mentioned earlier. In this new context:

> Humanitarianism unbound sought to co-opt the instruments of political control—military and government budgets—to pursue its ambitions. Western human rights organizations projected their formula of civil and political liberties as the answer to complex governance. (de Waal, 2010, p. 303)

The alignment of governments with the ethical demand explains both the exponential growth of the humanitarian field and what some perceive as its hegemony in international relations.

The Biafran War became a battlefield between the sovereignty of the nation-state and the sovereignty of human rights. Biafra's leadership framed the political decision to secede from the Nigerian federation as a humanitarian act. In this logic, Biafra became a sanctuary for the persecuted Igbo people. The Nigerian and British governments adopted the traditional stance of defending the almost sacred principle of territorial integrity. NGOs, influenced by the ethical dilemmas arising from the atrocities of World War II, sided with Biafra against Nigeria. Based on this argumentation, Biafra can be interpreted as one of the first theaters of a "new ethical and morally committed world order established on the basis of protecting and promoting human rights" (Chandler, 2006, p. 2).

Humanitarianism in Neo-Colonial Service?

The "compassionate mechanism" ("mécanique compassionnelle") (Péan, 2008, p. 69) that Kouchner has employed since Biafra is said to amount to an "attempt to co-opt humanitarianism" (Péan, 2008, p. 71) aimed at advancing strategic, political, or personal interests. Indeed, Kouchner's popularity, as one of the most media-visible figures in the Médecins Sans Frontières adventure, opened doors to the

political world for him. After serving as Secretary of State for Humanitarian Action and as Minister of Health under socialist governments, Kouchner went on to serve as United Nations representative in Kosovo before switching sides and joining the right as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Kouchner blurred the lines between humanitarian action and politics. The notion of just war that he defended regarding Kosovo also raises the issue of the militarization of humanitarianism. The blurring of boundaries between military and humanitarian actions challenges the ethics of selfless solidarity, which underpins humanitarian interventions. Péan suggests that Kouchner often appears as the spokesperson for certain politico-military causes. Kosovo, one of the last arenas of confrontation between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), was also a theater for the deployment of armies in the name of humanitarian conscience. Long before Kosovo, U.S. military actions and its allies, following the first war against Iraq, had already been framed in humanitarian terms.

Bernard Kouchner was part of the French Doctors during the Biafran campaign. He went to Biafra as a physician working for the Red Cross (Lévy, 1992). However, he would abandon the principle of neutrality and become a partisan of the Republic of Biafra. Kouchner constantly refers to the period of his life as "the French doctor" to legitimize all his current actions (Péan, 2008, p. 27). A theorist of the notion of just war (Péan, 2008, p. 72), he regularly positions himself "in the field of objectives and television cameras, quickly adopting the guise of a modern Doctor Schweitzer" (Péan, 2008, p. 35). Péan (2008) notes that the Françafrique networks, that is, the influence France exerted in the early 1960s, are now defunct. Yet he concedes that in the 1960s:

> France's influence over its former colonies was then considerable. Françafrique was a reality then. Engagement in the Biafran secession is, moreover, the best illustration of this. Jacques Foccart was still at the height of his power. He was the main orchestrator of this affair" (p. 44), accused of "attempting to co-opt humanitarian aid" (p. 71).

Kouchner defends Biafra's sovereignty in the name of humanitarian intervention. This humanitarian duty to intervene aligned with France's efforts to strengthen its neo-colonial empire. This destabilization of Nigerian sovereignty carried out under a "humanitarian camouflage" invites us to reflect on what David Kennedy (2004) calls the "dark side of humanitarianism". Adichie (2007) reminds us that "starvation made Zambia and Tanzania and Ivory Coast and Gabon recognize Biafra"**.** France exploited bodies in distress to advance its neo-colonial strategy under humanitarian camouflage the bodies of starving children shared, with the pawns of the neo-colonial empire, a strategic weakness in the face of all-powerful France.

In his book *The Limits of Anarchy: Intervention and State Formation in Chad*, Sam Nolutshungu advances the hypothesis that the state can acquire legitimacy only if citizens believe in its infallible sovereignty. Nolutshungu (1996) argues that chronic dependence on external interventions, whether solicited by leaders or imagined by opposition groups, delays the formation of a sovereign and viable state:

> The authority of the modern state depends to a large extent on the belief of those who live under it that it is ultimate and not subject to appeal to some higher authority. It is a weakness of postcolonial states that the political elites are apt to believe that all the crucial decisions concerning their public life are taken elsewhere. It is a belief that undermines the sense of collective purpose and of political responsibility. It also makes difficult the construction of a sense of community and patriotism of the kind that established states rely upon in peace as well as in war. Regimes that are seen as externally conditioned are always subject to nationalist repudiation, and their claim to be responsive to the society in which they operate is suspect. Although intervention may gain a regime or a movement a critical military advantage and time to undertake the task, genuine state construction, one might then conclude, begins at the end of intervention, as a negation of it, asserting the autonomy of the political community and giving more substance to the distinction between « internal » and « external ». (Nolutshungu, 1996, p. 13)

The debate on neo-colonialism, the graveyard of the sovereignty of the so-called Francophone African states, continues to shape the imagination of people living in Africa. This is evidenced by the demagogic surge across the Sahel, the desert garden that fertilizes military dictatorships. The demagogic surge sweeping the Sahel rests on a claim – this time non-demagogic – of sovereignty, long compromised if one reads the memoirs of Jacques Foccart, former perpetual adviser on African affairs under several French presidents. Foccart elaborates extensively on the instrumentalization of humanitarianism by the French government in its project to destabilize the Nigerian state during the Biafran conflict.

The activation of the right to intervene presupposes that the nation-state is perceived as a destructive force, either through failure or through the deployment of violence conceptualized as illegitimate, according to this restrictive theory of sovereignty: "The competence of NGOs begins, as their name indicates, in the ungoverned space. It is in these 'gaps' of sovereignty that their competence lies." (Troubé, 2006, p. 23). The ungoverned is the space occupied by rebels, refugees, and humanitarian agents. It bears witness to the sacrifices made by humanitarian actors to restore human dignity. Erica James, in *Democratic Insecurities: Violence, Trauma, and Intervention in Haiti*, argues that humanitarian interventions linked to the restoration of democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide were part of "practices of governmental accountability and transparency" (James, 2010, p. 3). At that time, the Haitian state, led by the military junta that had overthrown Aristide, was perceived as a destructive force and a source of misery for the Haitian people. Humanitarian interventions in such a context expressed the will of the international community, particularly the United States, which deployed military force for this operation "to reduce suffering and promote human security during and after periods of political strife" (James, 2010, p. 15). Thus, whether perceived as legitimate or not, the state remains at the heart of theoretical debates on humanitarian interventions: "Both conventional and human security discourses are largely framed in the shadow paradigms that view the State and its organized agents as malevolent perpetrators or negligent patriarchs in opposition to vulnerable, 'feminized,' or subjugated populations." (James, 2010, p. 15)

According to Fassin, humanitarian agents present themselves as those who intervene precisely when "sovereignty is either abusively exerted or temporarily suspended" (Fassin, 2010, p. 276). Military interventions, in turn, operate within a temporality of urgency and a spatiality "of exclusion manifested in relief corridors and protected enclaves within territories that are no longer subject to a state monopoly of legitimate violence" (Fassin & Pandolphi, 2010, p. 16). The ungoverned space is proof of the state's failure to protect populations. By its very existence, it indicates that the state is in default. Humanitarian responsibility arises from the irresponsibility, incapacity, or defeat of the postcolonial state. The defeat of the postcolonial state, from the Congo to Biafra, signifies the collapse of the dream of sovereignty.

The Ghosts of the Congo

In his novel *Whole-World* (*Tout-Monde)* (1995), Édouard Glissant describes a visit he made to the city of Ibadan in 1962:

> Ibadan, its modern buildings pushing against the forest, then along the streets where wooden shacks tumble over each other, the endless field of little night lights, which seem to ignite the clamor. The Cheikh and I drove through those improvised carts turned into drinking stalls, or beer bars, on the edge of the bush, like mushrooms at the boundaries of a great body. On one of these rickety walls, a candle lamp resting, the Christ Lumumba, recently crucified, stretched his ochre-colored arms, branches of great black and all-powerful hands. (Glissant, 1995, p. 424)

When Glissant refers to the Cheikh, he means none other than the valiant son of Africa known in Dakar: Cheikh Anta Diop. The lady in Ibadan who ran the small eatery, realizing that Glissant and his companions were Francophone, offered them beer for free in exchange for news about the Congo, about Lumumba. Glissant had already mentioned Ibadan in *Poetic Intention (L'intention Poètique)*: "It was in Ibadan, Nigeria, that I discovered and felt what is called the strength of a people." (Glissant,

1969, p. 157) The portrait of Lumumba, martyr of African independence, haunted the city walls that paid him tribute. Five years later, the contained strength that impressed Glissant would soon explode in the tragic conflagration that was Biafra. According to some estimates, the Biafran conflict cost over two million lives (Time Magazine, January 1970). Biafra was one of the theaters of the tragedy that Frantz Fanon called the “Pitfalls of National Consciousness”.

When I told a Cameroonian friend that I was working on the Biafran War, he immediately told me that in his town of Kumba (K-Town for those familiar with it), neighboring Nigeria, the Biafrans stayed at the Congo Hotel. The name of this hotel, one might assume, tells us about the resonance of the Congolese crisis in the African popular imagination of the time. The Congo and Biafra raised issues about sovereignty and humanitarianism. Both crises confront the issues of sovereignty from two radically different angles. In the Congo, a supranational force, embodied by the United Nations, allegedly served as cover for imperial powers to usurp the sovereignty of the democratically elected government (Nkrumah). During the Biafra episode, the sovereign absolutism of the central state was tacitly approved by the vast majority of state and supranational entities, including the Organization of African Unity. This creates a void that was filled by non-governmental organizations. Biafra thus became the cradle of humanitarian sovereignty. However, the ambivalent role of international aid, whether expressed through UN supranationality or the humanitarian apparatus, is explained by a context in which Western powers opposed still-fragile African states. UN or humanitarian interventions are thus plagued by the curse of neo-colonialism, whether imagined or real.

Biafra: Humanitarian Secession

The militarization of humanitarianism, inseparable from the “duty to intervene”, also emerges as one of the consequences of the uneasy convergence observed between the humanitarian movement and politics. The collusion between politics and humanitarianism took a decisive turn during the Biafran War. The civil war between Biafran secessionists and the Federal Republic of Nigeria represents the moment when the boundaries between humanitarianism, politics, and warfare became blurred. The Biafran War thus emerges as a foundational moment for activist, even partisan, humanitarianism: “several accounts see this event as kicking off the most recent wave of international humanitarianism” (de Wall, 2010; Fearon, 2008, p. 54; Troubé, 2006). Chandler considers Biafra, “the first African famine to become headline news” (Chandler, 2006, p. 29), as the “crucible of contemporary humanitarianism” (Heerten, 2014, p. 169). While the Biafran War appears as the totemic moment of activist and partisan humanitarianism, it also foreshadows its ambivalences, notably the abandonment of the principle of neutrality, which underpins what is called the duty to intervene.

On May 30, 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Emeka Ojukwu, military governor of Nigeria’s Eastern Region, proclaimed the Republic of Biafra in the city of Enugu, the first capital of the secessionist region. On January 9, 1970, Ojukwu transferred power to Major General Philip Effiong before heading to Côte d’Ivoire, which granted him asylum. The Republic of Biafra officially ceased to exist with the surrender of its military leader in Lagos. Humanitarian secession presupposes an irrevocable sovereignty of the right to life. It requires, as codified in the UN charter’s duty to intervene, that everything possible be done to protect human dignity. The creation of Biafra follows this humanitarian logic. This, in turn, brings it into conflicts with politics, namely the contested sovereignty of Nigeria over its territory versus the emerging sovereignty of the Republic of Biafra. Humanitarian logic invokes as evidence the massacres of the Igbo population following the coup that led to the murder of General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi and the rise to power of Yakubu Gowon (Achebe, 2012; Adichie, 2007; Forsyth, 1969). The Federal Republic of Nigeria had failed in its basic mission to protect its Igbo citizens in the North and other regions of the country. Chinua Achebe, in his memoirs on the Biafran War, articulates this position as follows:

> As we fled ‘home’ to Eastern Nigeria to escape all manner of atrocities that were being inflicted upon us and our families in different parts of Nigeria, we saw ourselves as victims. When we noticed that the Federal government of Nigeria did not respond to our

> call to end the pogroms, we concluded that a government that failed to safeguard the lives of its citizens has no claims to their allegiance and must be ready to accept that the victims deserve the right to seek their safety in other ways—including secession. (Achebe, 2012, p. 95)

Tanzania was the first African country to recognize Biafra. In a statement issued by the Tanzanian government on April 13, 1968, President Julius Nyerere defended secession as a humanitarian act. He observed that the Igbo people could no longer be guaranteed safety elsewhere in the Federation of Nigeria. He employed the defensive metaphor of retreat to emphasize the necessity of a Biafran sanctuary. The reference to the fate of the Jewish people under National Socialism suggested that the massacres had the character of genocide. The protection clause establishes the ethical and practical justification for the state as the political community. He rejected sovereign absolutism and recognized the right to break the citizenship contract in the event of proven security failure:

> States are made to serve people; governments are established to protect the citizens of a State against external enemies and internal wrongdoers. It is on these grounds that people surrender their right and power of self-defense to the government of the State in which they live. But when the machinery of the State, and the powers of the government, are turned against a whole group of society on grounds of racial, tribal, or religious prejudice, the victims have the right to take back the powers they have surrendered, and defend themselves. (Mwakikagile, 2002, p. 222)

A careful observer of the Biafran crisis might argue that the positions defended by closely resemble the propaganda strategy of the Republic of Biafra. This argument mirrors the discourse employed by humanitarian agents to justify their intervention. Framed in this way, this position invites us to observe that what would later become the “duty to intervene” does not have a Western genealogy solely. Nyerere’s contribution is a critical analysis of the weaknesses of newly independent states. Throughout his personal and deeply emotional narrative, Chinua Achebe bears witness to his lived experience in Biafra. His testimony can also be read as a meditation on the chaos that provoked this war and perhaps on the unresolved memorial and traumatic issues. Achebe served as Biafra’s roving ambassador. One might also speculate that his latest memoir serves as a justification for his role. The Congolese philosopher and writer Valentin-Yves Mudimbe describes Achebe’s book as an “uncompromising illustration of the moral and political right of the cause the author has decided to incarnate” (Mudimbe, 2013, p. 675). Mudimbe invites readers to reflect on the ethical challenge posed by the book, namely the “obligation of consciousness for an intellectual” (2013, p. 672). Humanitarian intervention in Biafra was not simply a site of collusion between war, strategic calculations, and political interests. Biafra was, and remains, one of the most intense ethical questions in the consciousness of Nigeria, Africa, and the human community. Above all, Biafra was a sanctuary for terrorized peoples, for those discovering that their citizenship was incompatible with their survival.

The Republic of Biafra, as thus conceptualized, follows the humanitarian logic of sanctuary. Yet the sanctuarization of Biafra faces a major obstacle. Sanctuarization was an instrument of political ambition. The politicization of humanitarianism renders any invocation of humanitarian logic void. Politicization and militarization of the sanctuary pave the way for its negation (Cheema, 1978; Golden & McConnell, 2006). The contradictions of the Biafra movement, in the evolution of the humanitarian movement, bear the marks of these tensions between sanctuarization and militarization, which often disregard human dignity.

In Biafra, the absence of state actors is explained by adherence to colonial-era borders, which underpinned the sovereign absolutism adopted by African countries emerging from colonial rule. This absence of state actors paves the way for non-state actors. It is perhaps for these reasons that Biafra inaugurates a humanitarian practice or doctrine. Non-state actors appear as a moral and interventionist force, willing to form opportunistic alliances with governmental strategies.

According to many observers, the Biafran War is a totemic moment in the reconfiguration of the humanitarian field. It represents a critical juncture in the evolution of humanitarianism, initiating a movement that eventually leads to the sovereignty of humanitarianism, understood here as the

duty to assist distressed communities. Humanitarian sovereignty triumphs over state sovereignty. It is in this context that Médecins Sans Frontières was born (Obiechina, 2003). Humanitarianism thus becomes a project challenging Nigeria's sovereignty and implicitly sanctioning the secession.

Yet, while the Biafran War is the cradle of this new configuration of humanitarianism, it would not be until the 1984–1985 famine in Ethiopia to observe its doctrinal consolidation. Unlike the theater of humanitarian intervention during the Biafran War, the Ethiopian humanitarian disaster raised no issues regarding sovereignty. Humanitarian intervention occurred at the request of the Ethiopian state. The United Nations coordinated operations, and Western states intervened directly on the ground. Yet this symphony of sovereignty in action conceals discordant notes that reveal a sovereignty in decline or, at least, contested.

Peter Gill, reflecting on the Ethiopian famine and subsequent humanitarian intervention, adopts a highly critical stance toward the United States. Gill accuses the American power of failing to assist people in danger. He argues that the U.S. could have intervened to prevent the humanitarian disaster he describes as a "holocaust" (Gill, 1986, p. 54). U.S. drastic restrictions on aid to Ethiopia were not due to the Marxist nature of the Ethiopian regime. There existed a political, ideological, and economic dispute arising from the nationalization of American companies and debts owed to them. These factors had negative repercussions on U.S. humanitarian assistance. One of the political barriers dates back to in 1982 "when USAID refused to channel food through the Government's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission" (Gill, 1986, p. 55). Here, the issue of sovereignty haunts the humanitarian debate.

The only remaining path was that of non-governmental organizations. By excluding the Ethiopian government from aid distribution channels, the U.S. reinforced the doctrine born in Biafra. Ethiopia thus became the theater for the emancipation of non-state actors. This marked the golden age of NGOs. Médecins Sans Frontières, born from the upheavals of the Biafran War, deployed its scandalous strategy in Ethiopia to the point of being expelled by the Ethiopian government (Jansson et al., 1987, pp. 76–77).

However, the Ethiopian famine sheds light on the discussion of sovereignty from another angle. When reflecting on the issue of sovereignty and humanitarianism, attention is often focused on so-called failed states, usually outside the developed world. One hypothesis is that the weakening of the state in Africa corresponds to an ideological movement that advocates for the weakening of the state in Western countries. During the holocaust suffered by the peoples of Biafra, non-state organizations gained considerable autonomy from state entities. During the Ethiopian famine, non-governmental organizations took control.

NGOs became sovereign by taking over humanitarian logistics. Oxfam, in a sense, usurped "the functions of mightier United Nations and Government agencies by buying its own shipload of food. If the big agencies were incapable of feeding Ethiopia, then Oxfam would show the way" (Gill, 1986, p. 83). Until then, NGOs had been confined to aid distribution and fundraising to finance their field operations. A seismic shift then shook the humanitarian galaxy, redistributing roles at the expense of aid-donor states:

> The proposal and the fact it was subsequently adopted and executed by Oxfam was an early pointer to a general lesson of the Ethiopian famine: that the voluntary agencies had now entered the most vital, if less well-endowed, component of the whole aid network; and that for all their money, carpeted offices and well-paid officials, the big agencies of the United Nations and Western Governments had failed in what the public had taken to be their most important duty—to stop people starving. (Gill, 1986, p. 82)

Peter Gill's book bears a harrowing title: *A Year in the Death of Africa: Politics, Bureaucracy, and Famine*. I would suggest revising and rephrasing it as: *A Moment in the Death of the Western State in the Face of Humanitarian Emergencies*. The abdication of Western powers in response to the

Ethiopian famine paved the way for Norwegian Church Aid, Redd Barna (*Save the Children, Norway*), and Oxfam to consolidate the hegemony of non-state actors. The British government thus chartered space on Oxfam's chartered ship:

> ODA (British Overseas Development Administration) agreed to put 3,000 tons of grain of grain aboard the SS Elpis which sailed from Hull on 10 October (1984). It was sure a sign of the moral lead which the charities had established over the official agencies that the British Government should ask space in the hold of an Oxfam ship. (Gill, 1986, pp. 85-86)

Oxfam's moral leadership is symptomatic of the seismic shift redefining the relationship between charitable organizations and state actors. The withdrawal of state or transnational actors paved the way for NGOs' credibility, making them indispensable channels for aid distribution. One could argue that the disqualification of the recipient state as guarantor of social security for its citizens is accompanied by a reduction in the role of donor-state actors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the politicization of interventions has facilitated the expansion of humanitarian action into a domain previously reserved for politics. At the same time, political organizations intervene in the humanitarian field, unhesitatingly militarizing so-called humanitarian operations. After the Congo, the Biafran crisis represents one of the most dramatic episodes in the collapse of hopes inspired by Africa's political renaissance. I put forward the hypothesis that the trauma of the Congolese tragedy may have dissuaded many African countries from supporting Biafra. Reading the defeat of Biafra's quest for sovereignty through the lens of the Congo could help us better understand the lessons, challenges, and opportunities facing Africa in this post-independence era. It is crucial to ask whether humanitarian practices are beginning to influence the very definition of the state in Africa. When Human Rights Watch calls for the continuation of sanctions against Zimbabwe, how does this so-called humanitarian intervention differ from the regime-change doctrine pursued by Tony Blair and George W. Bush in Iraq, Haiti, or Afghanistan? The humanitarian diplomacy of Human Rights Watch echoes the positions of the European Union and the United States, which treat Zimbabwe as a pariah state. Humanitarian practices in Africa are redefining international law, challenging the very principle of sovereignty. The same practices are reshaping the rhetoric of military interventions. The rise of humanitarianism goes hand in hand with a de facto privatization of financial channels, dominated by foundations and philanthropists. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, is one of the largest aid providers in the world. This also involves a redefinition of the state's role in donor countries. It is high time, from a comparative or global perspective, to highlight the analytical, ideological, and theoretical connections at work in these phenomena. In light of the impact of humanitarianism in the West, perhaps we should even consider revising our title to *Humanitarianism as a Sign of the Weakening of the State*.

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