

The Powerful Presence of the Past: Memory Politics, Self-Determination and the Reinvention of Igbo Nationalism in Contemporary Nigeria.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on recent reconstructions of Igbo 'memory' and its association with political violence in contemporary Nigeria. It draws on the use of a collection of 'memory repertoires' by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign state of Biafra (MASSOB) and other neo-Biafran movements to seek the self-determination of the Igbo and an exit from the Nigerian state. The core issues relate to narratological dualism generated by the Nigerian-Biafran War. While the state is intent on shaping the history and memories of the war to suit its own vision, interests and politics, the Igbo still connects to the war as a war of Igbo national liberation. The claims and counter-claims enacted by these contestations provides the setting in which 'memory' is being played out overtime in a political context.

Introduction

One of the most notable aspects of the crisis that has so dramatically engulfed Nigeria since its return to civil rule in 1999 is the emergence of several ethno-nationalist projects from different sections of the country. While these movements mobilise support from their ethnic enclaves, they also impose severe strains on national security by virtue of the means they adopt in their struggle against the state. The decade-long return to civil rule did not only open up the democratic space, it also unleashed a host of hitherto repressed and dormant political forces in the country, leading to a noticeable upsurge in the outbreak of ethnic, communal and religious conflicts.

Unlike other ethno-nationalist projects in the country that seek de-centralization, autonomy and devolution of political power in Nigeria, the rise of Igbo nationalism represented by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign state of Biafra (MASSOB) draws on a collection of 'memory repertoires' in the struggle for Igbo self-determination and exit from the Nigerian state into an independent state of Biafra. By using 'group memory' as a resource and adopting recent 'constructions of memory', MASSOB challenges the sovereignty of the Nigerian state over Igbo land (in South-eastern Nigeria), evokes 'counter-claims of sovereignty' and seeks to create alternative spaces of 'power and influence' in their Igbo homeland. This provides a context in which Igbo memory is mobilised and deployed in the quest for sovereignty and self-determination in the Nigerian political context.

Locating the Igbo 'Memory' in the Nigerian Context

The Nigerian state has been portrayed as one in which the major political issues are vigorously (and sometimes violently) contested along complex ethnic, religious and regional lines (Smyth and Robinson 2001). As such, Nigeria expresses traits like disintegration, secession, civil strife, civil war, minority agitation and violent conflict, all of which are typical and common occurrences. This division came to a full glare with attempted secession of the Igbo in the Southeast to create the Republic of Biafra on 30 May 1967, leading to the outbreak of the Nigerian-Biafran War (1967-1970). Often depicted by the Igbo as a war of national self-determination, part of the politics deployed by the Nigerian government in winning the war entailed the deconstruction of the Biafran secessionist attempt as an ethnic rebellion. Almost Four decades afterwards, there is a dominant perception among the Igbo that they are yet to be re-integrated into the Nigerian project and that the former Eastern region is perpetually treated like a conquered territory, a colonized space and not as a part of the larger federation. This raises the salience of the 'Igbo question' and feeds into the re-enactment of collective 'memories' of Igbo suffering.

The emergent manifestations of Igbo nationalism inevitably tends to dwell on situations, policies and actions that produce grievances, and the overwhelming feeling of the deprivation of 'nationhood' within the context of the present political arrangement in Nigeria. Critical to the formation of MASSOB is a particular version of Nigeria's political history that draws heavily from events succeeding the civil war. A central understanding is that there is an orchestrated and elaborate attempt by the hegemonic power elites in Nigeria to perpetually emasculate the Igbo. As such, the continued relevance of the 'Igbo Question', the emergent forms of Igbo nationalism and the quest for 'Igbo self-determination' in the Nigerian public sphere have played themselves out within the context of the politics of memory and contending historical narratives of the war.

Contested Memories, Contested Meanings in the Nigerian Public Space

The Nigerian public sphere depicts a scenario where memories of the civil war are often challenged, particularly when memory 'sites' and 'practices' are evoked in the struggles over identity, political power and legitimacy. The hegemonic group, political elites and others in positions of power pontificate with a view to control history and interpretations of the past. MASSOB demonstrates widespread Igbo resistance to such control which sometimes is expressed in 'counter-narratives' or overtly in more confrontational ways. Nigerian government's official position holds that the war was an Igbo rebellion, and efforts have been made to construct post-war memories to align with this perception. The day the war broke out on 6 July 1967 is still commemorated within the Nigerian Military and the National War Museum at Umuahia (Southeast Nigeria) only has military exhibits on display, with a motto that reads: 'That they did not die in vain', referring to those who fought and died on the federal side. In a sense, the official commemoration of the civil war is used by the Nigerian government and the military to display their role as guarantors of national unity. Officially, there are views that 'what happened in, and to, Nigeria during the period should be better seen and judged not through the lenses and perspectives of a civil war...a better description of the conflict would be the Nigerian War of Unity' (Akpan 1985: 166).

The official and institutionalized interpretation of the war offered to young Nigerians in schools comes across as a powerful educational tool in school curricular and textbooks (Eluwa et al 1988; Duze 1985). Memory contestations are common over the 'correct' manner to interpret the war. The authors of most of these textbooks emphasize the positive effects of the war like the creation of states, employment for the military and the attainment of nationhood (Duze 1985: 198-199). These views are backed, and echo the official views of the Nigerian government which denies and belittles Igbo issues connected to the war. On the contrary, these textbooks ignore the ethnic question connected to the civil war, the pogrom against the Igbo which preceded the war and gave rise to Igbo secessionist attempts, the use of hunger as a legitimate weapon of war by the Nigerian government, and the denial of Biafran national symbols (flag and national anthem). In the post-war era in Nigeria, 'Biafra' became a taboo word, the southern stretch of Nigeria's Atlantic coast known as the 'Bight of Biafra' was renamed the 'Bight of Bonny'; and the oil pumped from this area, known as, the 'Biafra Light' is now called 'Bonny Light'. These views reinforce the official position that the Biafra never existed and downplays the gravity of what happened between 1967 and 1970.

Memory, Identity and the Re-invention of Igbo Nationalism

Led by Chief Ralph Uwazuruike an Indian-trained lawyer, MASSOB was formed on 13 September 1999. MASSOB represents a post-civil war second generation Igbo nationalist movement that contests the marginalization of the Igbo since the end of the civil war with the aim of resuscitating Igbo ambitions for an independent state of Biafra. For Uwazuruike, it was the objective conditions of his own life and the existential fusion of his personal biography with the history of the Igbo nation that forms an indispensable part of his identity, predisposing him to embark on the struggle for the realisation of the Biafran dream. His life history aptly draws from the limitations that were placed on him and many Igbo youths born after the civil war in Nigeria. At the time the Nigerian Civil War broke out in 1967 Uwazuruike was about nine years old. According to him, it was

the recurring 'memory' of his five-year old sister who died of kwashiorkor right before him while their mother went to buy some drugs for her that fanned in him the dream to resuscitate Biafra. He blames the death of his sister on the Nigerian government who introduced the 'blockade policy' to isolate Biafra by land, air and sea, thereby, preventing any relief efforts from going into the territory.

MASSOB draws from a 'collective memory' of Igbo heroics and achievements in the past, and on the present experience of deprivation, marginalisation and injustice against the Igbo within the context of the Nigerian nation-state. Hence MASSOB and other neo-Biafran groups espouse and romanticise a brand of Igbo nationalism that delves into ethnic chauvinism. The websites of these groups are also inundated with chants, poems and legends that eulogise the Igbo nation, history, heroes, achievements and folklores.¹ This manner of heroising narrative is grounded in the reconstruction of a national past, which permeates temporality and evokes 'triumph', 'resilience' or 'victory' for the group based on enduring characteristics (Malkki 1995: 1, 55). In the preservation of social memories and identity, artefacts play a very important role in helping us retain them. The attempt to literally 'capture' the Igbo past for posterity is manifested more explicitly in the Biafran flags, Biafran military uniforms, belts, umbrellas, currencies, stickers, pictures of Biafran soldiers in military uniforms in training camp, Biafran documents and an almanac of Biafran hierarchy which are widespread in the Southeast of Nigeria.

The relationship between media and nationalism is a familiar one. The media in this sense (whether on radio, television, internet or newspaper) is based upon and informed by a political orientation that utilises certain political concepts and ideas in the everyday maintenance of political identity. For MASSOB and other neo-Biafran groups advocating for self-determination, the process of exchange of photographs, films, television footage, images, clips and objects give political discourse its meaning. Presently, these

¹ Some of these websites include: www.biafraland.com. www.biafranet.com. <http://magazine.biafranigeriaworld.com>. www.umuibousa.org. www.kwenu.com. <http://ekwenche.org>.

groups have established a communications outfit that combines a radio station and a weekly newspaper, both known as, the Voice of Biafra International (VOBI) in the United States with the aim of conscientising the Igbo at home.² Perhaps, the most innovative developments can be found on the internet where all sorts of websites devoted entirely to the Igbo quest for self-determination are found. These web pages are inundated with clips and visual images of the Nigerian-Biafran War, and the images so vividly captured on them represent an ambitious effort to somehow ‘freeze’ time and allow future generations a ‘memory’ access to important individuals (warriors, heroes, achievers) and events (Igbo heroics in battles).

The notion of a collective Igbo ‘memory’ implies a past that is not only commonly shared, but also jointly remembered (that is ‘co-memorated’). In a bid to forge a cohesive group ‘memory’ and remember the past together, society affects not only what we remember, but also when we remember it. Beginning from May 2000, MASSOB engaged in a symbolic hoisting of the Biafran flag and the movement officially presented the Declaration of the Demand for a Sovereign State of Biafra to the People and Government of Nigeria. This marked the beginning of the annual commemorative anniversary of the declaration of Biafra on 30 May, 1967. A permanent feature in marking the re-declaration of Biafra every May 30 involves various successful and unsuccessful attempts to hoist the green-red-black Biafran flag in major roads, streets, bill boards and strategic places in the Eastern states of Nigeria. MASSOB mobilises the Igbo to ‘co-remember’ and access their collective past by observing holidays, peaceful protests or marches across major cities in the southeast. In view of these developments, it was inevitable that MASSOB would clash with state security operatives in the course of its activities. The movement claims that between 22 May 2000 and 22 April 2008,

² According to Voice of Biafra International (VOBI) this shortwave radio broadcast service transmits on 15.28 MHz (on 19 meters band) every Friday at 20.00-21.00 Hours UTC (Universal Time Coordinated). This is equivalent to 9. pm – 10. pm Biafraland Time.

over 2,000 of its registered members were killed by state security personnel in various cities across the country (*The Guardian* 12. 4. 2008).

Conclusion: Continuities of Memory, the Search for Meaning and Nation-Building

In societies seeking to rebuild after a war, collective memories of the past pose a major obstacle to reconciling divided populations, constructing a durable peace and embarking on a nation-building project. Memories of persecution, suffering and marginalisation sustain group identities, and after festering for a years or even decades can translate into a basis for future violence. The reinvention of Igbo nationalism draws from the 'memories' of the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War (which evokes images of an Igbo war of national liberation), an idea of Igbo nationalism and a rendition of the war which differs profoundly from the official position articulated by the Nigerian government. While the Nigerian government has a clear idea of how it wants the past and the war to be remembered, this agenda is challenged by the Igbo who vigorously contest the official interpretation.

Intent on shaping on shaping memory to suit its own vision and interests, the Nigerian state portrays political constructions that are not only inaccurate, but also serves to alienate the people (the Igbo) whose history they are meant to represent. Hence, the Nigerian case presents an interesting case study of the limits of a government's ability to shape the collective memory of a population. The narratological pluralism generated in the Nigerian case often leads to discord and violence, particularly when repressions and exclusions arising from such memories are not addressed. This brings to fore the critical need to address contested representations of the past, hidden and repressed pasts, and the claims and counter-claims arising from such contestations. Coming to terms with a painful past is critical to the task of nation-building and serves as a basis for social cohesion within nation-states in a bid to find collective meaning in such memories and legitimise a government.

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