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Legacies of Biafra: Violence, Identity and Citizenship in Nigeria

Introduction

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Nearly forty years after the event, the Nigerian Civil War still conjures up powerful political images, within as well as outside Africa. Internationally, the ‘Biafran War’, as it was called, recalls accounts of ethnic conflict, starving children, and humanitarian intervention. Within Africa, it resonates with the devastating consequences of failed nationalism, but also with a tenacious demand for genuine citizenship and self-determination. In many ways, these images have remained as divergent as they are relevant to contemporary understandings of Africa. As a growing number of African countries have succumbed to civil war and foreign intervention, it is a good time to reflect on what was learned from the Biafran conflict, and what was left unaddressed to trouble the fortunes of future generations.

The following collection of articles represents an interrogation of the contemporary legacies of the Biafran experience. They explore how the fault lines of the Nigerian Civil War have continued to shape political trajectories in Nigeria and in Africa more broadly. In many ways, the Biafran War was not just a Nigerian civil conflict; it was a resounding challenge to the dreams of African nationhood, sending out tremors that echoed not just across Africa, but around the world. The unsatisfactory resolution of issues of identity, citizenship, and democracy that arose from that conflict continues to reverberate in contemporary struggles in Nigeria and beyond.

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Reassessing the Legacies of Biafra

Within Nigeria, the Civil War and the dream of Biafran nationalism continues to haunt contemporary processes of state-building. While Biafra lost the Civil War, the conflict reshaped the political and economic character of Nigeria, intensifying the salience of ethnicity in the political process, with profound implications for emerging institutions of resource control, citizenship, and the prospect of democracy. The new institutional arrangements that emerged in response to the war tended to mask the problems of Nigerian statecraft rather than solve them. The fallout from the war continues to influence the development of Nigerian institutions of governance and resource control, while failing to address smouldering grievances among the Igbo and the southern minorities of the Niger Delta. Over the years, an authoritarian and often negligent state has been met by ongoing challenges to its legitimacy. At the same time, patterns of migration, trade, and civil organization have generated countervailing forces at the popular level, giving rise to a resilient social fabric that has, so far, managed to weather violent challenges to Nigerian statehood. But, amid the intense economic pressures and mounting identity-based political mobilization since the 1990s, cracks are beginning to show...

At the regional and international levels, the Biafran War catalyzed new forms of international intervention motivated by humanitarian crisis as well as by colonial politics and oil interests. The response of the global community was shaped by international rivalries and political agendas as much as by humanitarian concern – the latter often driven more by voters, churches, and corporate interests than by states. Global famine relief efforts for Africa and Médecins sans Frontières were both enduring products of the Biafran conflict. Similar issues of humanitarian crisis, oil, and geopolitics are resurgent in contemporary crises in the Niger Delta, and in the wider regional crisis in Darfur. In short, Biafra, the Civil War, and their aftermath speak to the continuing problems of statehood in Africa: the precarious balance between ethnic identities and national politics, the extractive and authoritarian political culture on the continent, and the concerned but often disruptive humanitarian intrusions into sovereignty and political process.

Reflecting on Biafra and its consequences is not only of scholarly interest; it is also a timely contribution to current events. The botched 2007 Nigerian election has raised serious questions about the problems of democracy, not only in Nigeria, but in Africa more widely. Mounting violence in the Niger Delta continues to alarm and frustrate the international community, drawing attention to ongoing problems of identity, oil, and separatist militias in south-eastern Nigeria. As we near the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Biafran

War, and the fiftieth anniversary of Nigerian independence, it seems appropriate to consider the legacies of this iconic conflict for political developments in contemporary Africa.

The first two articles, by Ukoha Ukiwo and Kate Meagher, challenge the perception that civil conflict in Africa is a product of ethnic diversity and weak states. In the period since the Biafran War, they explore how state violence rather than popular divisions has contributed to eroding national cohesion from above, while, paradoxically, ethnic diversity and informal institutions have contributed to knitting it together from below. A second pair of articles, by Kathryn Nwajiaku and Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, investigates how Biafra has shaped contemporary challenges to the state, from sub-national minorities in the Niger Delta to international assertions of the 'responsibility to protect'. Together, these four articles highlight three broad themes: the role of violence in nation-building; the reimagining of Biafra in ethnic struggles since the 1990s; and the implications of the Biafran conflict for notions of citizenship in contemporary Africa.

This collection of articles takes up the challenge of assessing the Biafran legacy, with a view to addressing silences and grappling with the underlying challenges. More by happenstance than by design, the contributions presented here are dominated by Igbo perspectives on the war, sometimes self-consciously so. The workshop that originally gave rise to these papers involved academics from across Nigeria and beyond, but intervening commitments determined the final selection of articles. That said, these papers are very much the product of critical discussions and comments that took place in that forum, and explore the implications of the war in ways that resonate with perceptions of other Nigerians as well as non-Nigerians.

Violence, Identity, and Citizenship

A strong theme running through most of these articles involves a challenge to the notion that ethnic identity is a key source of violence in African societies. Explanations of the rising tide of civil war and violence in Africa have routinely focused on 'ancient tribal hatreds' (Kaplan 1994) or the inherent fragility of multi-ethnic African states (Young 2004). Ukiwo disputes this type of explanation by tracing how primary ethnic allegiances are a product of violent forms of statecraft, rather than the other way around. He shows, along with most of the other contributions, that the Igbo were the ethnic group with the highest commitment to federalism in Nigeria before the Civil War, detailing how state violence, through acts of omission as much as commission, has embedded ethnic and religious divisions across Nigerian society, with a particularly negative effect on the sense of national belonging among the Igbo.

Starting from the opposite side of the question, contributions by Meagher and Nwajiaku focus on the integrative role of popular identities amid the divisive pressures of state violence. References are made to marriage and trade across battle lines during the Civil War, and to the important role of identity in knitting Nigerian society together through migration, economic interdependence, and political mobilization. Nwajiaku highlights how the pressures of minority status and the Civil War galvanized numerous groups in the Niger Delta into an overarching Ijaw identity. Meagher emphasizes the role of Igbo identity and economic informalization in creating inter-ethnic frameworks of cohesion within Nigerian society, contrary to the conventional assumption that identity and informalization erode national cohesion from below. However, both contributions support Ukiwo's contention that state involvement or complicity in mounting violence in the Niger Delta and in Shari'a-related riots, are beginning to destroy the integrative dimensions of identity, making Nigerian society increasingly vulnerable to the identity-based fractures that precipitated the Civil War. Similar patterns of popular cohesion and political violence are evident in a number of other African societies – in Rwanda, Somalia, Sierra Leone – to the extent that international organizations are now turning to indigenous institutions rather than political nationalism as mechanisms of conflict resolution (ECA 2007; Jutting et al. 2007).

Turning to the second theme, these articles trace the changing meanings of Biafra within Nigerian society and beyond. Born of a commitment to federalism, rather than from a desire for separatism, Biafra did not begin as a bid for identity politics, but as a call for a more just and inclusive nationalism. This icon of disillusioned nationalism has given Biafra a resonance that has not only inspired the formation of contemporary organizations of frustrated Igbo youth, such as MASSOB, but has developed cross-ethnic appeal as a rallying symbol for Ijaw nationalist struggles in the Niger Delta. Nwajiaku's article shows that this is the more surprising since the Ijaw identified with the Federal side in the original Civil War, but are now actively reimagining themselves as champions of the Biafran cause.

The contribution by Pérouse de Montclos considers the ways in which Biafra has been reimagined in the international community. As Africa becomes the centre of humanitarian efforts, Biafra continues to symbolize the legitimacy of these endeavours – the protection of persecuted peoples from starvation and genocide – despite the fact that contemporary African conflicts are considerably more complex than these simple Biafran narratives can accommodate. In contemporary situations where the perpetrators of genocide may be among the refugees, and supplies may be assisting violent militias rather than defending armies, the Biafran imaginary is mobilized to gloss

over the contradictions and depoliticize the intervention, much as it was in the time of the original Biafran conflict, when the tangle of international economic, political, and religious interests was cloaked in a benevolent ‘responsibility to protect’.

Both Ukiwo and Nwajiaku also highlight the generational issues embedded in the contemporary reimagining of Biafra. While Biafra was very much a product of elite politics in the 1960s, it has been reappropriated since the 1990s as a symbol of subaltern politics. Ukiwo points out that popular organizations espousing the revival of Biafra were not championed by Igbo elites, or even by Ojukwu himself. Instead, Biafra has been appropriated by Igbo diaspora groups in the US and disaffected Igbo and Delta youth, disillusioned with the corruption and cliental pacts of their elites, and impatient with the failures of military rule, democracy and neo-liberal reforms to deliver inclusive forms of citizenship. By appropriating the trappings of statehood from the original Biafra – the flag, the currency, even an embassy – these relatively marginalized groups have acquired a symbolic power and prominence above their political weight, enhancing the visibility as well as the threat of their message of democratic disappointment.

The final theme touches on the issues of citizenship. The legacies of Biafra speak of the failure of the Nigerian state to address popular demands for a more just and equitable form of citizenship. As these articles show, it is a failure that has reverberated in the form of ethnic discord and civil conflict, not only in Nigeria, but in societies across Africa. In the globalized circumstances of contemporary African struggles, however, demands for greater citizenship rights are as likely to bypass as to discipline the state. International involvement, through humanitarian organizations and human rights NGOs, has changed the equation through which demands for citizenship influence governance and state-building. As Pérouse de Montclos points out, rebel movements that mobilize international sympathy and assistance are increasingly able to punch above their weight. In some cases, this may prolong conflict and increase, rather than ease, the suffering of excluded populations. Worse still, as hinted at in the contributions of Ukiwo and Pérouse de Montclos, excessive international intervention, even with the best of intentions, poses a threat to sovereignty, weakening the institutions and political confidence necessary to the emergence of genuine citizenship.

Moreover, as the original Biafran conflict revealed, diasporas play an important role in shaping notions of citizenship. Biafra was a creation of the Igbo diaspora in other regions of Nigeria, and the Igbo diaspora in the US and UK have played a key role in the contemporary revival of the Biafran cause. In an era in which remittances outstrip foreign aid by nearly two to

one, diasporas have become increasingly important in shaping, and funding, new ideas of citizenship and democracy (IFAD 2007; Mohan and Zack-Williams 2002). As in the original Biafran conflict, and the contemporary reawakenings of the Biafran idea, it is important to attend to both the disruptive as well as the constructive potential of diaspora involvement in contemporary processes of state-building and citizenship in Africa.

Reimagining Biafra: Looking Backward or Forward?

The timeliness of considering the implications of Biafra for contemporary Nigerian nationhood is reflected in recent offerings of the Nigerian video film industry, affectionately known as Nollywood (Haynes 2006; Chukwuma Okoye 2007). While still a highly sensitive subject (prompting government intervention in the title of one of the films), Nollywood films have begun to explore the issue of Biafra and its legacies since the democratic opening in 1999 (Haynes 2006:529). The first Nollywood film on the Civil War, *The Battle of Love*, which came out in 2000, was made by the Yoruba director Simi Opeoluwa. It tells the tale of an inter-ethnic Igbo–Hausa couple, uprooted from the North by the war, and attempting to flee to Biafra for safety. A second film, *Laraba*, made by the Igbo director Ndubuisi Okoh about the contemporary legacies of the war, continues the theme of an Igbo–Hausa couple living in the North, whose love is thwarted by parental opposition and ethnic violence, leading to a tragic Romeo and Juliet conclusion.

Despite the varied ethnic backgrounds of the directors, both films reimagine Biafra in similar ways: as a symbol of social dislocation and unnatural estrangement (Okoye 2007:8). This is particularly interesting, given current debates being carried out on the internet by the Nigerian diaspora on whether the Igbo have hijacked Nollywood and usurped global representations of Nigeria with their largely English-medium films (Naijarules 2008; see also Nyamnjoh 2008 on global struggles of representation in the Nigerian film industry). Nollywood takes up the Biafran theme in ways that not only challenge these ethnically factionalized debates from the diaspora, but raise new questions about who imagines national community in the post-colonial era. Contrary to Benedict Anderson's (1991) classic book, *Imagined Communities*, and Jean-Francois Bayart's (1996) more controversial work, *L'Illusion identitaire*, nationhood is seen neither as an elite project nor as an illusion, but as a popular longing disrupted by elite conflicts and mobilized violence. While the heroes, and in some cases the villains, of these films ultimately choose national solidarity rather than sides, there is a growing sense of foreboding that the space for national unity is being irrevocably eroded by mounting violence. Although Nollywood envisions Biafra and its

legacies in terms of a popular commitment to unity over political and ethnic divisions, staying together involves torture, flight, and even suicide.

What is clear is that, forty years on, Biafra still has a lot to say about the struggles of citizenship and statehood in Africa. As a cautionary tale, as a symbol of democratic longing, as a rallying point for the disaffected, or a justification for foreign intervention, Biafra stands as a reminder of failure and resilience, of lessons learned and unlearned. In the quest for African solutions to African problems, interrogating the legacies of Biafra offers a useful place to start.

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