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## The Future of the Nation-State Project in Africa: The Case of Nigeria

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As the Cold War cycle played itself out, some of the multinational nation-states which had been taken for granted such as the former Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia suddenly dissolved. Their splitting pointed towards a direction which had hitherto been a trend in world politics, namely that the nation's territory had to be synonymous with the territory of the state, the nation being made up of people with shared cultures and myths of blood ties. This direction in Europe might have set a worldwide pace. Africa has shown very little sign of complying with it.

Africa entered the post-Cold War era with seemingly high prospects of territorial disintegration. This was exemplified by many civil wars in recent years, some with genocidal features. But, except for Eritrea and, to a lesser extent Somaliland, the political map of Africa's states and borders has remained remarkably unchanged. Wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo have not caused these states to split. Nonetheless, wars have led to spatial recompositions, to emerging spaces of sovereignty within state territories and to renewed challenges to the official geography from above — the latter being defined by:

the various corporations that have or have had the political or technocratic vocation of establishing, defending or modifying foreign or internal (administrative) borders of established states and organizing their geographical space (regular armies, diplomatic corps, colonial or contemporary administrators) (Ben Arrous 1996:17).

In Nigeria, the colonial and postcolonial efforts to construct a nation-state from above rather than from below produced an 'uncertain' Nigerian; somebody with equivocal national feelings and many other allegiances. This 'uncertain' Nigerian has gone a long way to contest the state's sovereignty and its determination to mark up its borders.

Since the onset of civil, democratic rule in 1999, the duality of movement between geography from above and geography from below has shown itself in the competition for spaces between national, religious, ethnic and even 'resource' groups. This calls into question whether the resort to an authoritarian pattern can indeed be adequate in constructing a nation-state; whether a nation-state, artificial so to say, can be made to look like the European nation-state, its point of reference, when in fact, no nation-state in the world could be said to be mono-ethnic or made up of one social class.

One belief of the postcolonial state in Nigeria is that since a nation, a community of people who are culturally and linguistically the same, is much more a 'moral community' than say a collection of ethnic groups, the nation-state had to be constructed with a sense of being blind to Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversities. At the same time, the state assumed a narrow ethnic base and expected that a nation-state would simply appear through a *deus ex machina*. That has not been so and since the emergence of democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria has been awash with new identity manifestations and agitations.

This study wants to show, first, that Nigeria's recurring and worsening crisis of governance stems from the resort to geography from above rather than geography from below in constructing a Nigerian nation. Nigeria or indeed the aspiring nation-states in Africa are uniquely different from nation-states in Europe due, of course, to their origins and in fact, their experiences differ markedly from those of Europeans. In Nigeria, for example, almost every ethnic or religious identity claims to be marginalised by the state to the extent that the whole issue of marginalization appears like a myth when those who are the bearers of institutions of marginalization are difficult to identify.

Second, in the several years of authoritarian rule, federalism was jettisoned for commandism. This study argues that the present identity agitations are contesting commandism and calling for a return to true federalism, a federalism that would take into consideration the unique experiences of Nigerians, namely that there are nations which had hitherto achieved state structures of their own before they were frozen by colonial intervention; and that politicization of life in general has woken up other identities, that were hitherto dormant, into challenging the territorial framework of the nation-state project.

### **The Nation-State Project in Africa**

With the experiences of African states since the end of colonial rule, it is justified to argue that the discourses and philosophy behind the formation of the nation-state, as a mode of territorial organization did not have Africa as a reference point. The notion of the nation-state as a unit of organization of human kind was forced into being in Africa and the political discourses which laid the framework for the organization of the nation-state in Europe were, like received doctrines, foisted on and accepted by Africans even where the material and social conditions which made such discourses relevant in Europe, did not exist.

Much of what is now attributed to the nation-state, a liberal phenomenon, came from the writings of such English thinkers of the seventeenth century as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Hobbes is credited with the theory of obligation. This theory tries to explain who is to have obligation, and how obligations arise. It also means to investigate the extent to which those who claim to rule should be obeyed and how those who have a legitimate claim to power should be recognized. Hobbes' imagination was woven around what he called 'the state of nature', a situation in which no power could 'overawe' everyone and make them submit to the power holder.

In what he referred to as 'the war of all against all', Hobbes drew a horrific picture where individuals warred against one another because of the scarcity of resources and the absence of an overriding power. Having singled out this absence as a basic element of insecurity, Hobbes propounded a 'law of nature' in which men abandon the state of nature so as to live under a common power, a sovereign, in political society. Consequently, they enter into a kind of contract with other men to give up some part of the right to govern themselves, and the sovereign becomes the beneficiary of their renunciations of power. As a result of this contract, a political society comes into being, and men living in this type of society are obligated to give their obedience to the sovereign, so long as he is able to overcome all of them (Lively and Reeve 1988:10).

It is important to note that in the seventeenth century in Europe, feudalism was collapsing under the weight of an emerging propertied class of capital owners. Hobbes had favoured monarchy at a time when it was being challenged by the new class of property owners who wanted a decentralization of power—hence, his picture of 'a war of all against all'. In other words, if power was decentralized, you would have one such 'war' and this was convincingly proved in the fall of late feudalism when workers, working class organizations and working class agitations competed with the burgeoning role of the bourgeoisie for the enlargement of democratic space in society.

One cannot locate similar events as taking place in Africa at that time. In fact, records of Africa emphasize the issues of slavery, the slave trade and the collaboration of African chiefs with white slavers in the enslavement of African

peoples. There were no recorded movements for social change especially against slavery except, perhaps, when one comes to the nineteenth century, when such movements were geared forward by what was happening in the slaving countries, by protest movements against slavery there. Hence, discourses about democratic space, sovereignty, power and obligation in Africa were far to seek, as the insecurity posed by the slave trade was enough to keep the society traumatized.

Moreover, those problems that sought philosophical solution, such as the early beginnings of the industrial revolution, which were eroding in Hobbes' time, were again far to seek in Africa. Africa might be said to be at a primitive developmental stage at that time and when imperialism came, it further eroded any movement towards such discourses that had taken place in Europe (Echezona 1998:122-23). Instead of noting that the material and social conditions in Africa differed markedly from that of Europe, every effort was made to fit the new units of political organization in Africa, the territorial states, into the European discourse. In this regard, the nation-state project, an outcome of Europe's subjugation of the continent:

not only reproduced the subjection of Africa and African history to Europe and European history, it also produced a system of alienation (as opposed to liberation) which reinforced a mentality of dependence on irrelevant European models (Laakso and Olukoshi 1996:9).

The common definition of a nation-state is that of 'a polity of homogenous people who share the same culture and the same language, and who are governed by some of their own number who serve their interests' (Tivey 1981:12). There is no nation-state in the world which meets these criteria. Even where you have homogeneity in ethnicity, you are likely to have heterogeneity in dialectical groups or ethnic subgroups and where the latter obtains, such groups are likely to behave like distinct ethnic groups with consequences for societal fragmentation. That is, there are people who could claim to belong to one group or another simply out of some emotion which is not related too shared culture.

Africa is estimated to have about six thousand distinct cultural, linguistic groups, some composed of something similar to states, others in 'principalities and empires at different stages of evolution' (Tivey 1981:13). When imperialism came, these groups were merged within delineated territories and ideas about European merger formed the framework of their evolution. In reference to the freezing of African borders that hitherto might have been very mobile, Ben Arrous (1996:14) points out that 'collective identities change faster than borders' and underlines the 'continuous reconstruction of memories around new colonial and post-colonial traumatic events'.

Right from the very beginning, the nation-state project in Africa was a top-down affair which meant far-reaching centralizing applications. Its elite base was narrow and it functioned through a system of patronage networks, which linked

other groups and some of their respective elites. It assumed that a diverse ethnic base was inimical to the project and sought either an eradication of these identities or their submission to those of the group that maintained state power (Laakso and Olukoshi 1996:13).

However, even though borders were frozen and some political centralization was achieved through people with local influence, the nation-state project did not succeed in preventing the physical or mental exit of people who thought that such a social system was too hostile to them (Hirschman 1978). Instead, the nation-state project has nurtured a 'geography of ups-and-downs', meaning that spatial and identity configurations are not a given but polarize differently, dynamically, in adaptation to changing events and conjuncture (Ben Arrous 1996:22-24).

Regarding Nigeria in particular, the dynamic nature of spatial and identity challenges to the nation-state project raises a whole lot of epistemological and pedagogical questions. Who is a Nigerian? Do the present borders of the federal states clearly delineate the clusters within Nigeria? How have religious spaces turned out to be political spaces? Are there legitimate spaces and where (or what) are they?

### **Who is a Nigerian?**

Given the manner in which Nigeria and other African states evolved, a correct consideration of who is a Nigerian cannot emanate from the same framework as who is a British or who is a German or who is a French. Anthony Giddens (1998:134) writes that 'nations in the past were constructed in large part out of antagonism to others', which he illustrates by quoting Linda Colley's work (1992): in the case of Britain, that was done out of hostility towards Catholic France. Nigeria was not constructed out of hostility to any other country in Africa but out of jostling for power and position in world and African politics by European powers.

The process of making the Nigerian has given rise to many questions, especially during the long reign of military men, as to who negotiated the whole Nigerian enterprise with the British. Who did mobilise those who came to constitute Nigeria into the concept of the nation, and to what extent? In the area which came to be called Nigeria, were there nations in the strict sense of the term before the onset of British colonialism?

Going by the manner of the emergence of nation-states in Europe, one cannot say that a Nigerian nation-state existed or even was in the making. Colonial then postcolonial authorities engaged to construct one, albeit from above rather than from below. Under colonial rule, the British closed the North from influences of Christian missionaries, then fossilized the institutions of the North under Indirect Rule and finally treated the northern and southern portions of

Nigerian territory as two distinct, separate administrative territories. According to Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1968:63), the impact of all this was to create a psychological effect on those who came to constitute Nigeria — I am a Northerner, I am a Southerner or, further south, I am from the East or I am from the West.

Since the North was larger than the whole of the South combined, it meant in effect that Southerners would view with suspicion any postcolonial regime that was headed by a Northerner and vice versa. The completion of the triangular matrix is that Southerners were themselves divided along eastern (Igbo) and western (Yoruba) lines, thereby contributing to perpetuate northern (supposedly, Hausa-Fulani) rule in Nigeria. Mistrust went a long way to enhance colonial rule as the nation was constructed on suspicious lines. Many 'wes' and 'theys' emerged from the whole matrix — 'we' could mean the emerging Nigerians and 'they' the British colonialists; 'we' could mean the South and 'they' the North and vice versa; 'we' could mean the East and 'they' the West; 'we' could stand for one ethnic group and 'they' the rest of the ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Nigeria transitioned into independence in 1960 with a federal constitution. The Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), a party whose ideology was 'One North, One People', became the majority party at the federal level and went into a coalition government with the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), a party which started initially as a national party but ended up as an eastern party. The Action Group (AG), a party that was predominant in western Nigeria, together with other smaller parties, including the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), went into the opposition.

In January 1966, the first military coup occurred. With officers of Igbo origin masterminding the coup and the majority of those killed being of non-Igbo origin, the coup was seen in the eyes of other Nigerians as an Igbo coup. When the coup plotters were arrested but were not prosecuted and the new Head of State, General Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo, climbed into power, the theory of an Igbo coup was validated. General Ironsi worsened matters by decreeing the abrogation of the federal structure, an initiative which was widely perceived as an attempt to eliminate any counterbalance to an Igbo rule. The constituent regions were abolished and replaced with provinces which were answerable to the central government. Tribal unions were banned. These were the early beginnings of centralization of authority in Nigeria.

A counter coup six months later brought Yakubu Gowon, a Northerner (and a Christian), into power. He immediately reversed Ironsi's centralization and reinstated a federal system of government. Within weeks, however, massive rioting in Northern Nigeria led to the killing of thousands of Igbos and other Easterners, apparently to avenge the death of many senior Northerners in the January coup. In May 1967, Gowon moved to decree a twelve states structure,

ostensibly to assuage the feelings of marginalization by minorities. The decree, which split the Eastern Region into three distinct entities, was also an attempt to curb the secessionist pressures that had been building up there, since the counter coup killings. Lt Col Ojukwu, the governor of the dissolved Eastern Region, ignored the decree and Eastern Nigeria seceded as the Republic of Biafra.

The federal government succeeded in prosecuting the civil war and bringing Eastern Nigeria back into the Nigerian fold. It then launched its three Rs — Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction — but the civil war had created a mutation in the notion of being a Nigerian. A new ‘we’ and ‘they’ could immediately be discerned: ‘we’ were the North and the West who fought as the federal forces to keep Nigeria one, while ‘they’ were the Easterners or Igbos who fought to divide it. After living for three years in a Biafra to which they might have given their loyalty, the Igbos were now compelled to transfer their loyalty once again to the federal centre. It is from this point that Igbos started to refer to their marginalization from the mainstream of Nigerian politics.

As Olukoshi and Agbu have argued, the state creation exercise that started from 1967 was key to the process of concentration and centralization of power (1996:84). It actually initiated the centralising trends in Nigerian federalism (Asobie 1998). Apart from a short spell of civil, democratic rule, the military continued to rule Nigeria until 1999. During this period, the number of states was multiplied to nineteen, then twenty-one, thirty and finally thirty-six. Many of the created states lack viability as instruments of governance and have thus been dependent on the federal government for ‘budgetary handouts’. The economic crisis which engulfed most of Africa led both to the start of structural adjustment programmes and to the entrenchment of ethnic and religious identities in the political processes, simultaneously. Authoritarian rule forced such identities, which had hitherto been submerged, onto the agenda of national discourse.

The postcolonial history of Nigeria from 1960 to 1999 was one in which Southerners viewed political power as exclusive preserve of the North especially the Hausa-Fulani stock.<sup>1</sup> Hence, most references by Southern elites to their marginalization in Nigerian politics and economics roughly meant Northern marginalization of the South. It is worth noting, however, that no general consensus exists about who marginalizes who in Nigeria. The Igbo elites after the civil war thought they were marginalized by the Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani elites. Yoruba elites claimed that they themselves were marginalized by Hausa-Fulani elites. Since the end of military rule, the latter have been complaining that it is the Southern, especially Yoruba elites that are marginalizing them. Finally, the minorities, especially Southern minorities, think that their own marginalization stems from the perception of the majority ethnic groups, i.e. Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani that the Nigerian nation was meant for them in exclusion of any other group. Accordingly, minorities complain that they have been used as ‘cannon fodders’ by the big ethnic groups in their political power struggle.

Ethnic identities are constructed in much the same way as national identity: through the use of raw power and enculturation (Giddens 1998:133). In the case of Nigeria, raw power is neither casual nor benign but the outcome of an authoritarian adherence to geography from above. Rather than a Nigerian nation-state emerging in the same framework as nation-states in Europe, what appeared is a fundamental uncertainty about who is a Nigerian. In an interview with a Lagos newspaper, Ralph Uwazurike, leader of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), put this uncertain Nigerian more pungently:

Nobody believes in Nigeria and nobody is working for Nigeria. There is Nigeria but there are no Nigerians. Nigeria is an amorphous structure but there are no inhabitants (*The News*, 22 May 2000).<sup>2</sup>

### **New Identities in the Imagined Nigerian Community**

When we refer to new identities, we do not mean that the identities we deal with did not exist before. We refer to them as new because of the ways in which they manifest themselves today. This section is primarily based on extensive fieldwork which we undertook, in 2000 and 2001, throughout the six geopolitical zones that the federal government now uses for the share of administrative plum posts, namely North West, North Central, North East, South West, South South and South East.

The notion of an imagined Nigerian community is derived from Benedict Anderson's essay on nationalism (1991). In his words, an 'imagined community' is one in which its members are too numerous to know each other personally (*ibid.*, p.6). Going by this definition, all communities in the world are imagined communities. In the Nigerian case, the frame and spread of nationalism suffer from two layers of national imagination: breaking away from the presupposition that the many Nigerian communities are bound to integrate within a colonial, metropolitan construct; and then starting to construct their own national community in the way existing or emerging communities perceive it.

After decades of evolution and politicization of its various parts, Nigeria emerged as a morass of imagined communities. Even some groups which would not have imagined themselves as political communities started to perceive themselves as such. A typical example are the Igbos whose society had hitherto been described as acephalous (Green 1947). Colonial rule made Igbos interact more intensively with other Igbos and start to perceive themselves as a political community, a phenomenon which did not exist before colonial rule. It was not so with other ethnic groups such as the Yorubas, the Hausa-Fulanis or the Edos, which had had state structures before colonialism and lived under kingdoms or a fusion of theocracy and hegemonic rule of particular ethnic groups.



With an estimated two hundred and fifty ethnic groups<sup>3</sup> one can possibly refer to the presence of two hundred and fifty political communities in Nigeria. At the same time, these ethnic groups are not homogenous and distinct in themselves. Heterogeneity borders on dialectical differences, complexity of origins and prejudices that were fostered by colonialism and postcolonial arrangements, some of which reproduce dissidences against the state. This means, in effect, that there are more than two hundred and fifty imagined communities in Nigeria. We shall now deal with the manner in which some of them manifest an identity in Nigerian contemporary politics and what they pose for the future of the Nigerian federation.

### ***Niger Delta Identity***

The Niger Delta includes the various ethnic groups that are scattered around the creeks of the river Niger. Such communities include the Ogonis, Ijaws, Ikwerres, Itshekiris, Urhobos, Isokos, Ibibios, Efiks and perhaps, Yoruba and Delta Igbos. They are spread in the following states: Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Delta Ondo and Edo. What unites these states is that they provide the bulk of Nigeria's crude oil, which has, for a long time, been the mainstay of the federation. What they have got out of this oil wealth and what informs the Niger Delta identity is summed up by a civil society activist, Oronto Oro thus:

The coming of Shell was a coming of poverty, a coming of violence, destruction, dislocation and total annihilation of the Niger Delta People (*Africa Today*, February 2000).

While the agitation of the Ogonis has had many levels, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), founded by Ken Saro-Wiwa, came to be the lightning rod organization for a recognition of their rights to control the resources within their domain and to solve the environmental problems posed by the drilling of oil by Shell. All other groups within the area now have their own pressure groups. The most well known include the Ijaw Youth Council, the Ijaw National Congress, the Isoko National Movement, Urhobo Youth Forum and the Urhobo National Association. The Ogoni Bill of Rights includes the possibility of the formation of an Ogoni nation outside the framework of one Nigeria.

Such agitation has led to a permanent military presence in Ogoni land and to the 'judicial murder' of Ken Saro-Wiwa (Okanta and Douglas 2001). It has indeed led to a permanent military presence in most of the Niger Delta area and to frequent clashes between youths and military personnel over the abduction of foreign oil workers. In Odi, Bayelsa State, twelve policemen who were once sent to arrest some youths, were murdered in November 1999. A military

detachment that went there, razed Odi to the ground. This raised an uproar within the nation and when Lagos riots broke out a few weeks later in which the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) was involved, some Nigerian citizens drew parallels between Lagos and Odi, wondering why president Obasanjo, being a Yoruba, did not use the same punitive measures in Lagos, a Yoruba town as in Odi.

Why the Niger Delta identity has soared on the horizon has a lot to do with the interests which are involved in nurturing it, the alliances they have made in the Nigerian political equation and the opposition they have also encountered. Although it might not be said that there is latent cohesion among the Niger Delta peoples, they share a common cause in fighting for resources that are extracted from their desecrated land in a country in which they reason, three ethnic groups are dominant. While fighting a common fight for resource control, the Ijaws and Itshekiris have continued to quarrel over local government headquarters, the Itshekiris and Urhobos have a long standing dispute over who is the real owner of Warri, a major port town, and the Isokos (from where the major oil drilling takes place in Delta State) feel cheated by Delta administrations that seem dominated by Urhobos.

In the fieldwork I did in this region, I was really devastated to see the high degree of its neglect by successive military regimes. Although 'neglect' is a Nigeria-wide phenomenon, it was unimaginable that the Delta areas, which are the mainstay of the Nigerian federation have no electricity, running water and good roads. Interviewing people in this area especially the youth is a very herculean task as you stand the risk of being suspect as the agent of an oppressive state.

The alliances which incubate the Niger Delta resolve include a broader, Southern perception that the North benefited more from oil than the South since Northerners have remained in political power through military dictatorships for a considerably long time in Nigeria's political history. Accordingly, an institutionalized meeting of Southern governors was formed to pressure the Niger Delta for resource control, including bringing a formal case before the Supreme Court to decide whether in a federation, resources should be controlled by those from whom the resources are produced or by the federal government.<sup>4</sup> The Southern governors' forum is also used to advocate for a return to true federalism after years of military dictatorship and massive human rights violations.

Oronto Oro is one of those who point out that a majority of wealthy Nigerians are either retired or serving generals. Their protracted stay in power has indeed been, according to him, an instrument of looting (*Africa Today*, February 2000). Tam David-West, a former minister of petroleum resources and a Rivers State indigene, also declared that if Rivers people went to Abuja, the federal capital, they would see where their money was dumped (*Newswatch*, 22 May 2000).

These and many more similar declarations have drawn flak from the North. There also, since the splitting of the Northern Region into eighteen states, governors had been meeting. They had preceded the Southern governors in institutionalizing their own forum by decades. Even the Middle Belt, which would want to carve its identity outside a Northern identity, unifies with the general North over the issue.

Most Northerners interviewed on this score go back to the secession of Biafra to ask the question, who died in the creeks of the Niger Delta to protect 'their so-called resources' during the civil war? This is an allusion to the fact that the bulk of the Nigerian army personnel who fought against secessionist Biafra came from the North, especially the Middle Belt. Some also put forward that there was a time groundnuts from the North were the mainstay of the Nigerian economy — a fact that has been disputed by Southern politicians.

In their own argument, Southern politicians point out that before the 1966 coup, Nigeria was truly a federation but since that coup and with a series of military governments, the country has hitherto been governed as a unitary state. Hence, Northern control of power and resources, including mineral resources and especially oil (*The Guardian*, 28 May 2001).

Resource control has been the object of immense debate in Nigeria: how much should communities from which a particular mineral resource, especially oil, is produced, receive in contradistinction to other Nigerians in the whole matrix of community, local government, state government and federal government set up? The federal government, moving from five per cent to thirteen per cent for the area of derivation, first established an Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Corporation (OMPADEC, which was later abrogated) then, since the dawn of democracy, set up a Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) with billions of naira for the development of the area. But that has not quieted the debate.

Angered by what a writer had referred to as federal cheating of the 'Urhobo nation', a researcher from Ahmadu Bello University in the North pointed out that there were no nations in Nigeria before the 1914 project of amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria. He went further to point out that the territories in the Niger Delta were mere reservoirs where nature had stored the oil and gas formed from dead animals and excrements of people living on the banks of the River Niger and River Benue. In his estimation, therefore, sixty per cent of revenue derived from oil should go to the North (*The Guardian*, 26-27 April and 21 May 2001).

### ***Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani Identities***

The dawn of democracy in Nigeria could be seen as an era for the blossoming of ethnic identities. At independence in 1960, the Nigerian national anthem had

stated that 'though tribe and tongue may differ, in brotherhood we stand'. That phrase has since been changed to something that sounds more patriotic. Nevertheless, it aptly beckons to what has been unleashed in recent years in the name of ethnic rights.

With the benefit of events in Nigeria since the first military coup in 1966, it is not possible to refer to shared Nigerian collective memories of the past. In Nigeria, collective memories of postcolonial traumatic events are ethnic in character. Ernest Renan, the nineteenth century French philologist and critic, emphasized the importance of collective memories for both the construction of a nation and the understanding of what could be referred to as its nationalism. However, he cautioned, before shared memories may become national, they must attach themselves to a specified territorial space (Renan 1882). The process by which some shared memories become embedded in particular geographic spaces, fuse with them to become 'ethnic landscapes' or 'ethnospaces' then evolve into 'historic homelands', can be called the 'territorialization of memory' (Smith 1996:453).

Two such clear-cut territorializations in Nigeria are those of Oduduwa in Yoruba collective identity and Biafra in Igbo collective identity. One may argue that other territorialization processes are underway regarding the Ogonis, the Niger Deltans, the Hausa-Fulani Arewas, the Middle Belters and others, but those of Oduduwa and Biafra loom too large in the Nigerian political landscape.

The construction of recent Yoruba collective identity was a result of the traumatic events that preceded the immediate return to democratic rule. The decapitation in the Abacha era, especially of prominent Yoruba politicians, followed the denial of Moshood Abiola, a Yoruba, of his mandate to rule Nigeria after he won the 12 June 1993 presidential election, through a nullification of the whole electoral process by the military regime. These very events shaped the return to democratic rule in 1999 and the clarion call for a shift of political power to the South which a Yoruba, Olusegun Obasanjo finally won. On the other hand, the shared collective memories of the Igbos were forged in the civil war that lasted from 1967 to 1970 where the Igbos were forced from a secessionist bid back into Nigeria. The territorialization of an Igbo memory has manifested itself more recently in the democratic dispensation by a group which calls itself, Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB).

#### *MASSOB and OPC*

Why we are concerned with MASSOB and its Yoruba equivalent, the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), much more than the others is that in our estimation, these two possess the territorial dimension which Renan referred to. Oduduwa land is generally acknowledged as an ethnic landscape that predates colonialism. It was reincarnated in Nigeria's political history by chief Obafemi Awolowo who

formed his party, the Action Group, to represent the interests of the Yoruba people in a country he had aptly described as a geographical expression (Awolowo 1947).

The traumas of the 1990s confined credible dissidences against the Nigerian state to Yoruba land, including the whole of Oduduwa and the places of a wide range of traumatic events to Lagos, Ibadan, Abeokuta... Even though Moshood Abiola won the 1993 election across the board throughout Nigeria,<sup>5</sup> the lines along which infuriated Nigerians protested the military annulment of his election came to be mostly Yoruba. This particular incident epitomizes the political history of Nigeria. To the extent that there were voices raised here and there against the denial of Abiola's mandate, dissidences in Yoruba land cascaded into a movement. That was how the Oodua Peoples Congress was born, comprised mainly of urban Yoruba youths who were dissatisfied with the course of the Nigerian federation and so sought the possibility of an Oduduwa Republic. They might have been calmed by the rise of Olusegun Obasanjo in power but became increasingly restive. As the OPC leader, Dr. Frederick Faseun said, referring to the new political dispensation:

Much as the Yorubas did not vote for General Obasanjo, they are supporting his government. I know we support his government. I personally, and my group support his government. We have warned those who wanted to upturn his government that if they did they will be in trouble (*Africa Today*, February 2000).

Biafran memories as well, underwent dynamic transformation recently. Hitherto, after the defeat of Biafra in 1970, the question received fleeting mention in Nigerian discourses. It was a taboo subject because secession through armed combat was a most serious attempt to break the Nigerian federation. With the demise of Sani Abacha in 1998, MASSOB arose. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra might have been formed in response to the Oodua Peoples Congress (Babawale 2001). The nomenclature, Biafra, had become an Igbo memorial. It had also become virtually synonymous with Igbo for those Nigerians who cared to remember that Igbos had used a Biafran symbol to dismember their imagined Nigeria. In comparison to the OPC, however, there was no upsurge among Igbos in welcoming MASSOB.

Like the OPC though, MASSOB is made up of youths, who were born several years after the defeat of Biafra. Their leader, Ralph Uwazurike was about ten years old during the Biafran war and, like boys of his age, then, had joined the Biafran Boys Company, which was a preparatory ground for enlistment in a future Biafran army. He later trained in India and imbibed the non-violent approach to dissidence of the late Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi. All actions of MASSOB in that respect, including the planned introduction of a Biafran currency in the areas it defines as Biafran territory and hoisting the Biafran flag in Aba in February 2000, have met the stiff resistance of the state. In addition

to non-violent actions, shootouts with police are frequent in Okigwe, Owerri, Aba and other places in Igbo land. Just as the OPC would point to Yoruba marginalization as the cause of its rise, MASSOB would say the same for the Igbos. When told that others are also crying of marginalization in Nigeria, the MASSOB leader had the following reply:

That is why we say we want to go now. Why must almost everybody cry for the same thing? Nobody wants to be marginalized, isn't it? (*The News*, 22 May 2000).

What differentiates MASSOB from the OPC is that whereas the latter has the tacit support of Yoruba elites because of recent transformation of their postcolonial traumas, it is not so for MASSOB. Igbo elites distance themselves from MASSOB, including Chukwemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the leader of the Biafran war in the late 1960s, who pointed out that this movement was trivializing a Biafra which he led.

Ojukwu was nevertheless present at the opening of what MASSOB calls a 'Biafran embassy' in Washington. At this juncture, he explained that he was only there as a symbol — what he refers to as 'Biafra of the Mind' and had nothing to do with his faith in the Nigerian federation (*The Vanguard*, 4 November 2001). However, most Igbos would think that MASSOB should share the landscape with other similar organizations on the land like the OPC and others while, at the same point, leaving the stage of political pressure to such elitist organizations as the Ohaneze Ndigbo for the Igbos, Afenifere for the Yorubas and Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) for the Hausa-Fulanis.

#### *The Arewa Peoples Congress (APC)*

None of the people we interviewed could refer to any activities of the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) except to its stated purpose, which is 'to checkmate the militancy of the Pan-Yoruba Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) and the threats of terror by the newly formed Igbo Peoples Congress (IPC)' (*The News*, 3 January 2000). One only knows that after a series of meetings in Kaduna and Kano, the organization resolved to carry out activities aimed at promoting the cultural, economic and political interests of the Northern states and their peoples' (ibid.). Its leader, Sagir Mohamed, argued that it was the North and the South East that voted Obasanjo into power but the new president turned out to favour the South West, his Yoruba ethnic base, which did not vote for him. Expatiating on what he denounced as Obasanjo's partiality and the marginalization of the North, the APC leader said he did not mean the entire North but the Hausa-Fulanis. He went further:

What we are saying is that in the politics of this country, you cannot, and should not, preclude this major tribe, because this major tribe plays an important role in shaping the democratic values of their country (Ibid.).

After these initial statements about its principles, nothing was heard of the APC again. It was not possible to verify its role in the religious riots that engulfed some of the Northern states but the statement on the Hausa-Fulani was enough to show that the APC was a fig leaf of one ethnic identity as was the case of OPC for the Yorubas and MASSOB for the Igbos and that a dent had been made on a monolithic Northern identity in the Nigerian political equation. This was amply demonstrated by the 'struggle' for a Middle Belt identity.

### ***Middle Belt Identity***

The concept of a Middle Belt identity may be as old as the nation-state project and, as its name indicates, might be harder to construct than say Igbo identity or Yoruba identity. A geographical zone, located in the northern part of Nigeria, the Middle Belt is the largest concentration of minority ethnic groups with a complex mix of Muslims and Christians, interspersed with Hausa-Fulani communities. This has made Southern politicians refer to the Middle Belt minorities as suffering from internal colonialism. The United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), a political party led by the late Joseph Tarka in the 1960s, sought to carve out a Middle Belt identity outside a Northern identity. Whatever successes that move might have made were eclipsed by successive military regimes, which in their commandist character, put all identities including a Middle Belt identity into limbo.

The return to democratic rule in 1999 re-launched what might be called an agitation for the recognition of the Middle Belt as a specific zone in Nigeria, distinct from the perceptions of a monolithic North. What gave this agitation further impetus were the Kaduna riots of February 2000 in which Middle Belters were killed as well as Southerners, whether Christians or Muslims. In reprisals that followed in southeastern Nigeria, northern citizens were killed regardless whether they were of the Hausa-Fulani stock, Kanuris or Middle Belters. Middle Belters would have reasoned: 'In the North we were treated as outsiders, in the South we were treated not only as Northerners but as outsiders, why don't we construct our own identity outside the Southern and Northern blocks?'

Our travel within the Middle Belt shows that most ethnic groups in the zone speak Hausa as a first or second language. How this situation developed is something that baffles a researcher. Even where the Hausa language was not formerly taught at schools, Middle Belters spoke the Hausa language. Why then the agitation for a Middle Belt Identity? One Aminu Okpanachi in a letter to the editor of *The Post Express* wrote thus:

How can these people convince us that the so called Hausa-Fulanis are their problems when, after denouncing the Hausa-Fulanis in Aso Rock, Solomon Lar and others came out in a typical 'Core North' babanriga with tall caps to match while communicating in Hausa [...]. Are we sure that these people are sincere or are they acting out scripts written for them by others? (*The Post Express*, 9 September 2000).<sup>6</sup>

Many Middle Belters answer that to the extent that they lived in peace with the Hausa-Fulanis, quite often, in the share of national resources meant for the North, the Hausa-Fulanis and Kanuris divided them among themselves to their exclusion, yet they are referred to as Northerners. It was against this background that the appointments made in the Obasanjo administration of top ranking Middle Belters to sensitive positions — defence minister, chiefs of army, navy and air force — incensed the Hausa-Fulanis and they made it known. These appointments were not enough, however, to appease the Middle Belt Forum. One of its leaders, Dan Sulciman, asked to:

Look at the board of directors of federally owned companies and corporations. How many are Middle Belters? Look at federal parastatals, how many managing directors, directors-general, and general managers are from the Middle Belt? Name them. You can't name them because they are just not there. When you start talking about the wealthy people of Nigeria, you won't be able to refer to a single Middle Belter. You can't name them because they are also denied the patronage that other parts of the country enjoy (*The Comet*, October 2001).

One serious problem hinges upon who really is in and who really is out of the geographical configuration of the Middle Belt. Lawal Kaita, a prominent Northern politician, pointed out that:

If the worst comes to the worst, the entire Middle Belt will be split because those who are agitating for a separate identity know they cannot get Kwara, Kogi, Niger and Nasarawa [states] to their side. They can hold their Benue, Plateau and probably Taraba states but it is definite they cannot hold the four other states (*The News*, 3, January 2000).

For Bala Takaya, a Middle Belter:

It is the cultural Middle Belt that we are more interested in and this comprises the core central zone like Kogi, Nasarawa, Plateau, Benue, Kwara, the FCT Abuja inclusive and the so-called minority elements of Bauchi, Gombe, Southern Borno, Southern Yobe, the whole of Taraba, Adamawa and Southern Kebbi stretching from Zuru south-west across Mubi in the North-East (ibid.).

The heterogeneity of the region is compounded by frequent ethnic conflicts involving Tivs against Jukuns, Kutebs, Chambass, Domas, itinerant Hausa-Fulanis and Idomas. At the time of writing this chapter, the most recent ethnic conflict



between Tivs and Jukuns in October 2001 saw the killing of nineteen soldiers by Tivs and military reprisal which claimed more than three hundred Tiv lives (*The Guardian*, 28 October 2001). A split of identity has developed among the leading political figures in the region. Yakubu Gowon for instance, once Nigeria's president and a native of Lang Tang in Plateau State, is currently the chairman of the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), an umbrella Northern pressure organization, which is the Hausa-Fulani answer to Igbo Ohaneze and Yoruba Afenifere.

### **Religious Identity**

Religion in Nigeria had hitherto been one dimension of identity that overlapped with other dimensions. It had often not been too clear when an ethnic crisis became a religious one due to the fact that some ethnic groups can be identified with particular religions. Most ethnic groups in the South of Nigeria are Christians except the Yorubas who are a mix of Christians and Muslims. In the North, the Hausa-Fulanis and Kanuris are predominantly Muslims. But the other ethnic groups — Tivs, Idomas, Jukuns, Igalas, Biroms, Nupes, Gwaris, etc. are split between Muslims and Christians.

However, most religious riots in Nigeria have so far originated from the North and that is why Southern residents in Northern Nigeria, who are predominantly Christians, get caught up in religious riots that occur. Successive Nigerian regimes have tried to hedge against religious identity. Hence, the Nigerian constitutions have harped on the secular character of the Nigerian state; Although Muslims had always sought the introduction of Shariah, a penal legal code, which took care of Muslim concerns in the constitution. This continued until the return to democratic rule in 1999 and the introduction of Shariah by some states in the North.

Why did the bulk of the Northern states, including those which some claim belong to the Middle Belt, such as Niger and Bauchi, decide to formally introduce Shariah law? A Fulani Christian, Yunana Shibkai Sokoto, summed up a widely held view:

It was a calculated attempt [...] to destabilize [president Obasanjo]. They are not happy with a Southern president or a Christian president (*Tell*, 12 March 2000).

This is what is referred to as a 'political Shariah'. El Zhak Zhaky, the Muslim fundamentalist cleric has even pointed to the spurious character of the Shariah issue. His argument that there is definitely a political agenda behind it was twofold. First, was the fact that those who introduced it are state governors and not Muslim clerics. Secondly, Shariah is what Muslims aspire to and therefore in a society which is a mix of Muslims and others, one cannot say Shariah has been introduced and it works (*The News* 12 June 2000).

Contrarily, most of the influential Northern or Hausa-Fulani politicians and the mass of Muslims in the North have supported the introduction of Shariah. Two of them — Alhaji Shehu Shagari and General Muhammadu Buhari — are former Nigerian presidents. Buhari has gone further to charge Muslims to vote for Muslims in the 2003 presidential and general elections and to prepare for a Jihad (*The Guardian*, 11 June 2001).

When Shariah was initially introduced by the Zamfara State government, the Nigerian nation was put into a state of frenzy. Was Nigeria going to break up? A subsequent Council of State meeting chaired by Obasanjo asked states which had done so or were about to do so to backpedal, but it failed to persuade them. Many more states followed in quick succession — Kaduna, Kano, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe, Bauchi, Jigawa, Borno, and so on.

Hundreds of people were killed during the Kaduna riots, which broke out in February 2000 and were certainly caused by the introduction of Shariah. Some analysts ventured the opinion that it was once again the agitation for state creation. The latter reason seems unlikely as it is plausible to argue that in fact, the introduction of Shariah might have caused the agitation for a new state of their own by Christians in Southern Zaria. The Kaduna riots tore the metropolis apart and kept Nigeria on the brink. More riots or scares of riots followed in other Northern states and cities — Minna in Niger State, Tafawa Balewa in Bauchi State, Kafanchan, Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, Benue and Taraba. The first Shariah victim was in Gusau, Zamfara State where one Mallam Jangedi had his hand amputated for stealing a cow. Other 'Shariah sentences' have been passed by some of the other states for cheating, lying, prostitution, alcoholism and adultery.

What have been the responses of the federal authorities? After the Northern governors refused to comply with the Council of State decision, they henceforth turned a blind eye to future introductions of Shariah by the rest of the Northern states where Muslims are a majority. Shariah seemed to have been contained but Christians in Shariah states or the Southerners among them, migrated down to the South. Those who remained bore the brunt of 'infidels' amidst 'believers' and were treated as outcasts.

The most recent riot in Jos in September 2001 which paralleled those of Kaduna are thought to have been instigated by those who were not happy that by turning a blind eye to Shariah introductions, the federal authorities had contained their political potential. Jos, capital of Plateau State is squarely in the Middle Belt region with a predominantly Christian population and had long been a haven for Southern migrants both from the South and from riots in other parts of the North. People thought it was the least place in the North where likely such events would take place. But they did.

Why political Shariah is held as the plausible reason for the introduction of Shariah in some of the Northern states is that though Muslims exist in the South West, notably in Yorubaland, Shariah law has so far not been introduced there. Only in those states in the North where the Hausa-Fulanis or the Kanuris or those who claim a Northern identity predominate, do we have the Shariah. As far as we know, no one has even mooted the Shariah in such 'core' Middle Belt states as Kogi, Kwara, Taraba, Benue and Plateau. That is why it might not be too far fetched to say that a majority of the Hausa-Fulanis identify with Shariah as much as they do with their identity as Northerners. In our perception, the agenda of Shariah partisans, including the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), could be not only the furtherance of Shariah, but the maintenance of a common Northern identity with Christians of Northern origin such as Yakubu Gowon from Plateau State in the Middle Belt, who has emphatically stated that he is Arewa and a Northerner (*The Guardian*, 22 October 2000 and 11 June 2001).

### **The Partitioning of Territories**

As Denis Retaillé pointed out, whether it is regionalization, ethnic self-determination, exchanges of territories or any quest of some 'better way of carving up the land':

The model of partitioning territories [...] generates disorder [...] which we cannot even understand because our minds are overwhelmed by the pseudo-evidence of the need for partitioning (cited by Ben Arrous 1996:29).

That goes much more so for Nigeria. We have often mentioned that Nigeria was an artificial creation. How would we conclude that the present thirty-six states in Nigeria are not also an artificial creation? How could someone stay out there in Abuja or Lagos and decide that Nigeria should be divided into twelve or thirty-six states or more? To what extent has this partitioning of Nigeria solved the age-long problem of the 'imagined' Nigerian political community?

Nigeria started out as a federation of three regions. Pressures in the colonial period for an expansion of the regions in order to assuage minorities' fears that they would be dwarfed by three large ethnic groups, were rebuffed by the Willinks Commission of Inquiry. This Commission argued in the late 1950s that a Nigeria in which the rule of law prevailed, should be able to take care of these fears by the minorities. But fears persisted as Nigeria lacked a nationalities policy and the rule of law did not prevail.

The only state that was created in the postcolonial era through constitutional means, i.e. a referendum and plebiscite, was the Mid-West State, created out of Western Nigeria. All the other states that brought the total of states in Nigeria to thirty-six were created through military fiat. These creations have compounded rather than solved the nationality problems. True, there were jublations after

each wave of state creations but since created borders transverse through ethnospaces and historic homelands they at the same time create disorder which becomes very difficult for us, 'nomadic researchers' (Lonsdale 1981:206) in the identities sphere, to untangle.

The first problem is that there are new groups in a newly created state who perceive themselves as disadvantaged in a new status quo and they may start to articulate a new solution through the carving out of their own state. These new groups could be led by existing elites who may have been outmanoeuvred in a new power play in a newly created state and who hope that if they achieve the creation of yet an additional state, their power could be restored. They are therefore likely to mobilize their kith and kin for a new state creation by pointing to their dispersal in this or that state and by using all the language associated with nationalists to condemn a carving done from a distant centre.

The second problem that the partitioning of territories creates is that it tends to satisfy the power interests of the partitioner rather than solving the nationalities problem as a whole. When Yakubu Gowon announced a twelve states structure in 1967, prior to the civil war, it was a revolutionary decision but, at the same time, it served to pull the rug from under the foot of Eastern Nigeria, which was on the verge of declaring a secessionist republic of Biafra. By decreeing three new states (Rivers, East Central and Cross River) out of Eastern Nigeria, the intention was to confine the Igbos to one of them (East Central State), show the minorities that by declaring a republic of Biafra, Igbos were frustrating their yearnings for their own state and make minorities fifth columnists in the secessionist bid. It worked perfectly. But military dictatorships in the post-civil war era, saw the minorities becoming increasingly maltreated, as was exemplified by the looting of wealth accruing from oil, attitudes to environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, the crises in Ogoniland and the judicial murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

The third problem is the worst problem of all: identity crisis — 'I am from Anambra State or I am from Kano State'. That might have been the least intention of state creators but it went a long way to fuse ethnic identity with state identity and perhaps, even with religious identity. The phenomenon of state identity has gone paripasu with the proliferation of local governments. Currently, there are more than seven hundred local government councils in Nigeria and within a few years, the number could rise to more than two thousand. The creation of new local governments has poisoned inter- and intra-community relations and has been the cause of conflicts in Warri between the Itshekiris and Urhobos. In the first republic, people railed against 'northernization', i.e. the policy of the government of Northern Nigeria to exclude Southerners from its administration. But little did people know that state creation would be even worse. A number of state governments have now embarked on an enterprise to decree that non-indigenes could not work in their employment even if such

non-indigenes needed to work to support a spouse. If that is so, how many countries are Nigerians constructing out of Nigeria?

The fourth problem arises from the character of the federation. It was argued at the beginning that the three regions were so large that they held the federal centre to ransom, so it was necessary to multiply the regions or the states in order to make the centre manageable but the reverse is the case. In the military era, federalism was jettisoned for centralism. The centre became so powerful, with a firm grip on oil resources and the federal purse, that the only avenue its self-reproduction could open was that of widespread pauperization of ordinary Nigerians. Both the fiery debate on resource control and fiscal federalism, and the calls for a sovereign national conference, for Nigerians to discuss a return to true federalism, are resultant effects.

### **The Nation-State Project, Security and Geography from Below**

We have argued that there was a social contract between the state and people in the evolution of Western societies. The development of a coercive apparatus, including the police, the army and the judiciary, went a long way to serve emerging nation-states in the maintenance of security. In Africa, or indeed in Nigeria, there were no such contracts between the peoples and the metropolis nor were there any between the peoples and the postcolonial state except, perhaps, a social contract in the sphere of provision of basic human needs. When a 'security contract' did not exist, the establishment of the coercive apparatus of the state, a phenomenon of geography from above, had no organic linkage with the people. The coercive apparatus of the state could, hence, become an instrument of alienation of the people and the people could look elsewhere for the provision of their own security.

Part of the goals of the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) is to protect their people in the light of an insecure Nigerian environment. When the OPC struck in the Lagos area, the federal government threatened to impose a state of emergency on Lagos State. That threat was criticised by the governors of Southwestern states — Lagos, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, Oyo and Ekiti States — and was not carried out. Similar threats were issued when Kaduna riots erupted, when Shariah law was imposed in some states in the North. They were not carried out either.

Several challenges to the federal state took place since the inception of civilian rule in 1999 and hundreds if not thousands of people died. The response of federal authorities was to visit the areas of these challenges, send relief supplies to victims, assure citizens of the protection of their lives and property and implore them to go back to their businesses. Other rounds of killings ensued and the federal authorities engaged in similar rounds of assurances.

All this came to a head with the killings in Taraba and Benue States in October 2001. These killings fully illustrated the manner in which 'geographies of ups and downs' were played out in the political equation of Nigeria. Nineteen soldiers who had gone to keep the peace between the Tivs of Benue State and Jukuns of Taraba State were murdered by Tiv militants and their various parts displayed in some Tiv areas. Federal authorities were highly incensed and at the burial ceremonies of these soldiers, president Obasanjo ordered the army to fish out the culprits. The order became a blank cheque for the army to move into Tiv land and butcher hundreds of Tivs including burning down the house of a recently retired chief of army staff. Was it the intention of the federal state that specific Tiv areas be uprooted in the same manner as Odi in Rivers State? Was it the order of the minister of defence, a Jukun, to deal with Tivs? Since the conflict involved a long drawn feud between Tivs and Jukuns over Tiv settlement in Taraba State, what are citizenship rights in a country everyone claims he belongs to?

In addition to the disturbing fusion of ethnic and state identities, it should be underlined that the whole issue of Shariah also involves citizenship rights. Who is a citizen of Nigeria? What laws are you obligated to obey? What laws protect you as a citizen of a state? Are you protected by the law anywhere you reside in Nigeria?

In a further challenge to the federal state, some state governments, specifically those of Abia and Anambra have co-opted and appropriated a militia group, the Bakassi Boys as their internal security apparatus in place of the federal police. Hitherto, there was a debate over whether the police should be a federal or a state concern. This debate was sparked off by governments in the South West especially in the hey days of the OPC when it made headline news and was prominent in the crises in Lagos ports and other parts of Lagos such as Muslin and Ajegunle and in the South West as a whole. In southeastern Nigeria, life had become so insecure that governors sidelined the police for militias, only to the discomfiture of the federal state which itself failed to control the corruption of the police and other federal institutions, and therefore proved unable to give the citizens protection under the law.

The Bakassi Boys, who trace their origins to manufacturers of shoes in Aba became 'a resistance army to the criminal activities of armed robbers and hoodlums' (Babawale 2001:7). In Anambra State, they were integrated into the State Security network and given a legal imprimatur by the State House of Assembly. They were formally renamed 'Anambra State Vigilante Services'. The federal government protested against this incursion into its authority. The Bakassi Boys have run into frequent clashes with the police over their methods, which included prompt executions of civilian offenders and suspects. They would seem to be on the verge of disintegration in the face of internal contradictions and the setting of the stage for the 2003 national elections.

### The Future

Venturing into the test of predicting the future of the nation-state project in Nigeria is not just a simple task. Suffice to say that major trends such as the explosion of new identities and frequent fragmentation point towards a doomsday for the Nigerian experiment. Nigerians have, however, come to accept the fact that the notion that 'I am a Nigerian' can share the stage with ethnic, state, clan, region, or religious identities.

By way of conclusion, we hypothesize that the nation-state project in Nigeria is likely to materialize when its many inner spaces of increasing sovereignty and according imagined communities are confronted on their own terms and their goals interposed with what would be considered as ideal types of human consciousness. In other words, as Nigerians try to forge a nation with an eye to the dominant mode of national or even supra-national formation in advanced industrial societies, national practices will emerge out of social facts, social and historical experiences peculiar to Nigeria.

The civil war was one of these experiences and a crucial one indeed. It led Nigerians to share collective traumas, out of which developed the widely-held view that war is definitely not the best means for solving the problems emanating from geography from above. Even Ojukwu, the leader of the Biafran venture, has explicitly agreed to this wisdom on a programme on the 30th anniversary of Biafra. True, in the light of subsequent military dictatorships, some Nigerians who had fought the civil war on the other side publicized that they regretted their involvement in 'keeping Nigeria one'. Nevertheless, they did not take the secessionist option when the chips were down between 1984 and 1998, which means that they actually subscribed, beyond circumstantial bitterness, to the nation-state project.

Tens of thousands of people may die in Nigeria, and yet, ethnic groups at war or those contesting new spaces of sovereignty seek settlement through proper power sharing arrangements within an African consensual framework (Mengisteab 1996:106). After Biafra or in spite of it, no ethnic group in Nigeria has sought for outright secession or independence. That is why, though the Igbos could politik about their marginalization, they have not taken MASSOB seriously. Ralph Uwazurike's reference to the uncertainty of the Nigerian is only exhuming the consciousness of Nigerians at the level of geography from below, a consciousness that was nurtured in the decades of territorial engineering from above. Being a Nigerian therefore means to refer to the Nigeria of the nation-state project since a nation-state seemingly remains much more a morally accepted community than a reference to one's ethnicity in a multinational society.

For all that, ethnic groups are not in any way less socially constructed than nation-states and other imagined communities. They are all very heavily, emotionally laden. As a multinational, multicultural society, it is expected that

the nation-state project in Nigeria, should it hold, would lead to the full acknowledgement of a cosmopolitan society. Nigeria is not too far from other similarly plural societies in the world such as India or Indonesia, all of which are colonial constructs that have held on, in spite of frequent crises.

Most Nigerians currently agree that a firm resolve is needed to keep the genuine precepts of federalism but those can only take shape with a Nigerian characteristic. Commitment to federalism goes far beyond sending Nigerian legislators to Switzerland to 'learn the art of creating states', as was done during the civilian rule of Alhaji Shegu Shagari in the late 1970s (Akinola 1996:669). A federalist solution to Nigeria's crises will not emanate from the constitutions of Switzerland, Australia, Canada or the United States, but from the universal and abundant desire of the peoples of Nigeria 'to cooperate with each other through national regulation of a limited number of matters' while, at the same time, retaining their separate identities and remaining 'the competent authority in their own territories for the regulation of other matters' (Ramphal 1979:xiv).

Nigerians feel federal. That is why Nigeria has been the only known remaining federation in the whole British incursion into Africa. Nigerians delight in being the largest concentration of the black race in the world and would therefore want a preservation of the federation. This can only happen through a devolution of power to lower levels, which are not just the newly proliferated local government, but the various ethnic and sub-ethnic groups, clans and villages, some of which are yet emerging as social constructs as communications among Nigerians deepen.

### Notes

1. Although Hausa and Fulani are two distinct group identities, they are used as if they are one in Nigeria. The Fulanis had conquered the Hausa in a Jihad some centuries ago and since both languages share some similarities, the Fulanis who are smaller in number adopted the Hausa language in governance. Both groups have since shared similar perspectives on Nigerian politics.
2. All newspapers cited in this chapter are based in Lagos, except the London-based *Africa Today*.
3. This is really an estimation. Margaret Peil (1976:69), for example, points out that 'Nigeria has at least sixty major ethnic divisions and several hundred ethnic groups, depending on how one counts'.
4. A Supreme Court ruling on the case, gave control of offshore oil drilling to the federal government. This has caused a furore with oil producing states especially those with coast lines. The quest of new 'negotiated settlements' has remained on many political agendas ever since.



5. Including in Kano, home state of the purportedly Northern, military-backed candidate Bashir Tofa. On the context of both Abiola's countrywide victory and Yoruba-centered protest of the election annulment, read Ake (2000:97-109).
6. The Aso Rock hills are the seat of the presidential complex in the federal capital Abuja. Chief Solomon Lar, a former chairman of Obasanjo's People's Democratic Party, is a famous Middle Belter politician.

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