

**Dying For Attention:  
The Role of the Biafran Identity in the Biafran Campaign for Support during the  
Nigerian Civil War of 1967-70**

Joshua Willms

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Department of History

Faculty of Arts

University of Ottawa

## **Abstract**

This study examines the Biafran secession of 1967-1970 and how the secessionist government constructed a Biafran identity in its campaign to gain international support for Biafra's permanent separation from Nigeria. The introductory chapter outlines the role of identity in Nigeria's twentieth-century political history and discusses the scholarly literature addressing questions of national and ethnic identity and on the Biafran secession. The thesis then provides a historical framework for discussing the evolution of Nigerian political identities and the failures of Nigerian leaders to build a Nigerian nationalism among the region's numerous identifiable groups in the colonial and early independence eras. Subsequent chapters analyse the Biafran government's attempts to elide the inherent instability of identity and overcome the dynamic process of identity formation in Nigeria by constructing and promoting a fixed Biafran identity based on cultural characteristics and historical experiences that allegedly distinguished and united the diverse peoples of the secessionist region.

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## Introduction

Identity is a confounding term, constantly being negotiated in developing inter-relationships in any society, as well as between societies in an increasingly inter-connected world. The continuous significance of identity in both individual and group interactions, therefore, is indisputable. However, one's identity never reaches a state of permanence, as an individual or group can reform or mould its identity with multiple and differing meanings, largely because identity is applied in such a wide range of interactive situations and contexts. By the twentieth century, identifying with the state, which was widely recognized as the entity that held the greatest combination of political, economic and social influence, had commonly become recognized as the most empowering form of identification; a Canadian, for instance, could be most reasonably challenged by another state-based identity.

Within the boundaries of a colony or sovereign state, however, interactions among the population's individuals constantly require differing forms of identification. Depending on the location, circumstances, subjects, and numerous other factors, the identity of an individual or group can be defined by any number of characteristics, such as ethnicity, gender, age, or religion. Consequently, determining a singular and uncontested definition of identity has remained an arduous, if not impossible task in both everyday life and among scholars.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the one general consensus that can be determined in the debate on the meaning of identity has been that there still is no concrete explanation for its varied uses.

This study will accept the notion that identity is an unstable and contested term while focusing on the secession of the Eastern region from the state of Nigeria and the subsequent war between the secessionist region, known as Biafra, and Nigeria from May 1967 to

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Gleason, "Identifying Identity: A Semantic History," *The Journal of American History* 69, No. 4 (March 1983): 910-918.

January 1970. As a colony and state, Nigeria had been widely regarded as one of Africa's most promising territories, as the region contained Africa's largest population and a wealth of oil and other natural resources. Unfortunately, Nigeria's potential as a sovereign state had been largely unfulfilled into the 1960s due to internal instability that was largely caused by inter-group rivalries and conflicts. In the Nigerian region, the multitude of pre-existing societies, with each containing a distinct set of cultural traits and histories, meant that the establishment of the colony of Nigeria by officials of the British Empire during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries brought an array of previously disparate groups within the boundaries of a single political authority. Furthermore, expression of a Nigerian identity did not even exist as an idea until the establishment of the Nigerian colony.

In colonial Nigeria, ethnic diversity had already provided the Nigerian region with a formidable obstacle to colony- and state-wide unity – most scholars have argued the number of distinct groups in Nigeria to be between 200 and 300.<sup>2</sup> The potential for unity among Nigeria's diverse peoples was further complicated by the division of the colony into three administrative units in the late 1940s – the Northern, Eastern, and Western regions – that each possessed considerable autonomy from the central government. More than any other factor, these regions were established to offer each of Nigeria's three largest identifiable groups – the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Ibo in the East, and the Yoruba in the West – the opportunity to administer their respective regions at their own discretion. However, this decentralized system of governance allowed each region to use its limited autonomy from the centre to reinforce the sub-Nigerian boundaries between the colony's identifiable groups,

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers have varied considerably, but most scholars and other publications argue the number of ethnic groups in the Nigerian region to be at least 200. In Canadian International Development Agency, "Nigeria: Post-Report," (Hull: Revised November 1978), Nigeria is recognized as containing approximately 250 "tribal groups," according to the 1963 census taken in Nigeria. Among the most recent estimates, in Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), the number of "ethno-linguistic groups" in the region is argued to be over 200.

which were now based on both ethnic and regional divisions. As a result, in the Nigerian colony and state until the secession of the Eastern region in May 1967, Nigerians were given ample opportunity to develop varying sub-Nigerian loyalties – in the case of the three major ethnic groups, these loyalties were ethno-regionalist in nature. In any case, sub-Nigerianism ultimately prevailed over the construction of a territory-wide Nigerian identity that could unite the diverse peoples of the region.

A running theme throughout this analysis will be how and why several identifiable groups in colonial and independent Nigeria, first, developed competing and conflicting sub-Nigerian loyalties and, second, differed in their desires to construct a unifying Nigerian identity. During British colonial rule and following independence in 1960, Nigeria's indigenous leaders struggled amongst each other to negotiate the value of either serving the interests of the entire Nigerian population, which would help to stabilize and strengthen the Nigerian colony and state, or representing certain sub-Nigerian groups at the expense of other sub-Nigerian groups and further entrenching inter-group boundaries in the region. These struggles over the meaning and significance of the Nigerian would peak in the late 1960s with Biafra's secession from Nigeria and the subsequent war between Nigeria and the secessionist region.

This analysis will examine the struggles for power in the colony and state of Nigeria among the territory's leading sub-Nigerian groups, which attributed differing levels of importance to the national Nigerian identity and carried differing visions of the group boundaries within Nigeria. This analysis will then discuss the Biafran government's campaign to gain international support, analyzing how Biafra's leaders sought to legitimize the secession, first, by discussing how Biafra's leaders portrayed Nigeria's failed attempts to construct a national Nigerian identity and, second, via an examination of the Biafran

government's attempts to define a distinct Biafran identity that allegedly united all of the identifiable groups in the secessionist region. Consequently, this study will compare the attempts by Biafra's leaders to construct and promote a Biafran identity that was – unlike the Nigerian identity – not disputed or unstable, so as to present the various groups of the Biafran population as united by their collective desire to support the Biafran identity.

### **The Role of the Biafran Identity in the Biafran Government's Campaign for Support**

Though the Biafran government's campaign to legitimize Biafra's secession was active throughout the war, it should be briefly noted that, during the early stages of the secession, Biafra's leaders also aimed to secure the secessionist region's independence from Nigeria by achieving a military victory over the larger and more advanced Nigerian army. For several weeks following the beginning of hostilities on 6 July 1967, when Nigerian troops initiated a military offensive against the secessionist region to restore Nigeria's territorial integrity, Biafran troops actually enjoyed a series of victories over underprepared and disorganized Nigerian troops. The Biafran army's military successes peaked on 19 August 1967 with a successful invasion of Nigeria's Mid-West region, as well as the possibility that Biafran troops might threaten Lagos, the capital city of Nigeria.

Unfortunately for the secessionist region's leaders, the Nigerian army quickly recovered from its initial disorganization to launch a powerful counter-offensive, beginning with the recovery of the Mid-West region on 21 September 1967.<sup>3</sup> The Nigerian army, aided by military supplies from international powers with a vested interest in supporting the

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<sup>3</sup> The announcement of Nigeria's recovery of the Mid-West region can be found in A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, ed., "Lt.-Col. Murtala Mohammed Addresses Mid-West on Recapture of Benin," in *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: a documentary sourcebook, Vol. 2* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 162. Mohammed refers to "Benin" because on 20 September 1967 – a day before Mohammed's announcement – Major Okonkwo, the Administrator of the Mid-West region under Biafran occupation, declared the Republic of Benin in an attempt to separate from both Nigeria and Biafra. This declaration can be found in "Major Okonkwo Announces Establishment of the Republic of Benin," in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 2*, 160-1.

preservation of the Nigerian state, notably Great Britain and the Soviet Union, consistently overwhelmed Biafran troops, gradually pushing back the secessionist army and reducing the Biafran territory considerably. Nigerian military offensives resulted in the fall of several important Biafran centers to Nigerian occupation, most notably the capital city of Enugu in October 1967 and the oil port of Port Harcourt in May 1968. By mid-1968, Nigeria had effectively surrounded the secessionist region, blocking Biafra's link to the sea and isolating its peoples from the resources of the outside world. For the Biafran government, securing independence from Nigeria by military victory alone became clearly unlikely, if not impossible after less than one year of military hostilities.

Due to Nigeria's military dominance for much of the war, the most important component of the Eastern region's attempted secession was the Biafran government's campaign to gain enough support from state governments and international organizations to sufficiently pressure Nigeria into withdrawing from the war and recognizing Biafra's existence as a separate state. For Biafra's leaders, the plight of the Biafran population at the hands of Nigerian troops served as a catalyst in attracting international attention to the secession. Throughout the war, and for several months following the restoration of Nigeria's territorial integrity, the peoples who lived within the secessionist region suffered from mass starvation, disease and death as a result of the inability of the region's peoples to marshal adequate resources that could prevent such suffering. Estimates on the number of civilian deaths in the Biafra region have varied, generally exceeding one million people; whatever the precise figure, the degree of death and suffering in Biafra was catastrophic.

Images and descriptions of starving and diseased Biafran men, women and children released and distributed by the Biafran government and international observers began to gain publicity in the press around the world during the spring months of 1968, influencing a

massive international response to help the suffering peoples in the secessionist region. The International Committee of the Red Cross led the international and multi-organizational humanitarian effort to supply food, medicine and other basic necessities until well after Biafra surrendered and re-joined Nigeria. State governments and political leaders throughout the Western world also contributed to the humanitarian efforts in order to help the population of Biafra survive the war. A small number of states, led by France, even offered unofficial recognition of Biafra's secession and supplied the Biafran army with arms and other forms of military assistance to help Biafrans ward off Nigerian offensives. Though Federal military troops had established clear domination of the Biafran army in mid-1968, these initiatives to provide assistance to Biafra helped to prolong the war for another eighteen months, until the Biafran government finally surrendered to Nigeria on 12 January 1970.

The aim of the Biafran campaign for support during the war, however, was far more ambitious than merely gaining support for the survival of the population of Biafra; the secessionist region's leaders were determined to ensure Biafra's survival as an independent state. Beginning with Lt.-Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu's formal announcement of the East's secession from Nigeria and until the end of the war, the Biafran government published and distributed a number of newsletters, pamphlets, interviews, transcribed speeches and press releases to gain support for the permanent existence of Biafra. These publications were circulated to the secessionist region's diverse population and throughout Africa and much of the world. In February 1968, the Biafran government enlisted the Geneva-based Markpress News Feature Service to distribute publications sent from Biafra to press outlets throughout Europe and North America for the duration of the war. Through the Markpress News Feature Service, Biafra's foremost leaders, especially Lt.-Col. Ojukwu, were able to publicize addresses, interviews, military updates, and other press releases to a much wider audience.

Independent of the target audience, the Biafran campaign for support was rooted in the same goal: to define a Biafran identity that united the peoples of the secessionist region and distinguished them from any other identifiable group in Nigeria. Furthermore, Biafra's leaders often applied their constructed vision of the Biafran identity in contrast with an enemy "Other." In particular, the Biafra's leaders defined the "Other" by the characteristics that had become commonly associated with Northern Nigerians, as the Federal Military Government, at the time of secession, was largely controlled by military officers from the Northern region. Biafra's leaders also identified the enemy "Other" as the Northern Nigerian in order to avoid the inclusion of all Nigerians in identifying the enemy, namely the peoples from the Eastern region that had migrated to other parts of Nigeria and remained a part of Nigeria during the secession.

In relation to the identification and promotion of the Biafran identity during the attempted secession, this analysis will argue that the Biafran government's description of the Biafran was based upon describing the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, and projecting to the world the contrast between traditionalist Northern Nigerians and the modernized peoples of Biafra. A group's modernization, according to Biafra's leaders, was measured by the extent to which an indigenous group accepted and adapted to the Western-influenced ideas, beliefs and practices, such as Christianity and Western-oriented education, that had been introduced by European traders and missionaries prior to the colonial era and spread by British colonial officials and missionaries during colonial rule. Thus, in several ways, Biafra's leaders equated modernization with Westernization.

In comparing the level of modernization attained by Biafrans and Northern Nigerians in colonial and independent Nigeria, Biafra's leaders consistently contrasted the desire and ability of Biafrans to adapt to the Western influences with the Northerners' resistance to

stray from their pre-colonial or “traditional” ideas, beliefs and practices, which were largely founded upon a widespread belief in Islam. The Biafran government admitted that Biafra contained numerous identifiable ethnic groups – of the fourteen million people in the Biafran territory, roughly nine million were associated with the Ibo ethnic group, with the remaining five million identifying with one of the region’s minority groups – that were differentiated by varying cultural traits and historical experiences that stretched into the pre-colonial past. However, Biafra’s leaders also argued that the peoples of Biafra had become united prior to secession by their collective understanding of the importance of modernizing in order to become better suited to establishing stability and strength for a sovereign Nigerian state. Biafrans were depicted as being able to recognize the importance of adjusting their loyalties to fit the new political boundaries of Nigeria, by supporting the development of Nigeria-wide unity, or Nigerian nationhood, rather than their ethnic-based sub-Nigerian affiliations.

The Northerner enemy “Other,” on the other hand, was depicted in Biafran publications as being defined by its members’ collective desire to resist modernization. Furthermore, when Northern leaders had been voted into power in pre-independent and post-independence Federal elections in the late 1950s and 1960s, Biafra’s leaders argued that Northern Nigerians took advantage of their numeric superiority in Nigeria and overwhelmingly supported Northern leaders in order to protect Northerners from becoming modernized like southern Nigerians. As a result, Northern leaders and their Northern supporters, according to the Biafran government, were able to prevent the Biafran people from pursuing modernization in the entire Nigerian colony and state. For Biafra’s leaders, Northerners also often used violence and intimidation to deny the attempts by Easterners to stabilize Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s, by either promoting Nigeria-wide unity or trying to gain political power at the expense of Northern leaders. Biafra’s leaders also argued that

Northerner attacks against the Biafran people were unrelenting and had become genocidal, as Northerners were believed to be aiming for the extermination of the Biafran people. Consequently, the Biafran government asserted that the Biafran people could only pursue modernization without fearing for their survival by seceding from Nigeria.

The catalyst of the Biafran government's campaign for support was, therefore, an interpretation of the Nigerian region's history that presented the long-standing fragmentation between Nigeria's groups, as well as the alleged cohesion among the Biafran people. This study recognizes that the historical events and processes used in Biafran publications were often exaggerated or manipulated to fit the aim of Biafra's leaders to legitimize the secession. Additionally, Biafran publications frequently ignored portions of the Nigerian region's history that could undermine the legitimacy of the secession, including the similarities between Biafrans and other Nigerian groups, notably the Yoruba, who had also actively pursued modernization and developed a group of Western-educated elites. However, this study will not be concerned with the historical accuracy of the narrative presented in Biafran publications. Instead, this analysis will be focused on why the interpretation of history in Biafran publications, regardless of the target audience's background, was concerned with the Western-influenced concepts of modernization and the nation. Specifically, this study will examine the Biafran government's construction of a Biafran identity that was argued to have distinguished the peoples of the secessionist region from other groups in Nigeria and united the population of Biafra.

### **Historiography of the Secession and War**

The historiography on the Eastern region's secession and the Nigerian civil war, which is quite extensive and features a large number of African and non-African contributors, already contains numerous analyses on both the causes and legitimacy of the secession. War-

time publications from self-identified Biafran sympathizers commonly presented one-sided analyses that mirrored the arguments presented in the publications released by the Biafran government. The most widely distributed and popularized example of this propaganda-type approach in a scholarly publication is a 1969 book co-written by Biafran scholars Samuel Ifejika and Arthur Nwankwo, *Biafra: making of a nation*, which also received a public endorsement from the Biafran government as a book that outlined the “Biafran philosophy.”<sup>4</sup> In general, such publications put forth arguments that closely resembled those found in Biafran government publications, but on a more personal level.

A number of publications by Nigerian scholars during the war similarly revealed a version of the war that suited their interests, which primarily included arguing against the legitimacy of Biafra’s secession and proclaiming Nigeria’s potential to become a strong and stable state. Though the arguments of Nigerian scholars mirrored Biafran publications in regard to their emphasis on admitting that the political fragmentation among Nigeria’s peoples had helped to cause the secession, Nigerian scholars also asserted that the secession was not legitimate because the peoples of Biafra were not united, due to their diverse ethnic backgrounds and the numeric superiority of the Ibo in the secessionist region. Other Nigerian publications, such as M. Odugwu Ozalla’s Ojukwu’s “*Self-Determination*” and Nabo Graham-Douglas’ *Ojukwu’s Rebellion and World Opinion*, also commented on the Biafran population’s alleged lack of unity by dismissing the secession as a scheme by Lt.-Col. Ojukwu and other Ibo rebels to gain personal power.<sup>5</sup> Thus, such analyses were similar to

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Ifejika and Arthur Nwankwo, *Biafra: making of a nation* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969). For the Biafran government’s endorsement of the book, see “Book Outlines Biafran Philosophy,” in *Press Actions: abridged edition*, Markpress News Feature Service (Geneva: Biafran Overseas Press Division, 29 July 1969).

<sup>5</sup> M. Odugwu Ozalla, “*Self-Determination*”: *a reappraisal in the light of international politics* (Apapa: Printed by the Nigerian National Press, 1969). Nabo Graham-Douglas, *Ojukwu’s Rebellion and World Opinion* (Apapa: Nigerian National Press, 1968).

Biafran publications in that the arguments presented in the narrative were clearly affected by the author's personal involvement in the war.

A number of biased war-time publications also emerged from non-African scholars who did not have a significant personal stake in the crisis. Frederick Forsyth, a British scholar, wrote *The Biafra Story* from the Biafran perspective, outlining Britain's role in causing the secession and noting that Nigeria's instability during colonial rule was a direct result of British rule. Forsythe further accused Britain of contributing to Nigeria's instability during the war, by supplying arms to Nigeria and indirectly causing the mass suffering of Biafrans who were isolated by Nigerian troops surrounding the secessionist region.<sup>6</sup> In *Biafra: Britain's Shame*, Audrey Waugh provided similar anti-British views on the war, supporting Biafra through a veil of criticism against the former colonial ruler's failure to guide Nigeria's peoples toward peace and stability.<sup>7</sup>

Other scholarly publications during the crisis were concerned with objectively analyzing the secession as they sorted through the events that led to Biafra's secession, questioned the legitimacy of the secession, and wondered about the future implications for Nigeria and the rest of Africa's newly-formed, ethnically-diverse states if Biafra's secession succeeded. Most scholars agreed that even though the secession was grounded in a long-standing period of disunity among Nigeria's numerous distinct groups, Biafra also contained a number of distinct groups, including the dominant Ibo.<sup>8</sup> Similar to the vast majority of state governments that refused to recognize Biafra as a sovereign state, few scholarly publications during the war viewed the secession as legitimate. Some scholars worried that the future

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<sup>6</sup> Frederick Forsythe, *The Biafra Story* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969).

<sup>7</sup> Auberon Waugh, *Biafra: Britain's shame* (London: Joseph, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> Examples of this argument include: Stephen Jervis, "Nigeria and Biafra," *Africa Today* 14, No. 6, Black Power and Africa (December 1967): 16-18, and S.K. Panter-Brick, "The Right to Self-Determination: its application to Nigeria," *International Affairs* 44, No. 2 (April 1968): 254-266.

implications of a successful Biafra secession were far too dangerous, notably its negative effect on developing pan-African unity and the possible domino effect that would cause minority groups in other African states to mimic Eastern Nigeria's secession.<sup>9</sup> A number of other publications analyzed international policies toward secession, concluding that the United Nations and Organization of African Unity both contained Charters that restricted its member states from officially supporting any attempts to compromise a state's territorial integrity.<sup>10</sup> At any rate, these publications were understandably speculative, as they were examining an event that was still unfolding and, therefore, did not have a full picture on which they could effectively analyze the crisis.

A number of Western authors took an outsider's perspective in analyzing the humanitarian efforts during the war, as well as the role of politics for state governments in providing aid to Biafra.<sup>11</sup> Several Westerners also publicized their visits to war-stricken Biafra in a bid to increase international humanitarian efforts to the secessionist region. Michael Mok, for instance, published a photo journal of his visit to Biafra that included an entire section featuring numerous pictures of starving and dying children.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, John Sullivan revealed numerous photos of starving Biafrans in *Breadless Biafra*, a personal account of his visit as a reporter for the United States Catholic News Service, arguing that "in their quest for influence and economic hegemony, the great powers of the world have

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Sklar, "Nigeria/Biafra," *Africa Today* 16, No. 1 (February-March 1969): 3-4. Sklar argues that the potential of pan-African unity is a better alternative to basing unity on boundaries that were arbitrarily created. Stephen Vincent is an example of arguing the possibility of a domino effect in, "Should Biafra Survive?" *Transition*, No. 32 (August-September 1967): 53-57.

<sup>10</sup> See Ozalla, "*Self-Determination*": *a reappraisal in the light of international politics*.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Brewin and David MacDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy* (Toronto: James Lewis & Samuel, 1970). The two authors are Canadian Members of Parliament who documented their visit to Biafra in 1969, urging international states like Canada to become more involved in humanitarian efforts. A general example of analyzing the humanitarian effort is George Shepherd, "The Politics of Saving Lives," *Africa Today* 15, No. 4 (August-September 1968): 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Mok, *Biafra Journal* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1969). The section entitled "The Children" can be found on pp. 80-93.

worn out their shoddy formulae, twisted logic and ignored reason.”<sup>13</sup> Though such observers were direct and obvious in their accusations against the inaction of Westerners in the crisis concerning the plight of the peoples of Biafra, these publications highlighted how Western authors stopped short of urging international leaders to support the secession of Biafra from Nigeria. Indeed, for most outside observers during the war, the primary concern was the well-being and survival of the Biafran population rather than the Biafran state.

Post-war analyses on the secession and war, for the most part, emerged during the 1970s, as African and non-African scholars took advantage of their ability to examine the crisis in its entirety. Many publications immediately following the war concentrated on documenting the immediate causes of the secession and the events of the war. Zdenek Cervenka’s *The Nigerian Civil War* and A.H.M. Kirk-Greene’s *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria* represented two of the most detailed, well-documented and objective accounts of the war and the events of 1966-67 that led to Biafra’s secession, with Cervenka focusing more on international reactions and involvement in the crisis and Kirk-Greene examining the crisis from the perspective of Nigeria and Biafra’s leaders.<sup>14</sup> John Hatch provided another effective take on the war, *Nigeria: the seeds of disaster*, which detailed the historical roots of the secession.<sup>15</sup> Though reliable as general overviews of Nigeria’s troubled history, as well as the political and military aspects of the war, such publications did not delve deeper into how and why Nigerians had experienced such disunity during the colonial and independent eras.

A number of other scholarly publications throughout the 1970s, non-Western and Western, viewed the crisis from several distinct perspectives. In 1972, Joseph Okpaku

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<sup>13</sup> John R. Sullivan, *Breadless Biafra* (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Zdenek Cervenka, *The Nigerian War, 1967-70* (Frankfurt: Bernard & Graefe, 1971). Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: a documentary sourcebook*.

<sup>15</sup> John Hatch, *Nigeria: the seeds of disaster* (Chicago: H. Regrory Co., 1970).

recruited several eminent African scholars to publish a series of essays in a single volume that presented African interpretations on the crisis and its causes, with numerous contributors analyzing the importance of nationhood to a developing African state and Nigeria's failure to foster such unity in the late colonial era, as well as during the 1960s.<sup>16</sup> Most Western scholars during the 1970s focused primarily on international reactions and involvement in the war. Suzanne Cronje published a seminal diplomatic analysis of the war in 1972 that detailed the involvement of all major and minor state governments and international organizations.<sup>17</sup> John Stremlau's *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War* represented another important contribution to the discussion on international opinions on the war, noting that Nigeria's pre-war diplomacy and nonaligned stance allowed the state to develop friendly relations with states regardless of their ideologies. As a result, Stremlau believed Nigeria was able to effectively negotiate the amount of involvement in the crisis through their existing relationships with other states and their membership in international organizations.<sup>18</sup> The inaction of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity also received attention in several publications, notably from Cervenka's *The Unfinished Quest for Unity* in 1977 and Berhanykun Andemicael's 1976 overview of relations between the UN and the OAU.<sup>19</sup> Finally, a number of non-African scholars assessed the humanitarian efforts of the international community. For instance, the role of the global press in influencing international action was approached by several scholars, including Ulf

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph Okpaku, *Nigeria: dilemma of nationhood* (New York: Third Press, 1972).

<sup>17</sup> Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: the diplomatic history of the Biafran war, 1967-70* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972).

<sup>18</sup> John Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> Zdenek Cervenka, *The Unfinished Quest for Unity* (London: Friedmann, 1977). Berhanykun Andemicael, *The O.A.U. and the U.N.: relations between the Organization of African Unity and the United Nations* (New York: Published for the United Nations Institute for Training and Research by Africana Pub. Co., 1976).

Himmelstrand and Henryka Schabowska's study on African reports during the war and Bolaji Akinyemi's analysis of British press-coverage of the crisis.<sup>20</sup>

Since the 1970s, scholarly attempts to analyze the secession and war have become more sporadic, and have often tended to remain concerned with the motives and impact of external involvement on the secession and war. Joseph Thompson has observed how the United States government's level of humanitarian assistance to Biafra during the war was limited by the government's existing political relationship with Nigerian leaders and businessmen.<sup>21</sup> Other scholars, such as Chibuike Uche, have focused on how the oil reserves in the Niger Delta region of Biafra, which produced about two-thirds of Nigeria's oil revenues at the time of secession, affected the policies of foreign governments during the crisis because of their hesitation to forge oil-related connections with figures other than the Nigerians with whom they already had a business relationship.<sup>22</sup>

By comparison, few scholars have examined the secession and war within the context of Nigeria's struggles with nation-building. Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, for instance, offered "a critique of the efficacy of the Western-created post-colonial African state," providing one of the few examples of scholars who have analyzed the connection between Westernization – modernization – in Nigeria and the loyalties of Nigerians to their traditional roots rather than the colony or state.<sup>23</sup> Most other scholars who have examined the role of nation-building in the East's secession, however, have done so as a minimal part of an overview of Nigeria's

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<sup>20</sup> Ulf Himmelstrand and Henryka Schabowska, *Africa Reports on the Nigerian Crisis: news, attitudes and background information* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1978). Bolaji Akinyemi, "The British Press and the Nigerian Civil War," *African Affairs* 71, No. 285 (1972): 408-426.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph E. Thompson, *American Policy and African Famine: the Nigeria-Biafra war, 1966-1970* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

<sup>22</sup> Chibuike Uche, "Oil, British Interests and the Nigerian Civil War," *Journal of African History* 49, No. 1 (2008): 111-135. For information on oil revenues in the Niger Delta, see Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *The Biafra War: Nigeria and the aftermath* (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 1990). Ekwe-Ekwe also published *Biafra Revisited* (Dakar, Senegal: African Renaissance, 2006).

history, noting how Nigeria's long-standing struggles with unity have been due to the centripetal forces of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences between the region's groups.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, more recent publications have analyzed the crisis as merely a part of Nigeria's history since the beginning of military rule in January 1966 and the state's continuing struggles to foster stability and unity during the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, many scholars and writers have, in some manner, recognized the failed attempts by Nigeria's leaders, throughout the history of colonial and independent Nigeria, to cultivate Nigerian nationhood among its diverse ethnic groups. There has also been insight into the Biafran government's attempts to promote unity among the peoples of the secessionist region, especially within personal accounts and novels written from the perspective of those who lived within the secessionist territory.<sup>26</sup> However, there is currently a great lack of research on the hundreds of publications distributed by the Biafran government through its own printer and the Markpress News Feature Service; similarly, there is still a lack of scholarship on the themes and arguments used within these publications. In 2010, Nicholas Omenka examined the religious propaganda created by secessionist leaders during the crisis, namely the simplified identification of Biafra as Christian and Northern Nigeria as Muslim in Biafran discourse, as well as the role of Nigerian and international religious leaders in

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<sup>24</sup> Toyin Falola, *The History of Nigeria* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999). Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*. Godfrey Mwakikagile, *Ethnic Politics in Kenya and Nigeria* (Huntington, N.Y.: Nova Science Publishers, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Olayiwola, Abegunrin, *Nigerian Foreign Policy under Military Rule, 1966-1999* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003). Adegboyega Isaace Ajayi, *Military and the Nigerian State, 1966-1993: a study of the strategies of political power control* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, 2007). J.O. Irukwu, *Nigeria at the Crossroads: a nation in transition* (London: Witherby, 1983).

<sup>26</sup> Examples of personal accounts that examine Biafra's secession include: N.U. Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession: a personal account of the Nigerian civil war* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Because I Am Involved* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1989). Two examples of novels with a Biafran perspective of the war include: S.O. Mezu, *Behind the Rising Sun* (London: Heinemann, 1971) and Flora Nwapa, *Never Again* (Enugu: Nwamife, 1975).

supporting or discrediting the Biafran war cause.<sup>27</sup> Though effectively recognizing that religious rhetoric was important to the Biafran leadership's campaign for support, Omenka neglected to discuss the Biafran leadership's religious rhetoric as merely one of several important ideas in Biafran publications that were used to promote the Biafran and enemy Northern Nigerian identities. This study will aim to rectify this gap in the historical discussion on the secession by analyzing the Biafran government's publications and examining how and why they attempted to gain support for the secession by constructing and promoting a Biafran people that had become modernized by adopting a number of Western political, economic, and cultural practices, and supported Biafran nationhood rather than their respective traditional roots.

### **Theoretical Debates on Nations and Nationalism, Ethnicity and Modernity**

The theoretical discourse on the nation has proved to be a highly contested debate since its emergence in the 1950s and 1960s, as the concept still remains without a consensus on its definition. Although similarities have connected many of the divergent views in the scholarly debate on the concept of the nation, contributors to this discussion have often been frustrated by the number of dissimilar meanings of the concept, as well as the different assessments of how, when, and why nations and nationalism have developed in the past and present.<sup>28</sup> However, scholars have nonetheless appeared to reach a consensus on what can be described as nationalism. In many recent analyses, nationalism is understood to be, above all, a political concept and a modern phenomenon in which leaders of sovereign states divided by rigid political boundaries aim to develop nationhood, or state-wide unity, to strengthen the

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<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Omenka, "Blaming the Gods: Christian religious propaganda in the Nigeria-Biafra war," in *Journal of African History* 51 (2010), 367-389.

<sup>28</sup> This particular issue is addressed in the introductory section of Michael Hechter, *Containing Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

resolve of the state's population to contribute to the state's well-being and stability.<sup>29</sup> This description is accepted in the present analysis, so long as politics is not interpreted solely as a competition for power within the parameters of the state. States can often exist without a nation or nationalism, or with several nations and nationalisms. Furthermore, a nation can exist whenever or wherever a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed a nation.<sup>30</sup> In Nigeria, rival nations or groups have often negotiated for power outside the realm of state politics; however, since the Nigerian civil war erupted because of a decision to alter the state boundaries of Nigeria, this analysis will argue that the competition between the major ethnic groups in the Nigerian territory confronted each other most acutely in state politics.

The ongoing study of ethnicity has also produced multiple and differing approaches that preclude scholars from attaining a conclusive agreement on the concept. However, an ethnic group does have a recognized definition among those who analyze ethnicity: generally speaking, an ethnic group is described as a collectivity within a larger society having a real or accepted common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements that epitomizes their peoplehood, such as kinship, geographic concentration, religious affiliation, language, and physical distinctions.<sup>31</sup> Ethnic identity can be defined by the same characteristics as those that define an ethnic group, but on an individual level. Thus, the sense and memories of a past and the cultural characteristics

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<sup>29</sup> Among the first to openly argue this notion was John Breuilly in *Nationalism and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982 [1<sup>st</sup> edition]). Also see Michael Hechter, *Containing Nationalism* for commentary on the general consensus that nationalism is a political tool in "Chapter One: Nationalist Puzzles."

<sup>30</sup> Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: an enquiry into the origins of nations and the politics of nationalism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977), 1-6.

<sup>31</sup> This definition is taken from Richard A. Schermerhorn, *Comparative Ethnic Relations: a framework for theory and research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 12. Schermerhorn's definition has been referred to in later analyses on ethnic groups, among the latest of is Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: making identities in a changing world* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2007).

of an individual formulates one's ethnic identity which, in turn, helps that individual to feel a sense of belonging within a collectivity, or ethnic group, whose members subscribe to a similar ethnic identity.<sup>32</sup> Ethnicity and the characteristics that define an ethnic group will be extensively applied in this study's analysis of the ethnic-based divisions between conflicting groups in Nigeria, most notably the Ibo, Yoruba, and Hausa-Fulani.

Since theoretical discussions of nations and ethnicity emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, the ongoing debates of each term have contained similar notions of group solidarity and inter-group boundaries. The most distinguishable stances that focus on nations and nationalism, primordialist and modernist, contain arguments that lean towards two of the most differing stances on the concept. Similarly, two extremist arguments have emerged in the debate surrounding ethnicity: primordialist and instrumentalist. Broadly speaking, primordialists argue that nationalism is a part of human nature and, therefore, follow the notion that nations have existed since time immemorial.<sup>33</sup> In relation to ethnicity, primordialists believe that an individual or group's ethnic make-up is given, permanent and cannot be changed.<sup>34</sup> The weakness with this approach lies in its rejection of the notion that many people associate with multiple identifiable groups, including those identified by gender, age, or religious beliefs. Primordialists also fail to account for the certainty that individuals often change their affiliations to fit different social situations.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Cornell and Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race*, 15-21. The authors refer to Schermerhorn's definition of ethnic group in their description of ethnic identity.

<sup>33</sup> Umut Ozkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). Ozkirimli effectively explains the primordialist approach on pp. 64-73.

<sup>34</sup> Gleason, "Identifying Identity," 919-920. For a discussion of the primordialist approach to identity, also see Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper. "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29, No. 1 (February 2000): 8-12. Brubaker and Cooper label the primordialist approach as a "hard" conception of identity.

<sup>35</sup> An explanation and subsequent criticism of the primordialist stance on ethnicity can be found in John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (eds.), *Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8-9.

In contrast, the modernist paradigm of nations and nationalism, supported by the majority of scholars during the 1970s and 1980s, asserts that the emergence of nations and nationalisms are reliant on certain factors that emerged in the modern era. However, modernists have differed amongst each other in their opinions on the “modern” factor that caused the emergence of nations – for instance, Ernest Gellner has argued that industrialization spurred the emergence of nations, while John Breuilly believes the creation of states represented the “modern” factor that caused the emergence of nations.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, modernists differ from primordialists because they view the nation as a creation that separates a modernized society from a pre-modern or traditional society. Though it is reasonable to argue that nations are a modern phenomenon, modernists, however, neglect the significance of pre-modern affiliations in affecting the make-up and boundaries of nations, such as the long-standing similarities of many ethnic groups.

In relation to ethnicity, the instrumentalist approach differs from the primordialist’s vision in its treatment of ethnicity as a social, political, and cultural tool constructed and used by individuals and groups to serve their own interests.<sup>37</sup> Since many individuals and groups will identify with different aspects of their ethnic identity depending on which traits or beliefs will benefit that person or group in a certain situation, instrumentalists effectively argue that a person’s ethnicity and ethnic identity is not fixed and unchanging, but fluid and

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<sup>36</sup> For example of the argument of industrialization’s significance in the emergence of nations, see Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983). For example of the importance of states, see John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982).

<sup>37</sup> Crawford Young, “Dialectics of Cultural Pluralism: Concept and Reality,” in *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism*, ed. Crawford Young (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 22. Young lists several early contributors to the instrumentalist argument, most notably Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynahan, *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), and Joseph Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics: a conceptual framework* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

circumstantial.<sup>38</sup> Instrumentalists, however, focus far too much attention on the social and political interactions and competitions between people and groups. As a result, instrumentalists fail to explore the psychological and cultural dimensions of ethnicity and ethnic identity that help cause a person or group to actually believe that their ethnic identity is permanent. After all, ethnic competition and conflict often emerges when groups form solidarity around the perception that their ethnic identity is historically, if not naturally, different from the ethnic identity of their enemies.<sup>39</sup>

Though the aforementioned approaches to nations and ethnicity possess their respective merits, the most applicable approach to this study is the constructivist stance, which, as Paris Yeros argues, has “produced conceptual tools that have been applied to both ethnicity and nationhood.”<sup>40</sup> As with other approaches to the conceptual debates on nations and ethnicity, the constructivist argument has been varied. Constructivists have only conclusively produced a general agreement concerning the basic notion that ethnicity and nationhood are socially constructed through human thought and action.<sup>41</sup> As this study examines the struggles of Nigeria’s leaders to overcome differing conceptions of how group boundaries in Nigeria were constructed, the consequent failures of Nigeria’s leaders to construct a united Nigerian nation among the region’s diverse peoples, and the attempts of Biafra’s leaders to construct and promote a national Biafran identity, the constructivist stance will be a recurring point of reference throughout this analysis.

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<sup>38</sup> Brubaker and Cooper. “Beyond ‘Identity,’” 1. For a discussion of the instrumentalist approach, which Brubaker or Cooper label the “soft” conception of identity, see Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond Identity,” 8-12.

<sup>39</sup> Young, “Dialectics of Cultural Pluralism.” Young addresses the need to use both the social and political emphasis of instrumentalists and the cultural and psychological emphasis of primordialists in analyzing ethnicity and ethnic identity.

<sup>40</sup> Paris Yeros, “Introduction: On the uses and Implications of Constructivism,” in *Ethnicity and Nationalism in Africa*, ed. Paris Yeos (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 2. Yeos briefly analyzes the connections between nation and ethnicity, and discusses how constructivists can be applied to both ethnicity and nationhood.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

Several interpretations of the constructivist stance have been developed since the early 1980s. In 1983's *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defined the nation as an imagined political community. The term "imagined" is used because, Anderson argues, a nation's members imagine their community to be both limited, in order to establish boundaries between nations, and sovereign, as members are able to more effectively adopt kinship to a nation when they are not a part of a territory controlled by divine or hierarchical rulers.<sup>42</sup> Though focusing on nations, Anderson's interpretation of the "imagined community" has also been applied to other group formations, such as religious communities, that consciously constructed their collectivity. In *The Invention of Tradition*, also published in 1983, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger offered the argument that nationalism and the national consciousness are primarily enabled by an "invented tradition," which is defined by Hobsbawm as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules, and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."<sup>43</sup> For Hobsbawm, the traditions of a unified group are merely a part of the modern pursuit to foster group solidarity. Despite attributing a specific historical period to the emergence of nations and applying a modernist perspective, however, Hobsbawm does effectively assert that nationalists "use history as a legitimator of action and cement group cohesion."<sup>44</sup> This study will accept Hobsbawm's notion that nationalists establish continuity with a suitable past to

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<sup>42</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 1-9.

<sup>43</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. Terence Ranger admitted in an updated version of the "invented tradition" argument that using the term "invented" was misleading in that it implied that "traditions," particularly in colonial Africa, were invented only in the colonial era, which neglected the laws, ethnicities, religions, and languages that were also often included in the development of a national consciousness. Ranger's updated arguments can be found in "The Invention of Tradition: The Case of Colonial Africa," in *Legitimacy and the State in twentieth-century Africa*, ed. Terence Ranger (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1992), 80-81.

construct group solidarity, and apply this argument in examining the ethnic-based groups in Nigeria that based at least part of their respective unity on pre-colonial ethnic similarities.

Leroy Vail provides yet another effective take on constructivism, arguing that Africans did not belong to fixed tribes prior to colonial rule, but participated in fluid and overlapping social networks. According to Vail, ethnic groups, or tribes, only became constructed by colonial authorities, and then reified by African intellectuals and leaders, for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a new social order in which ethnicities and tribes thrived.<sup>45</sup> The indigenous leaders of Nigeria, for instance, legitimized their right to represent the masses by presenting themselves as the preservers of ethnic identity in Nigeria. The construction of numerous ethnic groups in Nigeria also hindered any attempts indigenous leaders made at constructing Nigeria-wide nationalism; as this study will show, an important reason for the Eastern region's secession from Nigeria was the failure of Nigeria's leaders to cooperate toward the construction of Nigerian unity which superseded the sub-Nigerian loyalties among leaders that were founded upon pre-colonial ethnic traits. Thus, of the major theoretical approaches associated with nations and ethnicity, the constructivist stance, with its recognition of the historical depth of many ethnic movements and its attention to the malleability of an ethnic identity under ongoing historical processes, can explain much of the identity-based politics involved in the years preceding and during the Biafran secession.

In sum, nations and ethnic groups can be defined as self-conscious populations; that is, they are ultimately conscious constructions by the members who identify themselves as distinct from other groups. However, as Stuart Hall argues, "only when there is an Other can

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<sup>45</sup> Leroy Vail, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) is an influential work on tribalism and ethnicity in Africa, and presents aspects of the constructivist stance that are most applicable to the study of ethnicity in Nigeria.

you know who you are.”<sup>46</sup> A national or ethnic identity, therefore, cannot be possessed in isolation, as one’s identity is both differentiated from an “Other” and greatly affected by the identity assigned by outside influences.<sup>47</sup> In colonial and independent Nigeria, sub-Nigerian nations were self-defined, but they were also powerfully influenced by interaction among different groups. Sub-Nigerian groups were also greatly defined and differentiated by their varied exposure to the concepts and ideas introduced by British officials and missionaries who, as a part of establishing and legitimizing colonial rule, differentiated between traditional and modern societies, and identified the indigenous groups of Nigeria as traditional and in need of modernizing.

During the time of the secession, modernity was in a youthful stage as an analytic concept. During the 1950s and 1960s, the predominant approach to examining modernity was modernization theory, which analyzed the concept in the colonial context. Since the 1970s, modernization theory has become challenged by numerous concepts of modernity that contain divergent meanings and apply the term to circumstances apart from colonialism, causing the term’s definition to become problematic and difficult to determine. As modernity has continued to be subjected to increased analysis and efforts to refine the concept into an all-encompassing form, scholars have often strayed from the original application of the term modern in the colonial context.<sup>48</sup> As this analysis is focused on the perspective of indigenous elites in the late 1960s, it would be anachronistic to assume that Biafra’s leaders were even

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<sup>46</sup> Stuart Hall, “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference,” in *Becoming National: a reader*, eds. Geoff E. Suny and R.G. Suny (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 339–51.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: anthropological perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2002 [2<sup>nd</sup> edition]), 12-19. Eriksen notes that “for ethnicity to come about, the groups must have a minimum of contact with each other.”

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion on the theoretical approaches to modernity, see Chapter Five in Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: theory, knowledge, history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

aware of the analytic categories that have arisen since the 1970s.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, in a discussion on the Biafran government's conscious use of modernity in its publication campaign the late 1960s, the ideas associated with modernization theory will suffice.

In brief, modernization theory approached the concept from a teleological and Eurocentric perspective, in which accepting indigenous peoples viewed modernity as a positive and desirable achievement. In this context, Frederick Cooper provides an apt description of modernity, stating that “the power of the concept comes from the assertion that modernity has been the model held up before colonized people: a marker of Europe's right to rule, something to which the colonized should aspire but could never quite deserve.”<sup>50</sup> Cooper also argues: “Modernity is understood and discussed, both by those who accept it and by those who reject it, based on the assumption that the West is already fully modern and that its present stage constitutes the model to which to aspire. This is misleading, as modernity lacks precise boundaries.”<sup>51</sup> Cooper effectively touches on both the understanding of modernity among indigenous groups – European imperialists were enabled to rule the indigenous population because they were already modernized – and the prevailing misconception among indigenous peoples that there existed a determinate boundary between modernity and tradition. This application of tradition and modernity in the colonial setting was spread by Western leaders and intellectuals who assumed that universal civilization originated from the European center.<sup>52</sup> This illusion then spread to a number of Africans who sought to become Westernized, that is, they began to learn, adopt and share the values of Westerners.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 18.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>52</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: gnosis, philosophy and the order of knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 19.

<sup>53</sup> This definition of “Westernized” is inspired by Skyne R. Uku, *The Pan-African Movement and the Nigerian Civil War* (New York: Vantage Press, 1978).

Thus, both colonizers and the colonized latched onto the dichotomy of tradition and modernity and the need for Africans to embrace these concepts as a part of the African historical narrative. During the twentieth century, many Westernized Nigerian leaders and intellectuals increasingly adopted this conceptual framework as a part of their general acceptance that achieving modernity was desirable, and an important part of satisfying their aims to gain political or economic power for themselves and their closest kin. In relation to this analysis, the Biafran government's campaign for support during the war was centered on its assertion of the superiority of modernized Biafrans in comparison to the traditional Northern Nigerians, who comprised the ruling elite that largely controlled the Federal Military Government during the crisis.

The Biafran government's attempts to differentiate between modernized Biafrans and traditional Nigerians included the use of "tribe" to specifically describe Nigerian groups. The scholarly definition of tribe draws many parallels with the standing definitions of both nations and ethnic groups, as a tribe can be described as an exclusive and territorially bounded collectivity of people sharing a common language, history and culture.<sup>54</sup> However, whereas nation and ethnicity have been commonly used to designate a neutral cultural entity, tribe was contrived as a negative label for cultural groups in Africa, and other regions of the developing world, that might elsewhere be designated as nations.<sup>55</sup> The term tribe became attached to many African ethnic groups as a way to define the retrogressive and divisive ethnic loyalties that colonizers assumed to have traditionally existed in Africa. Furthermore, tribe was frequently used to distinguish between the ethnic or tribal loyalties of the past and

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas Spear, "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa," *Journal of African History* 44 (2003): 16.

<sup>55</sup> Chukwuemeka Onwuku, "Ethnic Identity, Political Integration and National Development: the Igbo Diaspora in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 13, No. 3 (September 1975): 400. Onwuku effectively describes the use of the term tribe in African regions such as Nigeria.

the new, nation-oriented consciousness of citizens in a modernizing society.<sup>56</sup> During the 1950s and 1960s, the practice of differentiating between ethnic and tribal groups was especially prevalent, as this misguided perception was developed and maintained among scholars either born and raised outside an African region, or educated by Western ideas and concepts, or both.

As V.Y. Mudimbe noted in the late 1980s, “the fact of the matter is that, until now, Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order.”<sup>57</sup> It was only during the 1970s and 1980s that “tribe,” with its negative connotations, was consciously avoided as a descriptive term in scholarly publications and replaced by “ethnic group” to describe a social unit in any region - African and non-African.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, at the time of the secession, the term tribe remained accepted as an undesirable label among Western-influenced groups. This included the Biafran government, which consciously used the term to describe a Nigerian enemy “Other” that was accused of being less modernized and, therefore, less equipped to understand the political, economic and social practices of a sovereign state.

### **Outline of the Present Analysis**

This study will draw extensively from each of the concepts previously discussed in analyzing the failed attempts of Nigeria’s ethnically-diverse indigenous leaders to collectively construct a unifying Nigerian identity until the Eastern region’s secession in May 1967. Chapter One will examine the instability and disputes concerning identity in colonial and independent Nigeria, and reveal the differing views of Nigeria’s competing elite groups on constructing Nigerian unity. In particular, Chapter One will show how the pre-

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, x.

<sup>58</sup> Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 9-10.

existing ethnic differences of Nigeria's numerous ethnic groups and their differing levels of acceptance of the "modern" influences introduced by British officials and missionaries caused the indigenous population of colonial Nigeria to become divided into several sub-Nigerian movements. Most notably, the peoples of the southern regions of Nigeria pursued modernization to a far greater degree than Northern Nigerians throughout the colonial period, as proven by the spread of Western-oriented education, Christianity and other Western influences in the southern regions, and the comparative dearth of Western influences in the North. These divergences in modernization became magnified with the formation of nationalist movements in the 1930s and 1940s among the Yoruba, the Ibo and other southern groups, which evolved from calls to merely reform the colonial system into movements that, by the late 1940s, challenged British colonial rule itself.

Additionally, a federal system of government, implemented as the colony prepared for independence in the late 1940s and 1950s, included the division of Nigeria into three regions – the North, West, and East – that each held considerable power at the expense of a weakened central government. As each region came to be controlled by a political party that was largely represented by the region's largest and most dominant ethnic group, the political landscape of Nigeria, thus, became divided into groups based on ethno-regionalist characteristics – the Hausa-Fulani, Ibo, and Yoruba ethnic groups each became commonly associated with the Northerner, Easterner, and Westerner identities, respectively. Chapter One will also include a discussion of the ethno-regionalist divisions of the 1950s and 1960s which hindered any attempts at establishing inter-group stability in Nigeria between the three major ethnic groups and their respective supporters, the majority of whom supported the political party that represented their ethno-regionalist identity. Consequently, Chapter One will provide the historical context upon which the Biafran government based its arguments

for secession, as well as the processes that caused Biafra's leaders to view modernization and nationhood as integral components of the secessionist region's campaign for support.

Chapters Two and Three will continue to apply the ideas associated with modernization theory and the concepts of the nation and ethnicity in discussing the Biafran government's attempts to construct a Biafran identity as the foundation of its campaign for international support during the secession. The Biafran government largely based its campaign upon two arguments, both linked to negotiating the instability of constructing a unifying identity in an ethnically diverse territory. First, Biafran publications frequently discussed the failure of past and present Nigerian leaders to use the construct a unifying Nigerian identity; second, Biafra's leaders made their own attempts to construct a Biafran identity that both stabilized and united the diverse ethnic groups of Biafra. In examining the publications associated with the Biafran government's campaign for support, this discussion will not address whether a Biafran identity existed among the secessionist region's peoples, or if Biafrans had developed nationhood; this analysis will make it clear that the Biafran identity was clearly constructed by its foremost leaders and supporters as a means to marshal international support and become permanently recognized as a sovereign state. Instead, this analysis will be concerned with how and why the construction of a Biafran identity was so important to the Biafran war cause.

The Biafran government's campaign to promote the Biafran identity often targeted the Biafran population in its publications in order to foster Biafra-wide unity and prevent defection to the Nigerian side during the secession. In hopes of pressuring Nigeria to withdraw from the war, Biafran publications were often directed at appealing to state governments, the United Nations, and the Organization of African Unity because of their potential ability to affect the outcome of the crisis in favour of Biafra, in spite of Nigeria's

military dominance. African and non-African populations were also targeted by Biafra's leaders via newspapers, magazines and other media because of their potential ability to persuade their leaders to take action.

Since one might be tempted to view a "propaganda campaign" as purely based on false or manipulated information, this study will refer to the "Biafran campaign for support" when discussing the Biafran government's attempts to gain international support for Biafra's secession. Though this analysis will discuss, in detail, the Biafran government's extensive misrepresentation and manipulation of the histories of Nigeria and the numerous groups within the Nigerian region, the Biafran government's arguments were far from baseless. This analysis understands that Biafra's leaders manipulated a historical narrative to fit their present needs of gaining support from the international community for the permanent existence of Biafra as a sovereign state. Furthermore, the Biafran campaign for support was largely based on actual events and processes that were interpreted in a highly particular manner meant to legitimize Biafra's secession, which also revealed the impact of Western influences – notably modernization and the concept of nationhood – in Biafran discourse. In relation to the use of "Biafran government" to describe Biafra's leaders, this study does not intend to imply any recognition that the Biafra secession was legitimate and just – the secession and war was, at its most basic, largely initiated and caused by the struggles for power between elite leaders of the Nigerian colony and state since the early 1950s, and not a measure to ensure the survival of the people of Biafra. Instead, this study recognizes that the vast majority of publications released from Biafra were through the secessionist government.

Chapter Two will analyze how the Biafran government constructed the Biafran identity and the Northern Nigerian enemy "Other," which were both presented in a similar fashion regardless of the target audience. Biafran publications argued that the Biafran people

collectively desired to modernize and adopt the Western influences that were perceived to be important to succeeding in the political and economic systems introduced during colonial rule. Specifically, Biafra's leaders focused on the willingness of the Biafran people in colonial and independent Nigeria to convert to Christianity, acquire a Western-style education, learn the English language, and adopt the political and economic systems introduced by the British colonial administration. Conversely, the Northern Nigerian was depicted as resistant to change and dedicated to their pre-existing ideas and practices, including the beliefs and ideas associated with Islam, which were argued by Biafra's leaders to be ill-suited to becoming successful in a modernized environment.

In the process of comparing the modernization of Biafrans to the traditionalism of Northern Nigerians in colonial and independent Nigeria, Biafran publications frequently defined Biafrans as a progressive and civilized people and the Northerner as backwards and barbaric. In many publications, the Biafran government sought to prove that Northerners had repeatedly and deliberately attacked the modernizing peoples of the Eastern region because they were attempting to spread modernization throughout all of Nigeria and, consequently, threatened the hegemony of Islam and other traditional influences in the Northern region. Chapter Two will examine how these claims of Northerner attacks against the peoples of Biafra were often punctuated with accusations of genocide, a key component in the Biafran government's aim to legitimize the secession of the Eastern region. As Chapter Two will show, Biafra's leaders proclaimed the secession resulted from the collective fear of the Biafran people that they would no longer survive as a modernizing group in a Nigerian state in which the Northerner enemy "Other" resided.

Chapter Three will continue to examine the construction of the Biafran and Northerner identities in Biafran publications with a discussion of the Biafran government's comparison

between Biafran nationhood and Northerner tribalism. In essence, this was an extension of the Biafran government's depiction of the modernization of the Biafran people and the persisting traditionalism of the Northerners. In defining a unifying Biafran nationhood, the Biafran government also aimed to convince the international community that the secession was a movement of the entire secessionist region rather than the dominant Ibo ethnic group or a small group of elite leaders, which would have alienated the non-Ibo or non-elite sections of Biafra's population. Though admitting that the peoples of the secessionist region did not share a unifying ethnic bond, the Biafran people, according to Biafran publications, had become united by their collective willingness to disregard their varying pre-colonial, ethnic-based affiliations in favour of Biafran nationhood, which not only ensured the peace and stability that Nigeria had yet to attain, but also provided evidence of the extent to which the peoples of the secessionist region had become modernized, as they understood the importance of territory-wide unity in a sovereign state. Biafra's leaders absolved Easterners from the disunity between Nigeria's leaders in colonial and independent Nigeria, claiming that Easterners were the foremost believers in modernization, a process which included nation-building in an ethnically diverse territory such as Nigeria. Chapter Three will show that Biafra's leaders argued that the peoples of the secessionist region only decided to secede when they realized their aspirations for Nigeria-wide nationhood were futile in a state led by tribalist Northerners. Subsequently, Chapter Three will demonstrate that Biafran publications consistently asserted that the lack of nation-building in Nigeria was the result of Northerner tribalism and a Northerner-led Federal Government that prevented any initiatives by non-Northern leaders to build a Nigerian nation in the 1950s and 1960s.

Chapter Three will also discuss how the target audience altered the Biafran government's arguments only regarding pan-African unity and nonalignment; here, Biafran

leaders spoke to African audiences to convince African leaders that Biafra would greatly contribute to the strength and stability of the African continent. In appealing to pan-African unity, Biafra's leaders were also attempting to assure its African audiences that Biafrans would not succumb to complete Western modernization and lose their African-based identity. Biafran publications argued that, unlike Nigeria, Biafra would become truly independent and liberated from colonial and neo-colonial influences, and help other African populations to realize the same achievement as sovereign African nations.

This study will conclude with a brief analysis of the involvement of African states and global powers in the secession and war. During the secession, four African state governments – Tanzania, Gabon, Ivory Coast, and Zambia – and the Haitian government officially recognized Biafra as a state. Additionally, France and other smaller states publicly supported Biafra without officially recognizing the secessionist region. All of Biafra's major international supporters echoed the Biafran government's claims that the Biafran people's survival was threatened as long as they remained a part of Nigeria, and frequently referred to the right to self-determination of the secessionist region's peoples.

Unfortunately for Biafra, international support remained, for the most part, dedicated to the survival of the peoples in Biafra rather than the survival of the Biafran state. The Charters of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity both bound its member-states to respect and protect the territorial integrity of other member-states, which included Nigeria. Most African leaders also argued in favour of preserving Nigeria's territorial integrity due to their fear that a successful secession would encourage attempted secessions in other regions of the African continent, creating further instability and unrest in the developing region. The global powers that already had developed a relationship with Nigeria, namely Great Britain and the United States, preferred that the lucrative oil reserves and other natural resources in

the Eastern region remained in control of the Nigerian business leaders with whom international leaders already had a relationship rather than the unfamiliar leaders of the secessionist region.

The most prominent response among international leaders and the general public in many states resulted from the publications released from international media outlets, including a great number of releases distributed by the Biafran government, which increasingly publicized the mass suffering of Biafrans through publications and photographs. This interest generated a massive humanitarian effort that also included the involvement of many state governments pressured by their populations. However, the United Nations, Organization of African Unity and most of the African and non-African states involved in the war did not officially recognize Biafra, denying the secessionist region the opportunity to use international pressure against Nigeria as a means to win the war. On 12 January 1970, the leaders of the secessionist region finally surrendered and re-joined the state of Nigeria, ending the thirty-month secession.

## Chapter One

### **From Pre-Colonial Nigeria to Secession in May 1967: Failed Nigerian Nation-Building and the Emergence of Ethno-Regionalist Sub-Nigerianisms**

#### **Introduction**

Eastern Nigeria's secession from Nigeria in May 1967 was directly caused by the persistence of rival sub-Nigerian movements in late colonial and early independent Nigeria. This chapter will provide an overview of the emergence and strengthening of sub-nationalist movements among indigenous educated elites in Nigeria, from the advent of British colonial rule during the nineteenth-century to the Eastern region's secession. This will include a brief overview of the similarities and, more importantly, differences between the ethnic groups that would become bound within the Nigerian colony, as well as the differing responses to Westernization – viewed by indigenous elites as modernization – that further distinguished these identifiable groups.

The following pages will also examine the various attempts by educated elites to develop a unifying nationalism in opposition to European rule, first as an African movement in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, and then as a movement for Nigerian nationhood in the years following the official establishment of the Nigerian colony in 1914. Though many leaders attempted to construct a Nigerian identity in order to unite the diverse indigenous population, British assurance of Nigeria's eventual independence by the early 1950s had deprived Nigerians of their most important uniting factor: their collective stance of anti-colonialism. During the 1950s, nationalist sentiment was increasingly superseded by competing sub-nationalisms, which had become based on not only ethnic divisions, but regional boundaries as well, as political developments in the colony maintained a level of separation between, first, the Northern and Southern regions, and by the late 1940s, the

Northern, Eastern, and Western regions. During the 1950s, as the leading political party in each region became primarily associated with the region's numerically dominant group – the Ibo of the East, the Yoruba of the Western region, and the Muslims of the North – Nigeria's sub-nationalist boundaries often also took on an ethnic element.<sup>1</sup>

When the colony achieved independence on 1 October 1960, Nigerian leaders had failed to achieve their aim of developing Nigerian nationhood, causing Nigeria to become “a state without a nation.”<sup>2</sup> The continuing failures of Nigeria's competing elite groups to peacefully develop an uncontested and stable Nigerian nationhood in the 1960s helped to further divide the leaders and peoples of Nigeria's administrative regions, most notably the Ibo-dominant Eastern region and the Muslim-dominant Northern region. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the events from the January 1966 coup, in which a group of military officers overthrew the Northern-led Federal Government, until 30 May 1967, when Nigeria's internal strife culminated with the secession of the Ibo-dominant Eastern region, led by Lt.-Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, and the declaration of the state of Biafra.

Overall, the subsequent discussion will aim to track the development of sub-Nigerian groups in colonial and independent Nigeria and discuss the historical events and processes which led to the Eastern region's secession from Nigeria. Furthermore, the following pages will establish a baseline historical framework for the subsequent chapters, which will focus on the Biafran government's attempts to gain support from its ethnically diverse population and receive international recognition as an independent state by publicizing the ability of the secessionist region's peoples to construct a Biafra-wide nationalism, unlike the leaders and

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<sup>1</sup> The description of these groups as “numerically dominant” is in reference to their respective “dominance” in terms of the proportion of the population that associated with these respective group affiliations.

<sup>2</sup> Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 158.

their supporters in colonial and independent Nigeria. This chapter will also provide a background to the major events and processes that the Biafran government would use in its campaign for support as evidence of how Northern Nigerian leaders were the primary bearers of responsibility for the failed attempts at Nigerian nation-building. As such, this chapter is not only an analysis of failed Nigerian nation-building, but also an examination of the events and processes that the Biafran government would use in their attempt at Biafran identity and nationhood constructivism during the secession.

### **Pre-Colonial and Early Colonial Nigeria: Foundations of Sub-Nigerian Divisions**

Since long before British colonial rule, societies in the region of Nigeria varied greatly in their size, composition and history. However, the diverse peoples of the Nigerian region cannot be divided into wholly separate groups, as many cultural traits and histories have crossed over between distinct societies in the pre-colonial, colonial and independent eras.<sup>3</sup> Linguistic similarities, religious beliefs and the establishment of centralized kingdoms or states at certain times in the region's history are just a few examples of shared characteristics that have helped to blur the boundaries between societies. Furthermore, many pre-colonial societies had ample opportunities to exchange ideas, beliefs and cultural traits through trading relationships, conquests, and migrations. Thus, the Nigerian region's societies were far from static, as the geographic, political and ethnic boundaries of most societies were altered at least once, if not several times during their existence.<sup>4</sup> As Bernard Mouralis notes, British officials and missionaries of the nineteenth century did not encounter an "Africa in an

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<sup>3</sup> Okoi Arikpo, *The Development of Modern Nigeria* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Spear, "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa," *Journal of African History*, 44 (2003): 24-5.

immutable totality,” but came across “an Africa in alteration, at a specific moment in its history.”<sup>5</sup>

The group boundaries of the Nigerian region were defined, in part, by interactions and relationships between societies in the pre-colonial era, which generally decreased as the geographic proximity between two societies increased. This ongoing process allowed for neighbouring societies to accumulate more ethnic similarities – cultural traits, shared experiences and common histories – than societies that were further apart. In the northern regions, several groups, including the numerically-dominant Hausa, converted to Islam as far back as the eleventh century, allowing otherwise distinct societies to adopt similar beliefs and traits over a long period of time. Furthermore, as early as the seventh century, state formation occurred in the northern region among the Hausa. The northern regions achieved its greatest centralization during the nineteenth century, when Muslim Fulanis conquered much of the northern region, as well as the surrounding regions, and established the Sokoto Caliphate, which became one of the largest pre-colonial empires in sub-Saharan Africa and influenced the conversion of an even greater number of peoples to Islam in the region.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, these political connections were relatively recent developments. The northern region was far from culturally homogeneous, as devotion to Islam and linguistic similarities were the two primary links between many of the peoples in the region.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, many city-states within the Sokoto Caliphate were allowed a substantial amount of regional autonomy and remained politically separated from other societies in the empire, a trend that would continue under the British colonial administration’s policy of indirect rule in Nigeria.

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard Muralis, “Presence Africaine: Geography of an Ideology,” in *The Surreptitious Speech*, ed. V.Y. Mudimbe (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>6</sup> R.A. Adeleye and C.C. Stewart, “The Sokoto Caliphate in the Nineteenth Century,” in *History of West Africa, Volume Two*, eds. J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder (London: Longman, 1976 [2<sup>nd</sup> edition]): 86-131.

<sup>7</sup> A.L. Mabogunje, “The Land and Peoples of West Africa,” in *History of West Africa, Volume One*, eds. J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder (London: Longman, 1976 [2<sup>nd</sup> edition]), 21 and 26-7.

The smaller city-states of the Yoruba in the south-western region never achieved such large-scale centralization, with many Yoruba societies even descending into a number of inter-state wars during the nineteenth century. Any sense of unity among the Yoruba, therefore, was mainly linguistic and cultural, including their claim of common ancestry from Ile-Ife and its first king, Oduduwa.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the acceptance of Islam by a great number of Yoruba prior to colonial rule became paralleled beginning in the early- to mid-nineteenth century by the advancement of Christian missionaries in Yoruba societies, introducing another base of differentiation between Yoruba peoples.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the shared characteristics that existed between Yoruba societies collectively differentiated them from non-Yoruba groups under British colonial rule, particularly those non-Yoruba groups that resided outside the western regions of Nigeria.

The peoples of the south-eastern region, the majority of whom would become associated with the Ibo ethnic group in the twentieth century, were the most decentralized of all the regions in what would become Nigeria. A major reason for a multitude of small societies in the region compared to the south-western and northern regions was the geographic layout of the south-east; while the surrounding savannah areas had encouraged the movement and fusion of societies, the heavily forested south-east regions influenced the development of numerous small and relatively weak groups. Some Yoruba societies closer in proximity to the south-eastern region were affected by the forest landscape; however, the groups of the south-eastern region were impacted to a far greater degree.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> J.S. Eades, *The Yoruba Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> Mabogunje, "The Land and Peoples of West Africa," 23. For a general background of the pre-colonial histories of the Yoruba, also see Andrew Apter, *Black Critics & Kings: the hermeneutics of power in Yoruba society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-3.

Groups in the south-east typically lived in villages ranging in population from a few hundred to around 20,000 people that each claimed common ancestries and were governed, in most cases, by either a council of elders or a village assembly.<sup>11</sup> The only centralization that did occur was between neighbouring societies that coalesced into village groups. In spite of such political autonomy between societies, social and economic connections were strong between many Ibo groups that spoke dialects of the Ibo language. Inter-communication, trading, and inter-marriage also connected many societies in the south-eastern region over a long period of time. During the second half of the twentieth century, Christianity penetrated the south-eastern region, providing many societies a common religious bond in addition to their pre-existing similarities.<sup>12</sup> Despite their commonalities, prior to colonial rule, the peoples that would become identifiable as Ibo described themselves by the names of their local settlements and would not regard themselves as Ibo until the colonial era, when their collective similarities dwarfed any sets of similarities the Ibo shared with other groups.<sup>13</sup>

Overall, geographic, ethnic, and political factors affected the level of unity and cohesion between peoples in every region of Nigeria. These factors would become important when the British established a territorially-bounded Nigeria. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the British Empire gained control of the entire Nigerian region, gradually spreading from the coastal south into the northern interior.<sup>14</sup> The Sokoto Caliphate was the last of the region's polities to succumb to British conquest, accepting military defeat in

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<sup>11</sup> Axel Harnett-Sievers, *Constructions of Belonging: Igbo communities and the Nigerian in the twentieth century* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 39.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-7.

<sup>13</sup> Raphael Chijioko Njoku, *African Cultural Values: Igbo political leadership in colonial Nigeria, 1900-1966* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 5. Also see Harnett-Sievers, *Constructions of Belonging*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the various ways Britain gained control of the different regions of Nigeria, see "Chapter 4: Transition to British Colonial Rule, 1850-1903," in Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*.

1903.<sup>15</sup> By the first decade of the twentieth century, the British Empire had created the coastal Colony and Protectorate of Lagos, the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, and the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria.

The colonial era in the region lasted for less than a century, as Nigeria would gain independence from British rule in 1960. However, as Crawford Young notes, in spite of lasting for just “a mere moment in historical time,” the colonial era “reordered political space, societal hierarchies and cleavages, and modes of economic production.”<sup>16</sup> This fundamental reconstruction of group boundaries and power structures primarily occurred in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, culminating with the amalgamation of the Protectorates into a single colony in 1914. Among other reasons, British officials intended to use the revenue from the South to help offset the administrative costs that would be incurred in the less lucrative and less developed Northern region.<sup>17</sup> As early as 1899, the Selborne Committee, a group of leading British minds, foresaw the amalgamation, and proposed the implementation of provincial governments to administer the diverse societies and varying economic resources in the region.<sup>18</sup> Though neglecting to adhere to the details of the Selborne Committee’s recommendations, British officials in the early twentieth century adopted the Committee’s strategy of dividing the ethnically-diverse colony into regional governments and groups.

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<sup>15</sup> J.C. Anene, *Southern Nigeria in Transition, 1885-1906: Theory and Practice in a Colonial Protectorate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

<sup>16</sup> Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven and Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1994), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Olayemi Akinwumi “The Colonial Government and the Minority Question,” in *The Foundation of Nigeria*, ed. Adebayo Oyejide (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2003), 564.

<sup>18</sup> A.H.M. Greene, “The Genesis of the Nigerian Civil War and the Theory of Fear,” *Research Report – Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies*, No. 27 (1975): 1-27. Greene identifies 5 sources of conflict for the Nigerian civil war, identifying political issues that originated during the early years of colonial rule.

In creating the colony's boundaries, British officials often used their own perceptions of the ethnic make-up in the population, resulting in the social construction of new group boundaries in which many distinct societies were combined or divided, depending on their level of perceived ethnic similarities.<sup>19</sup> The Nigerian colony was divided into Northern and Southern provinces, as well as a number of smaller, localized provinces, many of which were perceived by British officials as distinct tribal units.<sup>20</sup> The territory and population of Northern Nigeria dwarfed Southern Nigeria, as British officials were leery of breaking up the perceived cultural and political unity of the northern region's Muslim peoples. In the north, British officials were also only familiar with the recent historical connections of the northern region's peoples within the Sokoto Caliphate, which did not form until the decades prior to British colonization.<sup>21</sup> The Yoruba and Ibo, meanwhile, were largely "kept" intact within Southern Nigeria. The preservation of these two major ethnic groups persisted following the division of Southern Nigeria into Western and Eastern provinces in 1939, which gave the Yoruba a numeric majority in the West and the Ibo a similar position in the East, though both ethnic groups remained spread throughout the south.<sup>22</sup>

Membership in many groups grew considerably following the introduction of new boundaries in the colonial era, with the number of identifiable groups in the colony far exceeding 200. The altered social boundaries especially affected the previously disparate Ibo

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<sup>19</sup> Crawford Young, "Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Africa," in *Understanding Nationalism*, ed. Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 174.

<sup>20</sup> Crawford Young, "Nation, Ethnicity and Citizenship: dilemmas of democracy and civil orders in Africa," *Making Nations, Creating Strangers: states and citizenship in Africa*, ed. Sara Dorman, Daniel Patrick Hammett, and Paul Nugent (Boston: Brill, 2007), 250.

<sup>21</sup> William D. Graf, *The Nigerian State: political economy, state class and political system in the post-colonial era*. (London: James Currey, 1988). Graf outlines this historical North-South comparison in his introduction and uses it to compare the different colonial administrative strategies used by the British in the regions. The peoples of the North, for example, were allowed to administer their own affairs to a much greater degree, in part, because they were perceived to have a history of political and cultural unity.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

societies, as the number of people who associated with the Ibo reached into the millions during the colonial era.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the Yoruba and the Hausa also had the opportunity to coalesce to a greater degree within the same regional boundaries and distinguish themselves from groups with whom they had a much larger set of differences. For the Hausa, this social reconstruction included becoming mutually identifiable with the Fulani because of their shared beliefs in Islam and recent history of common political connections, causing the Hausa-Fulani to become the most recognized group in the North. An important consequence of these boundaries, however, would become apparent when colonial era nationalist groups became divided into multiple competing sub-Nigerian groups, each based, in part, by the ethno-regional boundaries created by British officials.<sup>24</sup>

The British colonial administration would further reinforce the established ethno-regional divisions of Nigeria's major groups due to their allowance of differing colonial policies in each administrative region. The chosen form of colonial administration was indirect rule, a policy used in several British colonies that actually originated in the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria under the guidance of Sir Frederick Lugard, who sought to alleviate the fears of Muslim leaders that the social, judicial and spiritual importance of Islam would disappear under British rule.<sup>25</sup> Under indirect rule, British officials administered the colony through appointed indigenous rulers, usually a chief, which the colonial administration believed the indigenous peoples would perceive to be a more legitimate and,

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<sup>23</sup> Audrey Smock, *Ibo Politics: the role of ethnic unions in Eastern Nigeria* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 7. Smock provides a detailed analysis of the role of ethnic identity in Ibo communities, providing insight into how the Ibo identity emerged only in the 1940s and 1950s.

<sup>24</sup> Joshua B. Forrest, *Subnationalism in Africa: ethnicity, alliances, and politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004), 158.

<sup>25</sup> Julius Adukenle, "Religion and Politics in Transition," in *Religion and Politics: secularism and national integration in modern Nigeria*, ed. Julius Adukenle (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2009), 1-17.

therefore, acceptable form of rule. The British Empire also favoured indirect rule because of the view that it was the most efficient and inexpensive way to administer colonial rule.<sup>26</sup>

Due to early positive results in the North, the British implemented indirect rule colony-wide following amalgamation in 1914, even in regions where a chief had not been a recognized ruler.<sup>27</sup> As a result, in some regions of Southern Nigeria, the Warrant Chief System was unwelcome, especially among Ibo societies that had long been accustomed to council-led rule and considerable opportunities for social mobility. These issues were compounded by the corruption and abuse of power among many chiefs who took advantage of their privileged position in the colonial system.<sup>28</sup> The unpopularity of the Warrant Chief System among Ibo societies actually led to one of the first widespread anti-colonial movements in colonial Nigeria, the Women's Riots of 1929. This movement began as a local demonstration among ten thousand women in the Owerri province of south-eastern Nigeria, but spread to several other provinces during the following weeks. A few months following the spread of the movement, the British colonial administration was compelled to abolish the Warrant Chief System altogether in favour of allowing for greater indigenous representation in colonial governance.<sup>29</sup>

Another process that provoked reactions among indigenous groups in early colonial Nigeria was the spread of Western influences by British missionaries, such as Christianity, Western-oriented education and the English language. Missionary education was readily

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<sup>26</sup> Sara Berry, "Hegemony on a Shoestring: indirect rule and access to agricultural land," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 62, No. 3, Rights over Land: categories and controversies (1992): 327-355.

<sup>27</sup> Spear, "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa," 8.

<sup>28</sup> Adiele Eberechukwu Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: indirect rule in Southeastern Nigeria* (New York: Humanities Press, 1972), 272-287.

<sup>29</sup> For analysis on the Women's War of 1929, see: Chima J. Korieh, "Gender and Peasant Resistance: recasting the myth of the invisible woman in colonial Eastern Nigeria," in *The Foundations of Nigeria*, ed. Adebayo Oyeade (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), 623-646, and Nina E. Mba, "Heroines of the Women's War," in *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Bolanle Awe (Lagos: Sankore Publishers Ltd., 1992), 73-88.

provided by the British, in part, because the colonial system could not be sustained indefinitely without a group of educated indigenous Nigerians who could help administer the growing colony.<sup>30</sup> The spread of missionary education also helped to justify colonial rule, as British officials and missionaries asserted that the inherently backwards indigenous populations needed to be guided by Europeans into the modernized or Westernized world.<sup>31</sup> On a similar note, British officials and missionaries argued they were seeking to civilize the backwards peoples of the Nigerian region by appealing to both the past and the future, differentiating between what Africans had been and what they could become, and providing the Western ideas, beliefs and practices that would lead Africans out of a traditional state of being.<sup>32</sup> The Western interpretation of modernity dictated that accepting and adopting Western-influenced norms and practices, and discarding or reducing traditional influences, would allow indigenous Nigerians to gradually modernize.

The social benefits associated with Western-oriented education provided by missionaries helped to persuade many indigenous Nigerians the potential benefits of modernizing. Though many indigenous Nigerians merely sought to gain enough status to support their families in the colonial system, other aspiring indigenous Nigerians sought Westernization because of the implication that it would enhance their social status and authority within the colonial system and the future of Nigeria. As Toyin Falola states: “Education was an agency of social change, indeed the most potent agency of change. Africans who wanted to join in the new sectors needed the knowledge of a European

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<sup>30</sup> Njoku, *African Cultural Values*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: theory, knowledge, history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 115.

<sup>32</sup> Spear, “Neo-traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa,” 27. Also see V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: gnosis, philosophy and the order of knowledge* (Indiana University Press, 1988), 20. Mudimbe notes how colonial expansion beginning in the nineteenth century was, in part, assisted by the promotion of this particular model of history.

language and education.”<sup>33</sup> As indigenous educated elites emerged, a number of these aspiring elites echoed the sentiments of British officials and missionaries, proclaiming the need for Africans to embrace Western values to achieve progress in the colonial era.

British missionaries were mostly prevalent in the southern regions of Nigeria, where educated elites had already been emerging in a number of coastal city-states, especially among Yoruba societies, since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, Northern Nigerians were far more resistant to missionary education, stressing their desire to preserve the influence of Islam throughout the Northern region. Consequently, Northern Nigeria lagged far behind the other regions of colonial Nigeria in terms of producing enough Western-educated subjects to staff the North’s developing infrastructure; consequently, educated southern Nigerians were afforded the opportunity to gain administrative positions in the North. Migration was especially appealing to the Ibo of the south-eastern region, where overcrowding and land shortages had become problematic.<sup>35</sup>

While British colonial rule did not create ethnic identities in Nigeria, the colonial system did transform pre-existing concepts and cause indigenous groups to reconstruct their respective identities based on both pre-colonial and colonial era characteristics.<sup>36</sup> Those pre-colonial traits that ethnic groups carried into the colonial era, such as the prevailing Muslim beliefs among the Hausa-Fulani and the linguistic similarities among the Ibo, became more noticeable, strengthening and expanding ethnic group boundaries. Ethnic differences in colonial Nigeria also emerged by their varying reactions to the institutions, beliefs and practices introduced by British officials, missionaries and other Western colonial agents. As

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<sup>33</sup> Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 6-8.

<sup>34</sup> J.F. Ade Abayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: the making of a new elite* (Evanston: Northwestern Press, 1965), xiv.

<sup>35</sup> Ikenna Nzimiro, “A Study of Mobility among the Ibos of Southern Nigeria,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 6 (1965): 123-5.

<sup>36</sup> Spear, “Neo-traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa,” 24.

indigenous elites began their attempts to challenge the colonial system in the 1930s and 1940s, these glaring disparities between certain groups would become significant obstacles to the development of a burgeoning Nigerian nationalism in the colony.

### **Emerging Nationalist Movements in Colonial Nigeria**

A prominent component of the transfer of modern knowledge spread by the British missionaries was the idea of nationalism and nation-states.<sup>37</sup> However, the earliest attempts by indigenous elites to develop nationalist movements during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries in the Nigerian region, and in other African regions, were not based on the Nigerian or some other colonial identity, as these identities simply did not yet exist. In the region of what would become the Nigerian colony, the Nigerian was not even a definable identity with definitive boundaries until the establishment of the Nigerian colony in 1914. Instead, political consciousness among early indigenous elites was built through their collective opposition to remaining British subjects, and their intent on combining their modern or Western-influenced ideas with an insistence of “African” difference.<sup>38</sup> In distinguishing an African identity, these early nationalists were also early forebears of the pan-Africanist movement that would become popularized during the twentieth century.

Pan-Africanism became popularized in the early twentieth-century among West Indian intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey who, in spite of their failure to establish a single definition of the ideology, were in agreement on their ambitions to unite the “black” race in their struggles against discrimination and colonialism.<sup>39</sup> As Toyin Falola

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<sup>37</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 279.

<sup>38</sup> An example of early national consciousness can be found in the chapter entitled “‘Coming Home’: Pan-Africanisms and National Identities” of Kadiatu Kanneh, *African Identities: race, nation, and culture in ethnography, pan-Africanism and Black literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>39</sup> For analysis of early pan-Africanist sentiments and movements, see P. Olisanwuche Esedebe, *Pan-Africanism: the idea and movement, 1776-1963* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982).

argues, throughout the colonial era, pan-Africanism was both “an idea and a movement for creating unity among blacks in Africa and the entire African diaspora” which was based on their collective desire “to liberate Africa from imperial domination, speak with a common voice on matters of interest, and uplift all the peoples of African descent from their marginalized position in racialized environments.”<sup>40</sup> The indigenous elites of Nigeria took hold of pan-Africanism during the early twentieth century, when the movement began to achieve popularity among educated elites in several African colonies.

In 1920, Nigerians cooperated with elites from neighbouring colonies to form the earliest nationalist organization in the West African region, the National Congress of British West Africa. However, the Nigerian section of the NCBWA was recognized to be the weakest branch of the organization, as the challenge of overcoming ethnic differences among indigenous Nigerian elites quickly became a problem in their struggles to develop unity.<sup>41</sup> In a 1921 issue of the *Nigerian Pioneer*, one writer articulated his scepticism concerning the spread of unity in Nigeria: “Nigeria must reject the invitation and cannot profitably associate with the movement of the NCBWA for obvious reasons. We have a Yoruba nation and a Hausa nation but so far we have no Nigerian nation.”<sup>42</sup> Though Nigeria’s participation in the NCBWA signalled the earliest formal organization of Nigerian elites in a nationalist organization, albeit an African movement rather than a Nigerian movement, this writer foreshadowed the sub-Nigerian movements that would soon emerge in the colony. By the early 1920s, the weakness of the pan-Africanist movement in Nigeria became clear, as Nigerian elites increasingly strayed from the pan-Africanist tones associated with the

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<sup>40</sup> Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, 144.

<sup>41</sup> J. Ayodele, Langley, *Pan-Africanism and Nationalism in West Africa, 1900-1945: a study in ideology and social classes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 177.

<sup>42</sup> *Nigerian Pioneer* (15 April 1921). This excerpt can also be found in Langley, 182-3.

NCBWA and focused on establishing a united movement within the Nigerian colony, a pursuit which would prove to be a formidable challenge on its own.

The efforts of non-elite and less-educated indigenous Nigerians to contribute to the developing nationalisms of colonial Nigeria should not be discounted. Many anti-colonialist movements in colonial Nigeria, such as the Women's Riots of 1929, involved the initiative and leadership of these less-educated groups. However, British officials predictably became far more receptive to the demands of the Western-influenced, English-speaking elites that communicated their demands in a formal political forum and in a manner that was perceived by the British to be civilized.<sup>43</sup> British officials would also be more willing to negotiate with educated elites once Nigeria was guaranteed its eventual independence in the early 1950s, as the British Empire sought to ensure its continued political and economic influence in the region through cooperation with the Nigerian elites.

The nationalist movements that emerged in Nigeria from the 1920s to the 1940s originated exclusively among the educated elites of southern Nigeria. Unfortunately, a single, coalesced Nigerian movement never truly emerged, as these southern movements were often defined by a sub-Nigerian nationalist movement that excluded groups that were either unknown and from a distant region in the colony, or apart from the accepted ethnic identity that the elites used to define the movement. The ethnic element was sought after by nationalist educated elites because, as Partha Chatterjee argues, the search was for "a regeneration of the national culture, adapted to the requirements of progress, but retaining at

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<sup>43</sup> See Vaughan, "Decolonization and Legitimation in Nigeria," 135-136, and Njoku, *African Cultural Values*, 1-12. Vaughan provides a commentary on how Britain accepted indigenous elites as successors to colonial rule because of their modernizing skills. Njoku takes the same argument, but applies it to the particular case of Nigeria.

the same time its distinctiveness.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, ethnicity was used by southern Nigerian elites as the distinctive identifier in their varying nationalist movements.

Ethnicity was used instead of a unifying Nigerian or African identity largely because it could, first, secure a base of support from groups that related to the ethnic tones of the movement and, second, solidify the elites’ position as the leading preservers of their ethnic group’s identity in the colonial system.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the movements that emerged among elites from the Yoruba, Ibo and other groups each held differing visions of the “national culture,” as the Nigerian was defined by their respective traditional ethnic identities.<sup>46</sup> An early example of a sub-Nigerian movement was the emergence of Nigeria’s first political party in 1923, the Nigerian National Democratic Party. Though a self-proclaimed nationalist party, in reality, the NNDP was created primarily to serve the interests of the Yoruba elites in Lagos and, therefore, was nationalist in name only.<sup>47</sup> In general, the existence of numerous African-based identities, such as the Ibo and the Yoruba, allowed for a number of competing nationalisms to emerge rather than a single, unifying Nigerian nationalism.

From the 1920s to the 1940s, the formation of ethnic unions and cultural associations in southern Nigeria helped elites and non-elites to cooperate as members of the same organized sub-nationalist movement. With the creation of movements that restricted membership to those of the same ethnic group, Nigerian elites were encouraging the indigenous population to associate with an ethnic identity and exclude all other identifiable ethnic groups in spite of any similarities shared between them. During the 1930s, for

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<sup>44</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: a derivative discourse* (London: Zed Books; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [1<sup>st</sup> edition: 1986]), 2.

<sup>45</sup> Leroy Vail, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 14. Also see Olufemi Vaughan, “Decolonization and Legitimation in Nigeria,” in *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth Century Africa*, ed. Terence Ranger and Olufemi Vaughan (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>46</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

<sup>47</sup> Langley, *Pan-Africanism and Nationalism in West Africa*, 177.

instance, all-Ibo unions formed by educated elites began to surface in cities such as Lagos; the Ibo Federal Union was later formed, in 1945, as a means to unify local Ibo associations in eastern Nigeria and other regions where Ibo had migrated.<sup>48</sup> Ethnic-based unions established solidarity between the educated and uneducated, and the rich and the poor. Ethnic unions were especially popular in Nigerian cities, where any individual risked losing his or her identity amidst the inter-mingling of indigenous Nigerians from an array of regions and ethnic backgrounds, as well as the Western influences that were prevalent in the urban environment.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, by maintaining close contact with “home” branches, ethnic unions were often able to spread to rural communities and, thus, preserve connections between urban and rural dwellers.<sup>50</sup> These unions served as a base for an emerging ethnic consciousness in colonial Nigeria between, for example, Ibo and Yoruba who competed over employment, status and, ultimately, power in the colonial setting. Ethnic unions, in general, played an important role in an ethnic group’s ability to bridge differences between the Westernized and traditional members of the association. Due to the popularity of these unions during the 1930s and 1940s, an individual’s ethnic affiliation would have also been increasingly determined by his or her membership in an ethnic union; without membership in an ethnic union or cultural association, one risked exclusion from their own group.

Nnamdi Azikiwe, an Ibo intellectual, became one of the most prominent influences on the emergence of ethnic-based nationalist political parties in Nigeria during the 1940s.

During his education in the United States, Azikiwe had been influenced by the ideas of

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<sup>48</sup> Richard L. Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties: power in an emergent African nation* (Trenton: African World Press, 2004 [1<sup>st</sup> edition: Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963]), 64-72. Sklar provides a section on nationality movements in Nigeria during the colonial era before political parties emerged in the mid-1940s, beginning with the NCNC in 1944.

<sup>49</sup> For discussion of the role of ethnic unions in the solidarity of an ethnic group, see Smock, *Ibo Politics*.

<sup>50</sup> See Njoku, *African Cultural Values*. Njoku views the impact of Ibo ethnic unions in preserving cultural association among the Ibo in the urban environment during the colonial era.

DuBois and other early proponents of pan-Africanism. Upon his return to Nigeria in 1934, Azikiwe quickly emerged as a leading Nigerian nationalist.<sup>51</sup> In 1937, for example, Azikiwe founded the *West African Pilot* in Lagos, a newsletter that promoted Nigerian nationalism and regularly criticized the policies of the British colonial administration.<sup>52</sup> In relation to the pan-Africanist leanings which had influenced Azikiwe, the Ibo intellectual was an ardent supporter of the liberation of the African colonies from imperialist domination. However, Azikiwe fell in line with earlier conservative pan-Africanists in the colony, as the leading Nigerian figure refused to advocate the political unification of the African continent, an idea that became popularized by Kwame Nkrumah and other radical pan-Africanists beginning in the 1940s. Instead, Azikiwe believed in the close cooperation of independent African states towards mutual development, arguing the cultural and linguistic differences among Africans made political unification impractical.<sup>53</sup> Azikiwe's pan-Africanist stance also applied to his views of Nigerian nationalism, as Azikiwe understood that ethnic diversity provided a significant obstacle to any attempts to develop a unifying Nigerian nationalism. In relation to both pan-Africanism and nationalism within Nigeria, Azikiwe helped entrench the belief that unity was best pursued by the cooperation of ethnic-based sub-African or sub-Nigerian groups that each preserved their respective distinct traits.<sup>54</sup>

Despite widespread support for sub-nationalisms, the emergent sub-Nigerian groups did find a source of unity in their collective opposition to the colonial system. Since most elite leaders believed the greatest source of protection for their interests was government control, by the late 1940s, educated elites of varying ethnic backgrounds began to challenge

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<sup>51</sup> Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, 104-5.

<sup>52</sup> Harneit, Sievers, *Constructions of Belonging*, 119.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

the colonial system in the official political sphere.<sup>55</sup> In 1944, Nnamde Azikiwe and Herbert Macauley, a Yoruba and founding member of the NNDP, led the formation of Nigeria's first truly nationalist party, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons.<sup>56</sup> The partnership of Azikiwe and Macauley signified the first conscious attempt of indigenous elites to develop a cross-ethnic, Nigerian movement. One year later, in 1945, the NCNC cemented its leadership role in the colony's developing nationalist movement with its participation in the Nigeria-wide strike, in which the NCNC partnered with southern Nigerian workers to organize a movement that challenged a rising cost of living by demanding increased wages.<sup>57</sup> The nationalist party's outspoken support of the strike allowed the movement to cross class-based and other sub-Nigerian divisions and united peoples based on their collective opposition to the colonial system, eventually forcing the colonial government to concede to the movement's demands. As the NCNC's popularity grew in the colony, the party became the leading voice of the anti-colonial movement.<sup>58</sup> However, the NCNC's influences were limited to the southern regions, as most Northerners did not participate in the movement, mainly due to their reluctance to challenge a colonial system that protected their long-standing practices and beliefs.

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<sup>55</sup> John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982 [1<sup>st</sup> edition]), 35-36. John Breuilly argues that the nation's security is best served by state power. However, Breuilly also states that this truism only remains relevant if a group believes in that truism. During the 1950s, Nigerians repeatedly proved they believed their sub-nationalist group was most protected by gaining power in the government.

<sup>56</sup> For discussion of the construction and composition of Nigeria's emerging political parties, see Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties: power in an emergent African nation*.

<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that Nigeria's political issues during the 1950s and 1960s would be ethnic- and regionally-based, and not class-based. This argument can be found in A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, "The Genesis of the Nigerian Civil War and the Theory of Fear," 1-27. Kirk-Greene argues that, from the early 1950s, ethnic identity and regionalism retained primacy over class in Nigerian political issues. Crawford Young also uses this argument in "Ethnicity and the Colonial and Post-Colonial State in Africa," in *Ethnic Groups and the State*, ed. Paul Brass (London: Croom Helm, 1985), asserting that none of the major ethnic groups could be identified with a certain class, and vice-versa. Young explains that the power structure established in colonial Nigeria, as well as the constitutional developments of the late 1940s and 1950s that further regionalized power in Nigeria, greatly inhibiting any opportunities for a movement of any sort to cross regional boundaries.

<sup>58</sup> Young, "Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Africa," 165. Also see Kenneth Onwuka Dike, "100 Years of British Rule in Nigeria, 1851-1951" (a reprint of the 1956 Lugard Lectures given by K. Onwuka Dike, Professor of History, University College, Ibadan).

Cross-ethnic and -regional unity among southern Nigerians, led by the NCNC, reached its peak during the late 1940s. In 1946, the introduction of the Richards Constitution caused widespread protest from indigenous elites, who were enraged that the Constitution had been drawn up without their consultation. Southern Nigerians from various cultures and regions were also opposed a constitution seen as Britain's attempt both to consolidate its control of Nigeria and to prevent the emergence of a Nigeria-wide independence movement, by dividing the colony into three administrative regions – the Northern, Western and Eastern – holding limited autonomy from a weakened central government.<sup>59</sup> The NCNC again took a leadership role in the anti-colonial protests following the Richards Constitution's introduction, joining with labour unions to influence a widespread eight-month campaign. However, the regional structure would remain, creating the basis for inter-regional tensions during the 1950s and 1960s.

Overall, an incipient Nigerian nationalist sentiment developing in southern Nigeria during the late 1940s and early 1950s was based on a collective opposition to British colonial rule. Thus, any semblance of Nigerian unity was self-defined by identifying an "Other" that the movement could oppose. When Sir John Macpherson, who replaced Sir Arthur Richards as Governor in 1950, acknowledged in 1951 that Nigeria would gain independence in the foreseeable future, the main impetus of the building Nigerian nationalist movement – the British "Other" – had disappeared. Macpherson's guarantee had also occurred before Nigerian unity could develop throughout all of Nigeria, above all among the Northern region's peoples.

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<sup>59</sup> Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *The Biafra War: Nigeria and the aftermath* (Lewiston: E. Mellon Press, 1990), 3-46. Ekwe-Ekwe is pro-Biafran in his analysis; however, the book's discussion on British colonial rule is effective in highlighting how Nigerian nationalism was inhibited by a number of processes, events and constitutional developments, such as the introduction of the Macpherson Constitution.

### **1950s and 1960s: Sub-Nigerian Movements Supersede Nigerian Nation-Building**

In the place of a unifying Nigerian nationalism among southern Nigerians emerged the anxiety among non-Ibo elites in southern Nigeria that an independent Nigeria would be controlled by the NCNC, which had become predominated by Ibo leaders, many of whom were also members of the Ibo Federal Union. In spite of the NCNC's intentions to foster Nigerian nation-building, the party's primarily Ibo leadership caused unrest among non-Ibo leaders, who feared the NCNC's power in an independent Nigeria would unavoidably privilege the Ibo over other groups in Nigeria.<sup>60</sup> The NCNC's nationalist stance had, therefore, become significantly less appealing among those groups that had supported the party prior to Governor Macpherson's guarantee of independence. For the majority of Nigeria's indigenous leaders and their supporters during the rest of the 1950s and into the 1960s, the preservation of their sub-Nigerian identity took precedence over any Nigerian nationalist sentiment. This spurred the formation of competing, non-Ibo political parties to challenge the Ibos' perceived consolidation of political influence in the colony.

In the Western region, a group of Yoruba elites, led by Obafemi Awolowo, who had been a member of Egbe Omo Oduduwa, a prominent Yoruba union, founded the Action Group. The main goals of the AG contained an ethnic element, in which the interests of the West's minority groups were overridden by the particular interests of the Yoruba.<sup>61</sup> The AG also sought loyalty from Yoruba supporters of the Ibo-led NCNC, which had already gained popularity among many ethnic groups throughout southern Nigeria. The AG would only seek

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<sup>60</sup> Harneit-Sievers, *Constructions of Belonging*, 120-1. Also see Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: philosophical reflections on the African experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 92.

<sup>61</sup> For a discussion on the prevailing influence of the Yoruba in the Action Group, as well as the AG's leaders' favouritism toward the Yoruba over the West's non-Yoruba groups, see Chapter Six of Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties*.

Nigeria-wide support following the 1951 elections, in which the Yoruba-led party secured control of the West from the NCNC.

The guarantee of independence also finally pushed Northern leaders to become involved in the colony's political affairs, as Northerner elites formed the Northern People's Congress with the aim of preserving the political, economic and cultural autonomy the North had enjoyed during colonial rule.<sup>62</sup> Unlike the NCNC and AG, the NPC did not originate among leaders of any ethnic union. Instead, the NPC's leadership largely consisted of conservative Muslim aristocrats who supported the continuation of colonial rule until the North could develop to the point where its leaders were ready to compete for power in an independent Nigeria.<sup>63</sup> The NPC publicly declared its regionalist favouritism, attempting to invoke solidarity among Northerners with slogans such as "One North, one people, irrespective of religion, rank or tribe."<sup>64</sup> Thus, the NPC was, far more than the NCNC and AG, self-defined by the regional boundaries that, due to the division of the colony into regions based on ethnic similarities, took on an ethno-regionalist character.

For the minority groups of Nigeria, the regionalization of power was a troubling development, as the numerically dominant Ibo, Yoruba and Muslim Northerners could elect leaders of their choosing and develop their respective regions to fit their own desires.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, many minority leaders did not organize their own ethnic-based political parties, with

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<sup>62</sup> Olorunsola, *The Politics of Cultural Sub-Nationalisms in Africa*, 21.

<sup>63</sup> John D. Hargreaves, "Toward the Transfer of Power in British West Africa," in *The Transfer of Power in Africa: Decolonization, 1940-60*, ed. Prosser Gifford and Wm. Roger Louis (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 139.

<sup>64</sup> Moyibi Amoda, "Background to the Conflict: a summary of Nigeria's political history from 1914 to 1964," in *Nigeria: dilemma of nationhood*, ed. Joseph Okpaku (New York: Third Press, 1972), 32-4.

<sup>65</sup> These fears among Nigeria's minority groups would be addressed and recognized during the late 1950s by the government-appointed Willink Commission in "Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into the fears of Minorities and the means of allaying them, presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Colonies by Command of Her Majesty" (July 1958). Though recognizing the fear of minorities, the Willink Commission did not enforce any immediate measures to allow for greater minority representation in Nigeria.

most of the peoples in these groups opting to support the major political party in their region in order to gain at least a piece of power.<sup>66</sup> Those minority groups that did form political parties during the 1950s had a minimal impact on regional elections, as the seats they gained in the Regional government paled in comparison to those of the political party that represented the region's dominant group.

The emergence of numerous political parties based on regional or ethnic ties, or both, in preparation for the first regional elections in 1951 provided clear evidence that the promise of independence and constitutional developments had helped to stall the development of a unifying Nigerian nationalism and caused the development of numerous sub-nationalisms in its place.<sup>67</sup> In the elections, the NPC decisively won the Northern region and the AG took control of the Western region from the NCNC, which was relegated to control of the East. Consequently, the 1951 elections also signalled the beginning of sub-Nigerian divisions in the political forum that were based on ethno-regionalist differences, as the Ibo-led NCNC, Yoruba-led AG, and Muslim Northerner-led NPC each consolidated power in their respective regions. In the years leading to Nigeria's independence, the NCNC, AG, and NPC would also seek to secure enough support to win Nigeria-wide elections and control the central government, allowing for inter-regional disputes between the major political parties to become a common occurrence.

Sub-Nigerian divisions became further entrenched by the suspension of the Richards Constitution in 1951 and subsequent introduction of the Macpherson Constitution.

Interestingly, the Macpherson Constitution was the first of several constitutions throughout

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<sup>66</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Old Societies and New States: the quest for modernity in Asia and Africa* (London Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 150-1.

<sup>67</sup> James Coleman, *Nigeria: background to nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), 319-331.

the 1950s and 1960s that were adopted with the aim of assisting in the construction of a unifying Nigerian identity. After all, attaining power in the central government would be fruitless if the Nigerian state was unstable and riddled with internal strife. The Macpherson Constitution, for instance, allowed indigenous Nigerians greater political participation and party organization than ever before. In a measure aimed to prevent hostility between parties from different regions at the centre, the Macpherson Constitution also adopted a Federation style of governance and gave the three administrative regions more legislative powers and autonomy from the centre.<sup>68</sup> This decentralized form of government was chosen by cooperating indigenous leaders and British officials as a way to defuse inter-regional tensions by allowing the three major political parties a considerable amount of power at the regional level.<sup>69</sup> However, many indigenous leaders criticized regionalizing power throughout the 1950s, fearing a decentralized government would entrench regional divisions in Nigeria rather than contribute to national identity. Furthermore, the greatest amount of political power and influence still resided at the centre, notably control over revenue allocation throughout Nigeria, as well as the enviable social status that accompanied power in the central government.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the controlling party of each regional government would inevitably conflict over power in the central government.

The constitution developments of the 1950s also entrenched a system in which the allocation of seats in the House of Representatives to be determined by population figures. This measure heavily favoured the Northern region which, according to the 1952 census, contained approximately half of Nigeria's entire population. Furthermore, representatives of

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<sup>68</sup> For an effective overview of the effects of the Macpherson Constitution on regionalizing politics in Nigeria, see Chapter 3 of Richard Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties: power in an emergent African nation*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 279-280. Jackson provides an argument for why federations can be effective, and why they often fail to successfully develop. In Nigeria's case, Jackson feels Nigeria's centre was far too weak to foster Nigeria-wide stability.

<sup>70</sup> Bartkus, *The Dynamic of Secession*, 99.

the NPC actually threatened to secede from Nigeria in 1953 if they were not guaranteed 50% representation in the indigenous government leading to independence. The main factor for the threat of secession was the Northern leaders' fear that the North was underprepared for independence and that independence would lead to southern exploitation of Northerners. In order to prevent the disintegration of Nigeria before independence was even achieved, the NCNC and AG ceded to the NPC's demands, allowing Northern leaders to firmly establish a prominent position in the colony's preparations for independence.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, non-NPC parties became significantly handicapped in any Nigeria-wide elections.

To combat the NPC's political advantages, the NCNC and the AG attempted to gain popular support outside their respective regions.<sup>72</sup> However, each political party's determination to protect their power by serving the interests of the region prevented any outside parties from achieving sufficient support to defeat any region's incumbent party. The NCNC only acquired limited support outside the Eastern region, primarily among Ibo and other Easterners that resided in the North and West. The AG's base of support outside the Western region was much more limited, with Yoruba in the North serving as the primary non-Western supporters of the AG. Thus, even as the AG and NCNC sought Nigeria-wide support, the determination of each of the three dominant parties to preserve its base of support mutually reinforced the boundaries between the bases of support between the competing parties. In addition, indigenous Nigerians who migrated to other regions or intermingled with members of differing ethnic groups in urban centres typically remained loyal to their own ethnic group or region.<sup>73</sup> The Ibo provided the most glaring example as

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<sup>71</sup> Okpaku, *Nigeria: dilemma of nationhood*, 55.

<sup>72</sup> Olorunsola, *The Politics of Cultural Sub-Nationalisms in Africa*, 18.

<sup>73</sup> Chukwuemeka Onwuku, "Ethnic Identity, Political Integration and National Development: the Igbo diaspora in Nigeria," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 13, No. 3 (1975): 406-411.

they frequently migrated to Northern Nigeria for employment, yet remained identifiably Ibo through a combination of their own perceived differences with Northerners and the resistance of Northerners to fully accept the Ibo.

During the 1950s and into the 1960s, the decentralized structure of government did not create a base for Nigerian unity, as sub-Nigerianism and inter-regional frictions became a significant problem.<sup>74</sup> These sub-nationalisms were only magnified further by the British colonial administration which, in most issues leading to independence, favoured the NPC over the other two major parties. Britain's collusion with the NPC was primarily due to the assurance from Northern leaders that Britain would remain a strong influence in a Northern-led independent Nigeria, a promise that the AG and NCNC did not offer.<sup>75</sup> When the NPC and British colonial officials cooperated to delay independence in 1953 to allow Northern Nigeria the opportunity to develop its infrastructure, large numbers of southerners protested against Northern leaders. In retaliation, groups of northerners attacked and killed a number of southerners residing in Northern Nigeria.

Though southern Nigerians had been attacked in Northern Nigeria prior to 1953 – in 1945, Ibo immigrants had been targeted in the Northern city of Jos in retaliation for “stealing” jobs from Northerners – this event, known as the Kano Riots, represented the most widespread occurrence of violence between two sub-Nigerian groups, Northerners and southerners, in colonial Nigeria. The Kano riots were also an example of how sub-nationalisms were often identified and moulded by the leaders in the major political parties and then reinforced by many groups within Nigeria's population through support based on

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<sup>74</sup> Kirk-Greene, “The Genesis of the Nigerian Civil War and the Theory of Fear.” Regionalist politics is listed as the first of five reasons for Nigeria's built-in potential for antagonism in the Nigerian colony and state.

<sup>75</sup> Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: the diplomatic history of the Biafran War, 1967-70* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972), 7.

regional and ethnic ties.<sup>76</sup> The decision among Northern leaders to delay Nigerian independence incited many common southerners – not southern leaders – to action against Northern leaders, though the vocal outrage of southern leaders would have helped to influence southerners. On the opposing side, the retaliation of Northerners against southerners was a clear sign of support for their Northern leaders.

The leaders of the NPC, far more than the leaders of the other regions, took great advantage of the regional autonomy afforded by the Nigerian constitution. The starkest example occurred when the NPC introduced a policy of “northernization” in 1955 which, in short, gave preference to Northerners for jobs in the Northern region. The “northernization” policy proved to be popular among Northerners, as the regional government was seen to be protecting Northerners against educated southerners in the Northern region. Predictably, this policy negatively affected, to a significant degree, southerners residing in the North. Since the centre had no authority to prevent the implementation of the “northernization” policy, the AG and NCNC were unable to influence changes to the overtly discriminatory policy.

By 1957, the NPC finally joined the push for Nigerian independence alongside the AG and NCNC, mainly because Northern leaders had become confident in the development of the Northern region’s infrastructure due, in large part, to the “northernization” policy. The NPC was also encouraged by its continued popularity among Northerners, which would ensure Northern control in Federal elections. Indeed, the NPC won the pre-independence Federal elections of 1959, and did so without securing a single seat outside the Northern region – the NPC won 134 of the 174 available seats in the Northern region, and none of the 138 electable seats in the East, West and Capital Territory of Lagos combined.<sup>77</sup> Notably, the

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<sup>76</sup> Larry R. Jackson, “The Politics of the First Republic,” *Journal of Black Studies* 2, No. 3 (March 1972), 296.

<sup>77</sup> Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties: power in an emergent African nation*, 32-33 and 35-37.

NCNC received far more total votes in Nigeria than the NPC – the NCNC won 36.1% of the total votes compared to 28.2% for the NPC – yet still fell 45 seats behind the Northern-led party, and only gained majority control of the Eastern region.<sup>78</sup> The AG, meanwhile, maintained its power in the Western region.<sup>79</sup> Overall, the AG, NCNC and a number of minority parties won enough seats to prevent the NPC from attaining an outright majority in the House of Representatives and veto power over all regions. As a result, the NPC formed a coalition with the NCNC in order to make running a minority government in a divided Federation a less-difficult task.

In spite of the sub-Nigerian movements that clearly dominated Nigeria's political landscape, many Nigerian leaders recognized the vital importance of Nigerian nationhood as the colony transitioned to a sovereign state. At the 1958 Constitutional Conference, Obafemi Awolowo, who would become the Leader of the Opposition in the Federal parliament following independence, made a comment echoed by many southern leaders concerning the importance of Nigerian nation-building: "Nigerian unity is desired because – and only because – a united Nigeria will be better able to promote the prosperity, welfare, happiness, and dignity of its inhabitants."<sup>80</sup> For Awolowo and other southern Nigerian leaders, Nigerian unity needed to be built for the benefit of Nigeria's future development, stability and strength as a state.

On 1 October 1960, Nigeria officially gained independence from Britain with Abubakar Balewa, a Hausa Northerner, in place as Prime Minister. The Balewa regime did pursue Nigerian nation-building, primarily through symbolic gestures such as creating a flag

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. The NCNC won 58 of 73 seats in the Eastern region, 21 of 62 seats in the West, 8 of 174 seats in the North, and 2 of 3 seats in the Capital Territory of Lagos.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. The AG won 33 of 62 seats in the Western region, 14 of 73 seats in the East, 25 of 174 seats in the North, and 1 of 3 seats in the Capital Territory of Lagos. In total, the AG won 27.6% of the total vote.

<sup>80</sup> "Statement of Policy on the Resumed Nigerian Constitutional Conference. London, September 29, 1958. By the Honorable Obafemi Awolowo, Premier of Western Nigeria."

and national anthem. In 1963, Nigerian leaders also further established Nigeria's sovereignty, implementing a new constitution without British assistance for the first time. In a bid to advance the nationalizing process, the constitution transformed Nigeria into a Federal Republic within the British Commonwealth, ridding the state of sovereign rule by the British royal family.<sup>81</sup> The new constitution also created in the Federal Government a Presidential position that would not have extensive constitutional authority, but serve as a symbolic leader of Nigeria. In a move perceived to be both a motion to maintain the NPC-NCNC alliance and to encourage Nigerian unity, Nnamdi Azikiwe, one of Nigeria's foremost nationalist leaders since the late 1930s, was introduced as Nigeria's first President.

However, the challenge of attributing greater importance to an entirely modern phenomenon – the Nigerian identity – than the various sub-Nigerian loyalties divided by long-standing and pre-colonial characteristics would prove to be too great in the 1960s. In particular, the regionalization of power and the entrenchment of ethnic- and region-based political parties prevented Nigeria's leaders from constructing a Nigerian identity.<sup>82</sup> In relation to the regionalization of power, the Nigerian constitution included a provision that allowed for new regions to be created out of existing ones, as long as 60% of the population in question and two-thirds of the Senate and House of Representatives voted in favour of it. As a result, minority groups were afforded the opportunity to establish their own footing in the political sphere and escape the dominance of the region's prevailing ethnic group. In July 1963, a plebiscite was held in the Benin and Delta provinces, two minority-dominant territories of the Western region, with 89% voting in favour of creating a new Mid-Western region. In relation to the sub-Nigerianisms that continued to dominate Nigerian politics, the

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<sup>81</sup> Franklin L. Blitz, *The Politics and Administration of Nigerian Government* (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1965), 40. Blitz provides a description of constitutional developments in Nigeria until its publication in 1965.

<sup>82</sup> Graf, *The Nigerian State*, 32.

NPC-NCNC alliance in the Federal government conspired in favour of the vote, as it weakened the Yoruba-led AG's sphere of influence.<sup>83</sup> On August 9, the Mid-Western region was officially introduced, separating the Edo and other non-Yoruba peoples, as well as a number of Ibo, from the Yoruba-dominated Western region.

The ethno-regionalist tone of the three major sub-Nigerian nationalist movements also hindered any progress toward Nigerian unity.<sup>84</sup> For example, the Muslim elites who led the NPC were not entirely Hausa-Fulani. On the other hand, the Muslim characteristics which helped to define the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group could also be used to describe Northern leaders in general, as well as their main group of supporters. Additionally, the Northern groups that were not Muslim and did not share similar traits with the Muslim elites were, nevertheless, lumped into the Northerner group by both Northern leaders who represented the entire region and non-Northern leaders who opposed the NPC. For the AG and NCNC, the prevalence of the Yoruba and the Ibo of these respective parties caused the ethnic aspect of their sub-nationalisms to be prominent as well. At any rate, the regional sub-nationalisms of Nigeria could be understood to be ethno-regionalist in nature, with any conflict on the political stage between two or more regions potentially containing an ethnic element.

The census controversies of 1962 and 1963 provided a major example of ethno-regionalism in Nigeria, and revealed how seemingly ordinary processes became significant flash points.<sup>85</sup> The 1962 census, which concluded the Northern region did not have a majority population, was quickly rejected by pro-Northern Federal authorities, who ordered that a second census be taken. In 1963, the second census revealed that out of Nigeria's updated population of 55.6 million, the Northern region had approximately 30 million, a

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<sup>83</sup> Rex Niven, *The War of Nigerian Unity, 1967-70* (Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 1970), 53.

<sup>84</sup> Olorunsola, *The Politics of Cultural Sub-Nationalisms in Africa*, 21.

<sup>85</sup> Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of Berkeley Press, 1985), 196.

considerable increase from both the rejected census and the previous official census in 1952. Since the seats in the Federal House of Representatives would be re-allocated according to the new census, southerners feared that the Northern region would have a built-in political majority at the Federal level, ensuring Northern control of revenue allocation, appointments to the Federal Government, and other powers the Federal Government held that still influenced every region.<sup>86</sup> The census controversy also necessitated a non-Northerner coalition if the NCNC or AG wanted a chance to defeat the NPC in Federal elections. Additionally, the importance of this crisis to sub-Nigerianism was illustrated in the fact that the attachment to sub-national identities rather than a national Nigerian identity caused the census controversy in the first place, as each region paid close attention to who would “win” the results.<sup>87</sup> Determined to prove the second census was rigged, Eastern leaders attempted to disallow the census and “defeat” the Northerners, but failed.

In the wake of the census controversy, the NPC’s continuing “northernization” policy and the NPC’s general exertion of its political clout over the NCNC, the tumultuous NPC-NCNC alliance disintegrated during the first term of the Federal Government.<sup>88</sup> In preparation for the 1964 federal elections, both parties sought alternative alliances: the NCNC joined with the AG and other minor parties to form the United Progressive Grand Alliance, and the NPC formed the Nigerian National Alliance by joining with other minority parties and the newly formed, Yoruba-led Nigerian National Democratic Party, which sought a share in power for Western leaders at the federal level.<sup>89</sup> The UPGA and NNA crossed both

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<sup>86</sup> Jackson, “The Politics of the First Republic,” 290.

<sup>87</sup> Olorunsola, *The Politics of Cultural Sub-Nationalisms in Africa*, 29.

<sup>88</sup> Oye Ogunbadejo, “Nigeria’s Foreign Policy under Military Rule, 1966-79,” *International Journal* 35, No. 4, *Africa’s Prospects* (Autumn 1980): 749.

<sup>89</sup> Blitz, *The Politics and Administration of Nigerian Government*, 155-6. Blitz efficiently reviews the dissension within the Action Group in the early 1960s, which led to the defection of Samuel Akintola and his supporters, who formed the Nigerian National Democratic Party.

ethnic and regional boundaries. However, the formation of these two alliances was grounded in the division between the leaders of the Northern and Eastern regions and the determination among each of the three ethnic groups to gain representation in the Federal Government.

Prior to the 1964 elections, the NCNC-led UPGA realized it had very little chance of gaining enough seats in the North to prevent the NNA from victory. Similar to the census controversy, the southerners also suspected that corruption was marring election proceedings, especially in the Western region where both the NNA and UPGA heavily campaigned. As a result, the UPGA declared a boycott of the elections, hoping that the results would be deemed illegitimate. The tactic failed and the elections proceeded, allowing the NNA to emerge with an outright majority, winning 197 out of a possible 312 seats.<sup>90</sup> This overwhelming victory ensured the continued power of Northern leaders at the Federal level, and cemented the ethno-regionalist division between Northerners and Easterners, which would be at the centre of the conflict between Nigeria and secessionist Biafra.

### **January 1966 – May 1967: From the January Coup to the Eastern Region's Secession**

The battle for dominance between Nigeria's sub-nationalist groups reached a turning point on 15 January 1966, when a group of mainly Ibo military officers staged a coup to overturn the primarily Northern-led government, killing several military officers and political leaders in the process, including Prime Minister Balewa. The coup set a dangerous precedent, as the greatest perceived source of power in Nigeria had, for the first time, changed hands through undemocratic, unconstitutional means and, therefore, outside the boundaries of what had become acceptable political practices in Nigeria.

Reaction to the coup was divided and included two opposing camps: those who supported and felt empowered by the military coup, and those who did not. Many

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 159. The statistics of the elections are taken from Graf, *The Nigerian State*, 38.

Northerners labelled the coup an Ibo scheme to seize power in Nigeria, pointing to the killing of primarily non-Easterners during the coup, most notably the Premiers of the Western and Northern Regions, Prime Minister Balewa, and a number of top Northerner military officers.<sup>91</sup> The coup also resulted in the killing of Ahmadu Bello, who had been a long-time political leader in the Northern region and a spiritual authority for the Muslim Northerners – Bello was commonly known as the Sardauna of Sokoto.<sup>92</sup> The new leaders of the new Military Government, however, argued that the motivation for the coup was to finally develop Nigerian unity by removing the enemies within the current government. In a radio speech on the day of the coup, Major Nzeogwu exposed the leaders he believed to be the enemies of unity and progress in Nigeria:

Our enemies are the political profiteers, swindlers, the men in the high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten percent, those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers and VIPs of waste, the tribalists, the nepotists, those that make the country look big for nothing before international circles, those that have corrupted our society and put the Nigerian political calendar back by their words and deeds.<sup>93</sup>

Nzeogwu's comments were rare at the time for the leader's unambiguous attacks against Nigerian leadership. On the other hand, these comments were also an early example of the rhetoric Biafra's leaders would subsequently use during the secession to question the ability of Nigerians, particularly Northerners, to run a developing African state successfully.

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<sup>91</sup> See Graf, *The Nigerian State*.

<sup>92</sup> John J. Stremmlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-70* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 34.

<sup>93</sup> A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, ed., "Nzeogwu Announces Martial Law in the North and Promulgates Ten Decrees," in *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: a documentary sourcebook, Vol. 1* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 125-127.

In a press conference following the coup, Major-General Ironsi echoed Nzeogwu's sentiments in a more diplomatic manner, attributing the Balewa regime's downfall to its "rigid adherence to 'regionalism.'" Ironsi also promoted the need for Nigerian unity, asserting that "tribal loyalties and activities which promote tribal consciousness and sectional interests must give way to the urgent task of national reconstruction."<sup>94</sup> Each of the new regional Military Governors also deplored regionalism and tribalism; in Major Hassan Katsina's first press conference as the Military Governor of the Northern Region, the Northern native proclaimed the value of Nigerian unity in asserting "everyone must realize that we are one nation irrespective of the tribe from which each of us originates."<sup>95</sup> Of course, these statements could also be perceived as being made purely for the purpose of securing Nigeria-wide support for the new military leaders of Nigeria. The point to be made here, however, is not to determine which side was more truthful. Rather, it is important to note that the new regime saw nation-building and unity as important to Nigeria's well-being, and communicated to the rest of the population its intent to progress from the tribalism and corruption of Nigeria's past leaders.

A more objective look at the January coup reveals that the coup was, above all else, a practical means of gaining power in a political system that, in its structure, overwhelmingly favoured the numerically dominant Northern region. The coup, however, was not an "Ibo scheme," as many Northerners claimed. Though most of the military officers involved were primarily Ibo, non-Easterners such as Hassan Katsina, a Northerner, also figured prominently in the take-over. Furthermore, the new Head of the Military Government, Major-General

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<sup>94</sup> "Ironsi's Press Conference of 21 February 1966," in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 1*, 155-8, and "Policy Broadcast by General Ironsi, 28 January 1966," in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 1*, 154-5.

<sup>95</sup> "Major Hassan Katsina's First Press Conference as Military Governor of the Northern Region, 18 January 1966," in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 1*, 145-6.

Ironsi, was not a part of the coup. In fact, Ironsi had successfully led the fight to prevent the conspiring military officers from seizing power of the Federal Government. Since military officers had taken power in most of the top posts at the regional and Federal levels of government, the Federal Cabinet resolved to transfer power to the highest ranking officer in the Army in order to avoid further bloodshed. Ironsi was the highest ranking surviving officer following the coup and, therefore, became the new Head of State.<sup>96</sup>

The Ironsi era lasted for less than seven months, as a group primarily made up of Northern military officers, on 29 July 1966, successfully undertook a countercoup, with Lt.-Col. Gowon assuming the role of Head of State. Aside from the fear that the Ibo were consolidating political power in Nigeria, the primary impetus for the countercoup was the Ironsi regime's introduction of the Unification Decree in May 1966. The Decree was lauded by the Ironsi regime as an attempt to make a definitive step towards resolving Nigeria's ethno-regional divisions, as the measure centralized power by abolishing the 4-region political structure and grouped Nigeria into a number of provinces that were not based on ethnic affiliations. The Decree also banned political and tribal organizations for two years; Ironsi went as far as asserting in a radio broadcast that references to tribe or place of origin would no longer appear in any official document.<sup>97</sup> Though the actual intentions of the Ironsi regime remain unclear, one can see that, in the public domain, the Ironsi regime was aiming to finally put into practice the idea of emphasizing Nigerian nation-building over other identifiable affinities, notably those that were partly bound by pre-colonial characteristics.

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<sup>96</sup> Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *The Biafra: Nigeria and the aftermath* (Lewiston: E Mellon Press, 1990), 54-55. Ekwe-Ekwe is decidedly pro-Biafran in his analysis on the Nigerian civil war, but still provides an informative and fair assessment of the events in Nigeria prior to the secession and war.

<sup>97</sup> "The Unification Decree: No. 34 of 1966," in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 1*, 169-173.

Opponents of the military regime, most notably the Northerners, saw the Unification Decree as a scheme to give the ruling Ibo Easterners an edge in retaining Federal power by centralizing power and breaking up the Northern region into several provinces with little autonomy. On 31 August 1966, Gowon abolished the Unification Decree and restored the decentralized Federal system of government. According to Gowon, the regionalization of power was, compared to the centralization encouraged by the Unification Decree, better suited to establishing peace, stability and, therefore, unity between the diverse groups in Nigeria.<sup>98</sup> Gowon's regime echoed the sentiments of the ousted military leaders, assuring Nigerians that his government was merely a transition towards a civilian government in a Nigerian state that was both stable and united.<sup>99</sup>

However, Gowon's sentiments of Nigerian unity contrasted with widespread attacks by Northerners against Eastern civilians and low-level Ibo soldiers in the Northern region during mid-1966.<sup>100</sup> Widespread attacks and killings of Easterners in the North first erupted following the announcement of the Unification Decree in May 1966, and were re-ignited in August and September following the counter coup of July 1966. Additionally, during the counter coup, lower-ranked Northern officers not directly involved in the coup were reported to have taken their own initiative and killed a number of Ibo officers and soldiers.<sup>101</sup> Overall, the "pogroms" killed approximately 30000 Easterners during mid-1966.<sup>102</sup> Though Easterners of varying ethnic backgrounds were attacked in the Northern region, the Ibo-

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<sup>98</sup> "Gowon Abolishes Decree 34 and Reinstates a Federal System," in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 1*, 215-6.

<sup>99</sup> "Gowon's 1<sup>st</sup> Press Conference, given at the National Hall, Lagos, 4 August 1966," in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 1*, 204-6, and "Gowon Announces his Government's Policy for Return to Civilian Rule, 8 August 1966," in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 1*, 206-8..

<sup>100</sup> C.C. Wrigley, "Nigeria: The Colonial Imprint," in *History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 7, Chapter 100: Nigeria, ed. A.J.P. Taylor and J.M. Roberts (May 1967 – December 1969), 89.

<sup>101</sup> Graf, *The Nigerian State*, 42.

<sup>102</sup> Kirk-Greene, "The Genesis of the Nigerian Civil War and the Theory of Fear," 21.

speaking peoples suffered the most from the attacks, as detecting one's linguistic accent represented an easy way to determine a person's background. Furthermore, the Ibo had long been recognized as a threat to the hegemony of the Muslim Northerner in the Northern region. Nevertheless, this episode provided evidence of the escalating ethno-regionalist tensions between Northerners and Easterners in Nigeria.

Around the time of the "pogroms" and the countercoup, Lt.-Col. Ojukwu, a graduate of Oxford University and high-ranking military officer, began to assert his place as the Eastern region's most renowned leader.<sup>103</sup> In opposition to the Gowon regime, Ojukwu announced the East's refusal to recognize the Gowon government – the only region to do so. Ojukwu also lumped all of the Northern region's groups into the same identifiable group, generalizing the aggressor in the "pogroms" as the Northerners, claiming the killings of Easterners in the North as a crime "committed jointly by all sections of the North against all sections of the East."<sup>104</sup> Indeed, when Ojukwu was questioned whether the Tiv, who opposed NPC rule in the North and had rioted against NPC leaders as recently as 1964, could be distinguished from the rest of the North, the Eastern leader remarked: "The Middle Belt people did partake of all these atrocities, and really it will be wishful thinking on our part to think that with the feeling in the North today, I can well separate them from the main North."<sup>105</sup> Ojukwu made a conscious effort to simplify the sub-national boundaries in

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<sup>103</sup> Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-70*, 41-45. Stremlau provides a comparative biography of Lt.-Col. Ojukwu and General Gowon, detailing the similarities of the two leaders, notably their Christian upbringings and military background, as well as their differences, which include Ojukwu's strong academic experiences and the contrast between Ojukwu's charisma and savvy political mind, and Gowon's quiet and humble demeanor.

<sup>104</sup> Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, "Address to joint meeting of the Advisory Committee of Chiefs and Elders and the Consultative Assembly, November 10, 1966," in *Biafra: selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 95.

<sup>105</sup> "Ojukwu's press conference, 13 March 1967," in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 1*, 383 and 386-399.

Nigeria, but primarily as a convenience since it would have only complicated issues if he vilified the North and then excused parts of the region that were not actually of concern.

Despite these sub-Nigerian tensions, in September and October 1966, Ojukwu and other Nigerian leaders continued their attempts to resolve the divided state's internal strife by gathering for a series of meetings at the ad-hoc Constitutional Conference in Lagos. Proposals laid out during the meetings included increasing the powers of the regions while retaining the power of the Federal Government, which would be represented on a rotational basis between the regions every four years.<sup>106</sup> Before any agreements could be enforced, however, the meetings stalled when the Eastern delegates, led by Ojukwu, withdrew from the Conference, citing the continuing violence against Easterners in the Northern region and their resulting fear to travel outside the Eastern region. While the rest of the delegates beckoned the Eastern leaders to return to the meetings in Lagos, Ojukwu invited the other delegates to continue the meetings in the Eastern region. Neither request was met.

Nigerian leaders once again gathered on 4-5 January 1967 at a meeting organized by Lt.-Col. Ojukwu in Aburi, Ghana. The meetings in Ghana resulted in a set of agreements – the Aburi Accords – that included creating a new Constitution and allotting greater autonomy for each of the regions. However, the Gowon regime delayed the actual implementation of the Aburi agreements, citing reservations about further regionalizing power in Nigeria for the purpose of stabilizing the state and fostering unity. In response, Ojukwu sent a personal letter to Gowon, asserting that if “the Aburi Agreements are not implemented by the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, I shall have no alternative but to feel free to take whatever measure is unilaterally possible to

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<sup>106</sup> See “Summary of Proposals submitted by the Regional Delegations to the 1<sup>st</sup> Session of the Constitutional Conference, September 1966,” in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 1*, 245-254. For a comment on how Nigeria required a weak centre to help Nigeria build unity, also see “Ojukwu’s Press Conference in Enugu, 11 October 1966,” in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 1*, 258-266.

carry out the spirit of the Aburi Agreements.”<sup>107</sup> After repeated failures to foster Nigeria-wide unity, the Aburi Agreements appeared to be perceived, particularly by Ojukwu, as the final attempt by leaders to overcome their sub-Nigerian divisions. On 1 April 1967, the day after the Ojukwu-imposed deadline to implement the Aburi Agreements had passed, Ojukwu issued an edict stating that all revenue from Eastern Nigeria, notably the valuable reserves of oil that were located in the Niger Delta region, would be paid to the East instead of the Federal Military Government. Ojukwu had not yet declared secession, but his decision to alter revenue allocation was an obvious and direct threat to the power of the Gowon regime, as well as the integrity of the Nigerian state.

Sub-Nigerian tensions culminated during the final week of May 1967. The breaking point for Ojukwu and the Eastern region occurred with Gowon’s proclamation on 27 May 1967, that the Federal Military Government would adopt Decree No. 12, creating 12 states in Nigeria – six in the North, three in the East, with the other regions and the Federal Territory of Lagos remaining unchanged. Notwithstanding Gowon’s claim that the Decree was to better protect the minority groups of Nigeria, Ojukwu and other Easterners derided the move as a strategy to divide the peoples of the Eastern region and undermine the attempted centralization of Ironsi’s Unification Decree a year earlier. On the same day as Gowon’s announcement, the Eastern Consultative Assembly adopted a resolution that, in effect, revealed the inevitable secession of the Eastern region.<sup>108</sup> Three days later, on 30 May 1967, Ojukwu officially announced the Republic of Biafra as “an independent and sovereign

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<sup>107</sup> “Unilateral Action”– A Personal Letter from Ojukwu to Gowon,” in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 1*, 359-362.

<sup>108</sup> “The Republic of Biafra’: Resolution by the Eastern Region Consultative Assembly,” in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 1*, 449-450.

state.”<sup>109</sup> Following years of failed attempts to develop Nigeria-wide unity and foster the construction of a Nigerian national identity, the troubled state’s structural integrity had officially been destroyed by one of its sub-Nigerian groups.

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<sup>109</sup> “Ojukwu Secedes and Declares the ‘Republic of Biafra,’” in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, Vol. I, 451-3.

## Chapter Two

### **The Biafran Government's Campaign for Support, Part I: The Importance of Modernization in Identifying the Biafran and the Enemy "Other"**

#### **Introduction**

The struggles of Nigerian elites to cooperate in constructing a Nigerian identity had unravelled with the secession of the Eastern region in May 1967. Throughout the secession, and in the years following the reincorporation of the secessionist territory of Biafra into the Nigerian state, outside observers attributed various reasons for the secession; in most cases, personal ambitions for power among the Ibo elite and the vast wealth of oil reserves in the Niger Delta of the Eastern region were noted as the primary causes. Though such conclusions certainly played a role in the secession of the Eastern region, the motivation for seceding identified a lack of confidence in a durable Nigerian identity, and a clear preference for an alternative sub-Nigerian affiliation.

This chapter, as well as Chapter Three, will focus on the perspective of the Biafran government which, from 30 May 1967 to the surrender of secessionist leaders on 12 January 1970, sought to legitimize Biafra's separate existence from Nigeria by detailing the inability of Nigeria's leaders to cooperatively formulate a Nigerian identity prior to the Eastern region's secession, and projecting a Biafran identity that was argued by Biafra's leaders to have bound the peoples of the secessionist territory in spite of the region's ethnic diversity. Thus, the following pages will, first, discuss the Biafran government's interpretation of failed constructivism in colonial and early independent Nigeria and, second, examine how Biafra's leaders applied constructivism to their own cause, by building a Biafran identity upon a perceived set of cultural similarities and shared historical experiences between the secessionist region's various groups.

The process of constructing and projecting a Biafran identity was an integral component of the Biafran government's aim to defeat Nigeria through gaining official recognition from state governments and accumulating sufficient support within the internationally-represented United Nations or Organization of African Unity. In 1968, Lt.-Col. Ojukwu, the recognized leader of Biafra, admitted the great importance of international support to the secessionist movement, as the Biafran leader declared: "In the question of independence and self-determination, viability is usually given a very, very low priority."<sup>1</sup> Rather than being concerned with the economic challenges or political stability of Biafra, Ojukwu and other secessionist leaders appeared far more preoccupied with the reactions of the international community.<sup>2</sup> Thus, diplomatic recognition was significantly more important to Biafra's leaders than the viability of the secessionist region as an independent state. Biafra's leaders believed that if the secessionist region received sufficient international support, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria would be pressured to withdraw from the war and recognize Biafra's permanent existence as a state. This belief was clearly evident only a few hours after the formal announcement of secession, as a broadcast within the Biafran territory announced that Ghana, Togo, Gambia, Ethiopia and Israel had recognized Biafra, and that more countries would soon follow – these claims were quickly denied by the countries named in the broadcast.<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted that Biafra's leaders became more vocal and organized in garnering international attention once the secession and war had attracted international attention during early to mid-1968 – around the period in which Nigerian troops had completely surrounded

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<sup>1</sup> "Entering the Third Year: Two External Views," *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 2*, ed. A.H.M. Kirk-Greene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 395.

<sup>2</sup> Viva Ona Bartkus, *The Dynamic of Secession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: the diplomatic history of the Biafran war, 1967-70* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972), 287.

the Biafran territory – when the peoples of Biafra began to suffer from widespread starvation, disease and death due to an acute lack of food, medicine and other basic necessities. As catastrophic as these developments would become throughout the secession, Biafra’s leaders took advantage of the increased international attention and intensified its campaign for support until the secessionist region finally surrendered in January 1970 and re-joined the Nigerian state.

### **The Organization and Aims of the Biafran Government’s Campaign for Support**

The Biafran campaign for support was organized and directed by the leaders of the Biafran government, who distributed a massive amount of publications within Biafra and internationally in the form of books, journals, speeches, newsletters, pamphlets and press releases. Beginning in February 1968, the Biafran propaganda campaign was also aided by the Markpress News Feature Service, a Geneva-based press firm that agreed to receive publications from the Biafran government and, in turn, distribute them internationally, including transcriptions of numerous addresses by Biafra’s leaders, notably Lt.-Col. Ojukwu, throughout the crisis. Thus, the Biafran leadership’s campaign for support was able to remain quite reliable in disseminating similar documents to Biafrans, Africans and non-Africans throughout the war.

Though Biafran publications were released in numerous languages in order to communicate effectively with a large number of differing groups of peoples, the Biafran government’s organization in leading the campaign for support allowed the central theme of the campaign to remain consistent in any language that the document was published. Therefore, the analysis presented henceforth is not significantly hindered by its focus on the

English-language documents released from Biafra.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the English-language documents released by the Biafran government, the rest of this study will include discussion of the English-language documents released apart from the Biafran government by supporters of Biafra, who served to reinforce the arguments of the Biafran government to their audiences.

The following pages will detail how the Biafran government aimed to campaign for support by presenting an interpretation of Nigeria's history that Biafra's leaders believed would help to legitimize the Eastern region's secession. The Biafran government's interpretation of Nigeria's history was centered on actual processes and events in colonial and independent Nigeria. In particular, Biafra's leaders focused on the Nigerian leaders' failure to construct a national identity that could unite the diverse groups of Nigeria. However, the Biafran interpretation of Nigeria's history was also incredibly biased, and frequently embellished or manipulated certain historical processes and events in order to serve the campaign's ultimate aim of legitimizing the secession.

This chapter will be concerned with how and why the construction of a national Biafran identity was so important to the war cause. The Biafran government constructed an interpretation of the history of Nigeria that presented two distinct and identifiable groups, the Biafran and the Northern Nigerian enemy "Other." Biafra's leaders argued that the Biafran people had not willingly seceded but had been pushed out of Nigeria by Northerners, who had continuously attacked the Biafran people in their determination to preserve Northern hegemony in the Nigerian colony and state. Indeed, when the Biafran government published *Introducing Biafra* in 1967, Biafrans were described as 14 million people who "collectively

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur Nwankwo, *Nigeria: the challenge of Biafra* (London: Rex Collings, 1972), 33. Nwankwo is a Nigerian intellectual who was a part of the Biafra Ministry of Information and, therefore, had an insider's view of the Biafran government and its campaign for support.

embarked on the task of building a nation free from fear, bitterness and hate.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the interpretation of Nigeria’s history used by the Biafran government aimed to absolve the Biafran people from any responsibility for the persisting instability of the Nigerian state, reasoning that the secession was merely to escape an oppressive enemy.

Prior to entering into a discussion on how Biafra’s leaders sought to construct contrasting Biafran and Northerner identities, a brief explanation of why the Biafran incorporated the entire population of the Eastern region, rather than the Ibo who predominated the territory, should be presented. Inter-ethnic unity among Easterners did develop prior to secession. Various processes and developments of the colonial era had allowed the peoples of the Eastern region, first, to become a part of the same semi-autonomous governing system and, second, to accumulate shared experiences due to a combination of colonial policies that similarly affected the development of the entire region and occurrences of inter-regional strife in colonial and independent Nigeria, such as the Kano Riots of 1953 and the “pogroms” of 1966.

At the time of secession, however, the Eastern region remained most identifiable by its dominant ethnic group, the Ibo, which had the ability to claim ethnic connections that reached into the pre-colonial era. Therefore, the Ibo shared a stronger potential bond than an Easterner – or Biafran – identity that could only reasonably draw upon shared experiences and accumulated cultural traits from the colonial and independent eras of Nigeria. Furthermore, the Ibo elite dominated the leadership of the Eastern region since the colonial era, from Nnamdi Azikiwe’s creation of the NCNC in 1944 to Lt.-Col. Ojukwu’s reign as the Military Governor of the Eastern Region and unofficial spokesman of Easterners during

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<sup>5</sup> Government of the Republic of Biafra, *Introducing Biafra, Vol. 1* (1967), 5, accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezera Eastern Nigerian Collection*, Box 1, Folder 6.

1966 and early 1967. When the secession was announced, the Biafran leadership, including its foremost leader, was also largely comprised of Ibo elite. In relation to the most unifying shared experiences in colonial and independent Nigeria, the attacks of 1953 and 1966, Northerners did not solely target the Ibo. However, the Ibo's large population and the migration of large numbers of Ibo to the Northern region from the overcrowded East had caused the Ibo to suffer the most from these attacks against Easterners. Thus, for many Ibo, Nigerians, and outside observers, the Ibo remained the most recognizable and unified group in the East.

Interestingly, upon secession, the Biafran government proclaimed the establishment of a state for the entire Eastern region, rather than the Ibo that made up the large majority of the secessionist territory's leadership and population.<sup>6</sup> The primary reason for the secession of the entire Eastern region was due to the initiative of elite leaders who, more than any other grouping of the Nigerian populace, had enabled the emergence of sub-Nigerian factions that were based on the regional boundaries of Nigeria. The political boundaries of Nigeria, in which the colony and state were divided into semi-autonomous regional governments, served to be the most fundamental division between Nigerians. Even following the establishment of military rule in January 1966, the regional structure had been maintained, as military officers took control of each of the regional governments. There certainly was an ethnic element in inter-regional issues in Nigeria – the Hausa, Yoruba, and Ibo were dominant figures in their respective region's government. On the other hand, even if a conflict between, for instance, Hausa and Ibo leaders was based on some ethnic sentiment, the fact that Hausa and Ibo

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<sup>6</sup> For further analysis on why secessions in African states have not taken on an ethnic form, see Joshua B. Forrest, *Subnationalism in Africa: ethnicity, alliances, and politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004).

leaders represented the North and East, respectively, allowed the inclusion of each region's non-Hausa and non-Ibo groups to become associated with the conflict as well.

An additional reason for the secession of the entire Eastern region was its comparative appeal to declaring a secession of the Ibo in Nigeria. Had Biafran leaders replaced the Biafran identity in favour of the Ibo, they might have emphasized the ethnic similarities of its people, providing a more direct path to affirm the solidarity of the secessionist population.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the Ibo had migrated throughout Nigeria since the colonial era and remained identifiable as Ibo because of the ethnic and ethno-regionalist movements that prevented the full integration of "foreign" peoples into their group, such as the Ibo in the North.<sup>8</sup> With a large number of Ibo still residing in Nigeria during the secession, basing the secessionist region's unity solely upon ethnic traits would have been significantly discredited by the continued well-being of Ibo in Nigeria.

It should be noted that the Biafran government's campaign for support was not without instances of pro-Ibo sentiment. In particular, Biafran publications included sub-Biafran sentiments during the early months of the war, when Biafran troops had enjoyed a series of victories and were on the offensive to expand into Nigerian territory. Following the successful invasion of the Mid-West region in August 1967, Ojukwu publicly declared the liberation of the Ibo in the Mid-West from Nigerian rule.<sup>9</sup> Following the Nigerian army's restoration of the Mid-West region as Nigerian territory just a few weeks later, references to the Ibo and any other sub-Biafran identity largely disappeared from Biafran publications.

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<sup>7</sup> Clara A.B. Joseph, "Nation because of Differences," *Research in African Literatures* 32, No. 3, Nationalism (Autumn 2001): 57-70. Joseph argues that Biafra's leaders were misguided in their attempts to present a Biafra nation that included the entire Eastern region and, therefore, required Biafra's leaders to remove or submerge the ethnic differences among its diverse peoples.

<sup>8</sup> Viva Ona Bartkus, *The Dynamic of Secession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>9</sup> A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, ed., "Ojukwu Broadcasts on his Seizure of Benin," in *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, Vol. 2, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 153-5.

Similar to constructing a Biafran identity, the Biafran government defined the enemy “Other” in a manner that they believed would most benefit the legitimacy of the secession. When labelling the enemy “Other,” Biafran publications deliberately identified the Northern leaders who held power in Nigeria, along with their Northerner supporters. Since the Yoruba and other southern groups shared similarities with the peoples of the Eastern region, incorporating the Yoruba and other identifiable groups into Biafra’s descriptions of the enemy would have complicated the aim of differentiating Biafrans and the “Other.” When non-Northern Nigerians were discussed in Biafran publications, they were usually dismissed as contributors to causing the secession because of their unwillingness to negotiate a compromise between the state’s sub-Nigerian rivals. For instance, early in the war, a publication released by the Biafran Ministry of Information argued that the Yoruba were inconsequential to the conflicts of colonial and independent Nigeria because they were a group “who waits for the apple to fall instead of daring to climb and pick it.”<sup>10</sup> A public address by Ojukwu reiterated this point, as the leader of Biafra argued the Yoruba were focused solely on developing their own region and only willing to venture into affairs outside their regional sphere to share in the gains of another group’s fortune.<sup>11</sup> In general, the Yoruba and other non-Northerner groups were deemed to be relatively unimportant to the outcome of the war because of their subservience to Northerner power and desire to be a part of the winning side; the majority of Biafran publications did not even bother to mention the Yoruba or any of Nigeria’s other non-Northern groups.

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<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Information, “The Yoruba Personality,” *Biafra Spotlight: a weekly review of progress and development in Biafra. Vol. 1, No. 34*, 3 August 1967 (Enugu: Biafra Information Service Corporation), accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezera Eastern Nigerian Collection*, Box 4.

<sup>11</sup> “January 27, 1968 Address by Ojukwu to a Joint Meeting of the Consultative Assembly and Council of Chiefs,” accessed at Peter Butenschon (ed.), *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict, 1967-70 [microform]* (Oslo: Yrkesralghemmedes Kontoservice Bedrift Oslo A/S, [19--?]), Reel 4 of 5.

In delineating a Biafran and a Northerner enemy “Other” throughout its campaign to legitimize the secession, the Biafran government pursued two primary and inter-connected aims. First, as this chapter will discuss, Biafra’s leaders aimed to prove that the beliefs and practices they used to distinguish the Biafran and Northern Nigerian groups were opposite and clearly divided. In particular, Biafra’s leaders sought to show how Biafrans, Northerners and the other groups of the region reacted to the spread of European ideas, beliefs and practices in differing ways and negotiated their pre-colonial loyalties in the new colonial boundary to varying degrees. Biafra’s leaders avoided labelling the Biafran people as an ethnic group, focusing instead on how Biafrans had become united by their collective willingness and ability to adopt European influences, as well as their shared experiences in being attacked by Northerners who did not desire to modernize Nigeria. The second aim of the Biafran government in defining the Biafran and Northerner groups, which will be discussed in Chapter Three, was to argue that the secessionist region’s peoples collectively subscribed to a unifying Biafran nationhood – the Eastern region’s secession was, according to the Biafran government, a nationalist movement, rather than an initiative of the leading elites or another opportunistic sub-Biafran group.

The rest of this chapter will analyze how the Biafran government based its characterizations of the Biafran and the Northerner enemy “Other” on their respective reactions to the modern concepts and practices introduced by European traders, missionaries and colonial officials. Biafran publications equated modernization with the ideas, beliefs and practices of the British colonizers, who had legitimized colonial rule, in part, by introducing their superiority to the indigenous population. Biafran publications often emphasized the desire of Biafrans to adopt Western traits, or pursue modernity in the colonial era, which included obtaining a Western-oriented education and widespread conversion to Christianity.

The Biafran government also aimed to promote the superiority of the Biafran to the Northern Nigerians who had resisted the pursuit of modernity and remained steadfast to their traditional ideas, beliefs and practices. The following pages will also include a discussion of the Biafran government's depiction of the pre-colonial characteristics that Biafrans shared, which allegedly enabled them to become willing and able to pursue modernity in the first place. Similarly, this chapter will detail the Biafran government's discussion of the pre-colonial characteristics shared by Northerners which had supposedly precluded them from attaining modernity.

The analysis herein will also include the Biafran government's differentiation between the civility of Biafrans and the barbarity of Northerners, which arose out of each group's differing responses to modernity. Biafra's leaders interpreted civility by attributing several characteristics to the term that were typically used to describe Western, or modern societies. In contrast, Northerners were deemed barbaric because they were largely Muslim, lacking in Western education and generally unwilling to adopt the characteristics that Biafran publications associated with modernity. This chapter will detail how Biafran publications showed that the pursuit of Biafrans to modernize all of Nigeria increasingly threatened Northerners, who reacted by deliberately attacking Biafrans on several occasions in colonial and independent Nigeria – the 1953 riots and 1966 “pogroms” were most often mentioned – which eventually caused Biafrans to believe they could no longer survive as a modernized people in the same state as primitive Northerners. Thus, the Biafran government aimed to demonstrate that they had not actively pursued secession, but were pushed out of the Nigerian state by Northern leaders and their Northerner supporters. To further their claims of Northern barbarism, the Biafran government also claimed Northerners were committing genocide against Biafrans during the war, referring to the mass suffering of starving,

diseased and dying citizens in the Biafran territory, as well as events in which Nigerian troops deliberately attacked common Biafran citizens. Overall, the Biafran government's interpretation of the Eastern region's secession was, in large part, a modernized people's struggle to escape a state in which they were controlled by, and attacked by Northern leaders and their Northern supporters.

### **The Pursuit of Modernity vs. Backwardness and Resistance to Change**

Biafra's leaders did not reserve arguments related to modernity in their attempts to gain support from the United States, Great Britain and other leading Western powers and international organizations. A large number of publications directed at Biafrans, Nigerians and other audiences throughout Africa also utilized the concept of modernization as a means to garner support for the secessionist region. The Biafran government's aim to appeal to Western and non-Western audiences using the same vision of modernity served to reveal the extent to which Biafra's leaders believed Western influences had become accepted, and even embraced by many educated, English-speaking Africans throughout the continent and the rest of the world. For many Western audiences and Western-influenced groups in Africa, the attainment of modernity was perceived to be a key to overcoming a traditional state of being, which could stretch into a past that was not defined in terms of time but by its relation to the modernity.<sup>12</sup> As Thomas Spear notes, "traditions endure for long periods of time, but only because cognitive categories are in dialogical tension with social reality, continually readjusting while simultaneously projecting an image of timeless continuity."<sup>13</sup> However, Biafra's leaders would not argue that the attainment of modernity necessitated the complete rejection of one's traditional identity. As Chapter Three will discuss, the Biafran government

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<sup>12</sup> Leroy Vail, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Spear presents one of the most interesting takes on tradition in "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa," *Journal of African History* 44, No. 1 (2003), 5-6.

would actively promote the ability of Biafrans to effectively pursue modernization and negotiate the continuation of many of their traditional attributes and pre-existing ties.

Nevertheless, Biafra's leaders argued that modernization was vital to an African state's ability to establish itself in a Western-dominant era. Biafran publications drew on the history of colonial and independent Nigeria in defining the distinct characteristics that the identities of the Biafran and the Northerner enemy "Other" accumulated in their experiences with Western concepts and processes that accompanied British colonial rule. The historical recollections of the colonial era in Biafran publications were not comprehensive or objective, nor were they intended to be. Rather, the perspective among supporters of Biafra commonly took accurate versions of Nigeria's history and manipulated them to fit their present needs in order to gain international support. When recalling colonial Nigeria, Biafran publications most commonly discussed two major points of comparison in relation to the Biafran interpretation of modernity: the differing responses of Biafrans and Northerners to Western-oriented education, and their contrasting religious beliefs.

According to Biafra's leaders, Western-oriented education was a vital method of transferring modern ideas and practices to indigenous peoples. Biafran publications often differentiated between the Biafran and the Northerner during the colonial era by contrasting their respective experiences and familiarity with Western education. Due to indirect rule and the separate administration of Nigeria's regions, Northern Nigerians were allowed to implement a policy that matched what Biafra's leaders suggested was their preference to resist adopting the modern skills and knowledge associated with Western-oriented education. In *Biafra: the making of a nation*, Ifejika and Nwankwo argued that even in 1957 there was

still only one Western-style secondary school in Northern Nigeria.<sup>14</sup> Although this statistic was unfounded and exaggerated solely to emphasize the prevalence of traditionalism of Northerners, a more objective war-time publication by a group of former British civil servants and missionaries in Nigeria affirmed the lack of Western-style education in Northern Nigeria, stating that, as late as 1960, the North had only 41 secondary schools, while the East and West together had well over 800.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Easterners did pursue formal Western-style education on a much larger scale than Northerners and migrated throughout Nigeria more than the native residents of the other regions. These facts were, however, taken solely to be indicators of the Easterner's desire to modernize Nigeria, ignoring the likely possibility that higher population densities in the Eastern region had led to a level of competition for employment opportunities that eclipsed the other regions.<sup>16</sup>

Biafrans asserted that their education and knowledge of modern concepts had enabled them to branch out to the rest of Nigeria during the colonial era and replace the British colonizers as the leaders of Nigeria's collective push towards modernity. In an address to fellow Biafran leaders, Ojukwu emphasized the efforts of Biafrans to influence other Nigerians, outlining how "our people moved from this area to all parts of the old Federation, and particularly to Northern Nigeria."<sup>17</sup> In the same address, Ojukwu also described Eastern

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Ifejika and Arthur Nwankwo, *Biafra: the making of a nation* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), 28.

<sup>15</sup> "Statement by ~40 British former civil servants or missionaries in Eastern Nigeria," *The Nigerian Civil War: the background and the economic and political consequences* (October-December 1968), accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 3 of 5. This is an account of the war that seeks to be objective, and presents itself as more attuned to the war because of its authors' collective experience in Nigeria. The publication provides a detailed presentation of Nigeria's colonial history.

<sup>16</sup> C.P. Nwolisa Okanga Eloka, *Migration is Rewarding: a sociocultural anthropological study of global economic migration* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003). In particular, see "Chapter 2: Colonial and Post-Colonial Migrations: Impacts on Igbo Migration."

<sup>17</sup> Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, "Address to Port Harcourt Leaders of Thought," in *Biafra: selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 3-4. This publication is a semi-autobiography of Lt.-Col. Ojukwu. The first section is a compilation of many of the secessionist leader's public addresses from 1966 to the months prior to the book's release. The second section

Nigerians in a way that could be confused with the manner in which Europeans described their colonization of Africa: “Where there was backwardness we brought progress. And where there was ignorance we brought them education.”<sup>18</sup> Ojukwu presented education to both Biafrans and international observers as an important tool for teaching indigenous Nigerians skills and concepts that could be applied to the political, economic, and social characteristics of a modernized environment. Many Biafran publications also used arguments from Western intellectuals and leaders to prove the ability of Biafrans to learn and understand modern ideas. *Biafra: the making of a nation*, for example, used a Thomas Jefferson quote in stating that representative democracy requires an “aristocracy of virtue and talent,” traits that the Northern leaders of Nigeria’s First Republic were accused of lacking.<sup>19</sup> Another publication commented that instead of the “military dictatorship” found in Nigeria, “the state structure of the Republic demonstrates the democratic and popular will of the people and the belief of the Governor and Head of the State in the fundamentals of democratic rule.”<sup>20</sup>

Throughout its campaign for support, the Biafran government asserted that the Northerners’ refusal to become educated and develop modern skills was detrimental to the development of Nigeria, and the colony’s progress from the traditional past into the modern era. For Biafra’s leaders, this huge gap in education and development also contributed to the Northerners’ feeling that they were different from the southerners. One Biafran publication highlighted this sentiment especially well, explaining that Northerners impeded the

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of this publication contains “random thoughts” of Ojukwu, which reflect many of the themes in the Biafran campaign for support.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ifejika and Nwankwo, *Biafra: the making of a nation*, 124.

<sup>20</sup> *Ojukwu’s Government is the People’s Government* (Enugu: Ministry of Information, [1968?]), accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezera Eastern Nigerian Collection*, Box 1, Folder 6.

southerners' push to modernize all of Nigeria, including the Northern region, because "Northerners have always tended to explain their backwardness and poverty in terms of the presence of Easterners in the North."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Biafra's leaders argued modernized non-Northerners were perceived as legitimate threats to the traditional way of life that Northerners had been able to preserve into the colonial era.

Religion was the second prominent contrast that the Biafran government commonly used to distinguish between the modernity of Biafrans and Northerners. Though, in reality, the peoples that the Biafran government associated with the Biafran and Northerner identities were far from homogeneous in their religious affiliations, the Biafran government frequently described the Biafran as Christian and the Northerner as Muslim. Certainly, the majority of Easterners had converted to Christianity, and the vast proportion of Northerners had adopted Islam. However, within both purported identities there existed peoples who subscribed to differing spiritual traditions from the religion identified in Biafran publications. Most Biafrans who were not Christian had remained devout to their indigenous spiritual beliefs, which ran contradictory to the Biafran government's aim to promote the Biafran as a Westernized or modernized people. Unsurprisingly, Biafran publications were void of discussion on the religious disparities within Biafra's population. Furthermore, a large number of Northerners were Christian, particularly among the peoples of the Middle Belt region in the North. Included among these Christians was the Head of State of the Federal Military Government, General Yakuba Gowon.<sup>22</sup> Even with such obvious inconsistencies between the "facts" in Biafran publications and the actual historical processes and

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<sup>21</sup> *Nigerian Pogrom: The Organized Massacre of Eastern Nigerians* (Aba: Printed by the International Press), 21, accessed at Clearing House for Nigeria/Biafra Information, *Nigeria/Biafra Information Collection [microform]* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Photoduplication Department, 1973), Reel 5 of 7.

<sup>22</sup> Federal Ministry of Information, *Soldier of Honor* (Lagos: Director, Printing Division), 1, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 3 of 5. This biography of General Gowon states on the first page that Gowon is "a devout Christian."

developments that allowed Biafrans and Northerners to accumulate some overlapping similarities, the Biafran government attempted to maintain a rigid boundary that divided the identities of the two opposing sides of the war.

In comparing Islam and Christianity, Biafra's leaders argued Islam to be a primitive faith and Christianity to be the religion of a modernized people. Biafra's leaders argued Muslim Northerners were not modernized because they did not desire to learn the Christian beliefs and Western concepts that were taught in schools run by Christian missionaries and Western-influenced teachers during British rule. Northerners did prefer Islamic schools, but Biafra's leaders claimed that Northerners favoured such schools because "an attitude of subservience" was taught to children.<sup>23</sup> In an address to the people of Orlu Province on 30 December 1967, Ojukwu alluded to the alleged backwardness of Muslim Northerners, claiming that "Northern Nigeria had a different idea about fellowship; theirs, according to their religion, was that of slave and master – no more."<sup>24</sup>

Biafra's leaders, in contrast, equated Christianity with modernity and frequently noted the Biafran population's widespread conversion to Christianity. Regardless of the target audience, many publications from the Biafran government were concluded many publications and speeches with the statement "God is with us."<sup>25</sup> Several Biafran publications also argued that Biafrans had resisted alleged attempts by Muslim Northerners to conquer the southern regions in the pre-colonial, colonial and independent eras – one publication claimed that Biafra's ancestors "remained immune from the Islamic contagion"

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<sup>23</sup> Ifejika and Nwankwo, *Biafra: the making of a nation*, 97.

<sup>24</sup> "Address to the people of Orlu Prince, Orlu, December 30, 1967," in *Biafra: selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu*, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Examples include: "Biafra – a "friendly" country at war (Feature)," Markpress News Feature Service, *Press Actions: abridged edition covering period February 2<sup>nd</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1968* (Geneva: Biafran Overseas Press Division, 21 March 1968), "The Head of State's broadcast of March 31<sup>st</sup>," Markpress News Feature Service (1 April 1968), and in the introduction of "The Ahiara Declaration: principles of the Biafran Revolution," accessed Spring 2010, [http://www.biafraland.com/Ahiara\\_declaration\\_1969.htm](http://www.biafraland.com/Ahiara_declaration_1969.htm).

and prevented the Muslim conquests from spreading throughout the southern regions.<sup>26</sup> By detailing their resistance to the influence of the ‘expansionist’ Muslim Northerners, Biafra’s leaders also revealed a belief in the superiority of European imperialists when they arrived in the region. Biafra’s leaders viewed the British Empire’s colonization of Nigeria as progress, evidenced by their embrace of Western-oriented education, instead of an unwelcome invasion, which was reserved to describe any attempted Muslim conquests.

Overall, the Biafran government’s comparison between the desire of Biafrans to progress and the Northern Nigerian’s backwardness was applied primarily to show that the struggles of Nigerian leaders to cooperate resulted from the differing reactions to modernity among the Northerners and non-Northerners, including the Biafrans. In an address to other Biafran leaders and chiefs, Ojukwu summarized the dedication of Eastern Nigerians to Nigeria’s modern development before the secession: “In all spheres of life in the now defunct Federation of Nigeria – economic, social, cultural, political and constitutional – Biafrans (then Eastern Nigerians) were in the forefront of the struggle for unity and equality, justice and progress.”<sup>27</sup> Northerners, on the other hand, were depicted in Biafran publications as generally resistant to modernization. The Biafran government also argued that when Northerners did make a concerted effort to adapt to the modernized environment, it was only for the benefit of the Northerners and their ability to control power in all of Nigeria, which would be done at the expense of any non-Northerners.

In characterizing the attempts of Biafrans to modernize, notably via Western-oriented education and conversion to Christianity, Biafra’s leaders portrayed modernizing as liberation from their pre-existing ideas, beliefs and practices. Thus, modernization included

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<sup>26</sup> Quote extracted from the “Arab-Muslim Expansionism” section in “The Ahiara Declaration.”

<sup>27</sup> “Address by Ojukwu to a Joint Meeting of the Consultative Assembly and Council of Chiefs, January 27, 1968” in *Biafra: selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu*.

the notion of change – the adoption of new ideas and practices at the expense of pre-existing perceptions with which they conflicted. Biafra’s leaders, as did many indigenous leaders, also associated the pursuit of modernity with progress, civilization and development, and often used these terms interchangeably.<sup>28</sup> Northerners were depicted in Biafran publications as resistant to change and, therefore, unwilling to gain the Western or modern beliefs and practices that would allow them to achieve progress, civilization and development. Many Biafran publications interpreted the resistance of Northerners to modernizing as being traditionalist, applying the Western concept of tradition in the colonial context, ascribing to the term a connotation of barbarism and backwardness.<sup>29</sup>

A major component of the Biafran government’s aim to differentiate modernizing Biafrans from traditional Nigerians was the perception that Northerners, unlike Biafrans, were not civilized. Northern Nigerian leaders before and during the secession were frequently identified as corrupt and nepotistic, and, in one publication, as “fledglings, ex-convicts, former motor park touts, dissolute drunkards, and thieves.”<sup>30</sup> In reference to democratic governance, another important component often associated with modernity, Biafra’s leaders asserted that its people recognized the importance of the principle of “one man, one vote,” and promoted the Biafran group’s conviction that a modern government “must build a progressive state that ensures the reign of social and economic justice, and of the rule of law.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, when discussing the failure of Nigerian leaders to develop a modern and progressive state, Biafra’s leaders reasoned that “the majority group in power happens to

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<sup>28</sup> Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 47-8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Ministry of Information, *Support for Nigeria Challenges the Basis of Responsible Government* (Enugu), accessed at Butenshon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 5 of 5.

<sup>31</sup> “An address to the nation by Ojukwu on Thanksgiving Day, June 1, 1969,” Markpress News Feature Service, *Press Actions: abridged edition covering period January 1<sup>st</sup> to June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1969* (Geneva: Biafran Overseas Press Division, 1 June 1969).

come from the least informed and most backward group in the society.”<sup>32</sup> Another publication noted that the Northerners who held power were a people who “hate round-table arguments” and “prefer the bullets to the ballot boxes.”<sup>33</sup> In general, Biafra’s leaders argued Eastern leaders had long been able to effectively modernize, but were prevented from achieving their aims as long as they remained in a Northerner-led Nigerian state, implying that Biafra would inevitably develop into a successful modern state.

Among Nigeria’s leaders, the Head of State, General Gowon, was particularly targeted by the Biafran government as a leader who was unfit to lead a modern state. One issue of the *Biafra Newsletter* singled out the supposed atrocities committed by the Gowon-led Federal Military Government, stating that “no longer will Biafrans tolerate the rape, murder, arson, looting, molestation and persecution which they were forced to endure under the Gowon regime.”<sup>34</sup> One front-page article of the *Biafra Sun*, published under the authority of the Biafran government, was even titled: “Colonial Gowon is Sick! Suspected Mental Disorder!” This article accused General Gowon of suffering from a mental disorder that explained many oddities in his behaviour, concluding that Nigeria’s Head of State “found the position which he usurped too heavy for his lean shoulders.”<sup>35</sup> Such accusations were, to be sure, far-fetched and publicized mainly to attract international attention, anchoring their descriptions of Northern leaders in the backdrop of Nigeria’s history of political instability and corruption. Accusations against Gowon were also not immune to ignoring facts or reliable sources.

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<sup>32</sup> Ministry of Information, *39 Accusations against Nigeria* (Enugu: 1968), 1, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 5 of 5.

<sup>33</sup> Uba, “Why Federalism Won’t Work,” *The Scotsman* (13 October 1967), 13-4, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 4 of 5.

<sup>34</sup> “Ensuring Justice for Every Biafran,” *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 5, 29 December 1967, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 2 of 5.

<sup>35</sup> “Colonel Gowon is Sick! Suspected Mental Disorder!” *Biafra Sun*, Vol. XIV, No. 2165, 2 July 1967, accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezera Eastern Nigerian Collection*, Box 6, Folder 5.

However, applying a “face” to the Nigerian enemy was an important reason for the attacks against Gowon, who was cast in the Biafran campaign as a personification of many of the negative traits embodied by Northern Nigeria.

### **Accusations of Genocide against Northern Nigerians**

Biafran publications attempted to punctuate this comparison with accusations that the barbaric Northerners were committing genocide against Biafrans during the war, and had been attempting to “exterminate” the Biafran people since long before the Eastern region’s secession.<sup>36</sup> For Biafra’s leaders, the Biafran people’s desire to develop a modernized state had become impossible as long as Eastern Nigeria remained a part of a Nigerian state in which Northerners dominated power and retaliated with brutal, violent force whenever their power was threatened: “We Biafrans feel we have a right to a separate existence. The first law of nature is self-preservation.”<sup>37</sup>

An interesting relation to the subject of genocide is the necessity of having two identifiable groups in the discussion, with one group deliberately seeking the destruction of the other. Publications from the Biafran Government were greatly aware of the need to incorporate all of the secessionist region’s peoples into the debate on genocide. In order to present the solidarity of the secessionist region’s peoples to audiences inside and outside Biafra, the Biafran government focused on the plight of Biafrans before and during the war. When recounting the killings of Easterners in mid-1966, for example, numerous Biafran

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<sup>36</sup> Accusations of genocide can be found in numerous Biafran documents. Notable examples include: Ministry of Information, *Genocide Breaks Up Nations* (Enugu: 19 November 1968), accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 5 of 5, “The Ahiara Declaration: principles of the Biafran Revolution,” and a number of international press releases in Markpress News Feature Service, such as “Call to Halt Genocide,” Markpress News Feature Service, *Press Actions: abridged edition covering period July 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1969* (Geneva: Biafran Overseas Press Division, 5 July 1969).

<sup>37</sup> “Why We Are Fighting,” *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 27 October 1967, accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezera Eastern Nigerian Collection*, Box 1, Folder 6.

publications insisted that the “pogroms” were pre-meditated and indiscriminate because the Ibo, Ibibio, Efik, Ijaw and other groups from the Eastern region were all victims. Northerners were acting upon their “sadistic nature” and revelling in their “deep hatred” for the Easterners with whom they often interacted on a daily basis in Nigeria.<sup>38</sup>

In referencing past instances of attacks against the Biafran people, some Biafran publications went as far back as 1945, when Northerners were accused of massacring Eastern Nigerians in Jos, a city located in the Middle Belt region of the North, where Northern leaders were already struggling to protect its sphere of regional power and influence among minority groups that were opposed to accepting the rule of the Hausa-Fulani.<sup>39</sup> In many other publications, Biafra’s leaders aimed to include references to the Kano Riots of 1953, which similarly contained Northerner attacks against peoples from the Eastern region.

The 1945 massacres, as well as the Kano Riots of 1953, were, however, usually only used in Biafran publications to supplement the most common example of Biafran civility and Northern primitiveness in Nigeria: the “pogroms” of 1966. Biafra’s leaders often connected the Jos attacks of 1945 and the Kano Riots of 1953 to the “pogroms” of mid-1966, detailing how the “nature and depth of hatred of Easterners which had been built up in the North long before independence” had inevitably resulted in the widespread killings of Easterners in Northern Nigeria during 1966.<sup>40</sup> In an August 1968 address, Ojukwu commented on the misguided dedication of Eastern Nigerians to remain in Nigeria and support the modern development of the region even after the attacks of 1945 and 1953:

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<sup>38</sup> Ifejika and Nwankwo, *Biafra: the making of a nation*, 159-160.

<sup>39</sup> Government of the Republic of Biafra, *Introducing Biafra*, Vol. 1, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Ministry of Information, *January 15, Before and After: Nigerian Crisis 1966*, Vol. 7 (Enugu: Government Printer, 1967), 31, accessed at Clearing House for Nigeria/Biafra Information, *Nigeria/Biafra Information Collection [microform]*, Reel 5 of 7. A similar quote can be found in Government of the Republic of Biafra, *Introducing Biafra*, Vol. 1, 6.

Yet, such was our faith and, in retrospect, our folly, that our people ignored these early warnings and continued to preach and fight for a united Nigeria. In our folly we ignored the fundamental differences in religion, the differences in our social organization, the differences in political outlook.<sup>41</sup>

Biafra's leaders, in general, were quick to discuss the civilized behaviour of the Eastern Nigerians, specifically noting the lack of Eastern retaliation following Northern attacks, as well as the Easterners' continued determination to develop a modernized Nigeria. Ojukwu asserted, on the other hand, that the Easterners' determination to modernize Nigeria also contributed to the continuing instances of Northern barbarism.

In a petition to the United Nations against Nigeria's purported violations of human rights and acts of genocide, Biafra's leaders detailed several eyewitness accounts from the 1966 "pogroms," though it is unclear whether these accounts were authentic or fabricated. Nonetheless, such accounts reiterated the barbarism of Nigerians as well as the civility and Westernization of Biafrans, including the following recollection of an Easterner who had lived in the Northern region:

At 9:30a.m. on Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1966 when we were in the church we saw a group of people coming towards the church compound, they carried big sticks; some of them had knives while others had bows and arrows, spears and stones. The bishop came out from the church and asked them what was the matter; they started to stone the bishop. As they were stoning they broke all the glass windows on the building damaged the pulpit and the cross. I ran out of the church and fled home.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "Address by His Excellency Lt.-Col. C. Odumegwu Ojukwu to the OAU Consultative Committee Meeting at Addis Ababa on Monday 5 August 1968," Markpress News Feature Service (5 August 1968).

<sup>42</sup> This is an eyewitness account from Mr. E.N. Ozoh of Abacha in Onitsha Province who lived at Sokoto, found in *Petition against Contraventions by the Government of Nigeria of the Human Rights Declaration and*

This account contrasted the Northerners' disregard for the religious beliefs of Eastern Nigerians and their use of intimate, close-range weapons with the Eastern Nigerians' religious devotion and superior comprehension of reason. The detailed description of weapons that could easily be associated with barbaric combat was also utilized in other Biafran publications that discussed the primitive actions of Northerners. For instance, in a Biafran magazine, Chinna Uyanna recalled how Northerners "rampaged through the streets with stones, cutlasses, machetes and home made weapons of metals and broken bottles."<sup>43</sup>

Many publications distributed by the Markpress News Feature Service, which were primarily sent to Western audiences, were also careful to detail the modernization of the secessionist region. For instance, one press release describing a Nigerian attack on Biafran civilians provided a description of the modernized environment in which the civilians lived: "At 13:15 local time, the planes swooped on the town, rocketing, and strafing civilian concentrations, office blocks, busy highways, and residential buildings."<sup>44</sup> These descriptions depicted the Biafran city of Owerri in a similar fashion that one may envision a typical Western city. When press releases went on to detail Nigeria's destruction of these cities, the purpose was to elicit Western discontent and anger towards Nigeria's deliberate destruction of these urban centers.

In describing Northerner acts of genocide during the war, the Biafran government distributed dozens of press releases that described the alleged brutal and unnecessary violence of Nigerian troops, with a particular focus on Northern soldiers, as well as their lack

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*Convention on Genocide*, Sent to the Chariman, Third Committee of the U.N. on Human Rights, U.N., New York, Sent from the signatories of the petition (people of Biafra), accessed at David Robison, *Documents Related to the Biafran War, 1968-69 [microform]* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Photoduplication Department, 1972). The eyewitness accounts of the 1966 killings can be found in the document's Appendix.

<sup>43</sup> Chinna Uyanna, "Why we Revolted," *Sunrise: Monthly Magazine, Vol. 1, No. 1* (Port Harcourt: West African Press Service), December 1967, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 5 of 5.

<sup>44</sup> "Nigerians Again Raid Owerri," Markpress News Feature Service (7 July 1969).

of regard for distinguishing between Biafran troops and civilians.<sup>45</sup> One *Biafra Newsletter* article featured an especially shocking description of the barbarity of Nigeria's troops:

Usually the pattern is the same. First, they line up all males above the age of eight and shoot them. Then the women and children are roughly whipped... the younger girls are carried to the North to become concubines to their 'religious' natural rulers.<sup>46</sup>

Similar to many Biafran publications, the importance of such detail was not found in its accuracy but, rather, in the way Biafra's leaders attempted to self-define the Biafran by first identifying an enemy "Other" that threatened the survival of Biafran people.

Biafra's leaders also remained consistent in attributing the genocide as a primitive group's attempt to resist change in a modernizing environment. One publication depicted Northern troops as "undisciplined, cowardly opportunists and thieves who specialize in mass murder, plunder and genocide," and "a threat to human development and progress."<sup>47</sup> A particularly revealing quote from an article in the 31 May 1968 issue of *Biafra Newsletter* summarized the Biafran government's accusations against Nigeria during the war:

When on July 6, 1967 Gowon's vandals invaded our borders, it was not only their intention to exterminate us physically but also to destroy all the progressive elements which we embody – our industry, our individualism, our egalitarianism and our republicanism.<sup>48</sup>

Another publication reinforced the Biafran government's attempts to depict a modernized and Westernized Biafra in commenting that "most of the early bombing was in the vicinity of

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<sup>45</sup> Examples from Markpress News Feature Service include: "Nigerian Bomb Raid kills 300 Biafrans: 500 injured," (7 February 1969); Bombing of Biafran civilians increases: 4 attacks in 2 days," (26 March 1969); and, "Over 1200 Biafran civilians have been killed or injured in 2 months of indiscriminate Nigerian bombings," (2 May 1969).

<sup>46</sup> Quote taken from "Barbarism vs. Civilization," *Biafra Newsletter*, 31 May 1968, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 2 of 5.

<sup>47</sup> Ministry of Information, *Support for Nigeria Challenges the Basis of Responsible Government*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> "Barbarism vs. Civilization," *Biafra Newsletter*, 31 May 1968.

churches” and other bombings were directed at “built-up residential areas.”<sup>49</sup> Biafra’s leaders were clearly determined to argue that the alleged genocide was the Northerners’ primitive reaction to another African group’s modernization.

In describing the Biafran people’s fear that they were victims of genocide, several Biafran publications used Western history as a point of reference. Biafra’s leaders, in some cases, characterized Nigerian troops in a manner that befitted the actions of a people that had not progressed from the primitiveness of periods that reached numerous centuries into the past. When accusing Northern troops of plundering and pillaging cities and villages in the secessionist region, one newsletter classified Northern soldiers as from “the Year of the Dark Ages.”<sup>50</sup> Multiple publications also argued that forcing Biafrans back into Nigeria “would be like forcing the Jews who had fled to Israel back to Nazi Germany.”<sup>51</sup> Though the holocaust was not necessarily well-known to all audiences at the time, a reference to such an infamous part of Western history was a clear strategy to appeal to an international audience. By this logic, just as Jews had gained international support for the foundation of the State of Israel, so too should the Biafran secession receive such support. If Biafra’s plight resembled that of the Jews, Biafran leaders reasoned, why should they not also be allowed to escape such persecution? Though this address was at the Kampala Peace Talks and directed towards other African leaders, the transcript was also distributed internationally by the Markpress News Feature Service, providing further evidence that attacking the lack of civility of Northerners was a strategy in publications that were released to Western and non-Western audiences.

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<sup>49</sup> “Genocide is their Aim: Bombing Civilians,” *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 5, 29 December 1967, accessed at Butenshon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 2 of 5.

<sup>50</sup> “Vandalism of the Northern Nigeria Army,” *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 27 October 1967, accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezera Eastern Nigerian Collection*, Box 1, Folder 6.

<sup>51</sup> “Opening address at the Kampala Peace Talks by the Biafran Delegation,” Markpress News Feature Service (23 May 1968).

When peace talks broke down between Biafran and Nigerian delegates at Kampala in May 1968, both sides refused to stray from their original proposals for establishing a resolution to the conflict – Nigeria wanted Biafra to renounce its secession before beginning peace talks, and Biafra wanted Nigeria to recognize Biafra’s secession before they sought an end to the war.<sup>52</sup> However, Biafra’s leaders re-interpreted the failed peace talks to argue that Nigerians did not want a political solution but, rather, a military solution to the conflict.<sup>53</sup> This comparison was also important in arguing that the Federal Military Government of Nigeria was not determined to win a war with Biafra to restore Nigeria’s territorial integrity, but was driven to use any means necessary, including the complete extermination of Biafrans: “Our experience of this war has confirmed our previous fears that the Nigerians are not fighting to capture territory or to defeat an army but to find their opportunity to complete the pogroms of earlier years.”<sup>54</sup> Biafran publications sought to convince the international community that the secession was a modernized people’s determination to survive and freely exercise their modern practices and beliefs apart from Northern Nigerians, who were argued to be determined to protect Northern power and preserve the Northerners’ traditional practices and beliefs in Nigeria at any cost.

At the same time, the Biafran government also attempted to gain international attention by implicating many world leaders in the genocide, either because they supplied arms and other forms of direct support to Nigeria or because they simply did not act to stop the suffering of civilians in Biafra. Several international press releases, such as “Foreign contracting interests aid Nigerian war effort” and “One Nigeria Maintained by British

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<sup>52</sup> For information on the Kampala Peace Talks, see Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 2*, 220-233.

<sup>53</sup> “Kampala Peace Talks breakdown,” Markpress News Feature Service (31 May 1968).

<sup>54</sup> “International Press Conference, Umuahia, January 28, 1968,” in *Biafra: selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu*, 34-5.

Arms,” focused solely on foreign arms supplies to Nigeria, providing statistics and descriptions that highlighted the foreign impact on the war.<sup>55</sup> Biafra’s leaders reasoned that if the international powers wanted to contribute to the outcome of the war, they should immediately cease supplying Nigeria with arms. Biafra’s supporters also presented Western audiences with a choice between preserving Nigeria’s territorial integrity or saving the Biafran people by pressuring Nigeria to surrender and withdraw from the war.

For the Biafran government, promoting a Biafran identity as a part of the genocide debates was a tough task, as international observers were more familiar with an interpretation of Nigeria’s history that typically viewed Nigeria’s ethnic groups in terms of tribes divided upon long-standing rivalries. An Ibo-Hausa division was easier for many in the West to understand because it satisfied the common notion that Nigeria’s internal problems were a product of ongoing traditional ethnic divides in Nigeria. For example, the International Observer Team, which was sent by the United Nations to the secessionist region in late 1968 to investigate Biafra’s accusations of genocide, concluded in its first report that “there is no evidence of any intent by the Federal troops to destroy the Ibo people,” undermining the Biafran government’s attempts to present the genocide as committed against all Biafrans, rather than a section of its population.<sup>56</sup> Even if the report had concluded that genocide was occurring, the international reaction might have been to merely stop Hausa Nigerians from decimating the Ibo population and stop short of supporting a separate state of Biafra, which would have detached other ethnic groups from Nigeria that had not been targeted in the purported genocide. Thus, the Biafran government did not entirely base their campaign for support on accusations of genocide, as secessionist leaders also reasoned that all of Biafra’s

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<sup>55</sup> “Foreign contracting interests aid Nigerian war effort,” and “One Nigeria Maintained by British Arms,” Markpress News Feature Service (21 November 1969).

<sup>56</sup> “First Report by International Observer Team,” in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, Vol. 2, 331.

peoples would contribute to the stability and strength of a modernized Biafra. In turn, Biafra's leaders hoped to convince the international community that Biafra could become a positive contributor to the economic growth and political well-being of Africa, as well as the global affairs that connected state governments throughout the world.

### **Conclusion**

In publications directed towards the leaders and intellectuals of both African and non-African regions, as well as the Biafran public, the Biafran government was quite consistent in embedding the comparison between the modernized people of Biafra and the barbaric Northerners who resisted the concepts and practices associated with the Western concept of modernity. Throughout the secession, Biafra's leaders vigorously attempted to present a Biafran identity that was characterized by modern traits, aiming to argue in favour of both the superiority of Biafrans and the inability of the Biafran people to remain in a state that was controlled by backwards Northerners who violently attacked any attempts to modernize colonial and independent Nigeria because of their fear of losing power.

However, the Westernization of Biafrans was not the sole source of emphasis in appealing for support from the Organization of African Unity, the people of Biafra and other African audiences. While describing the virtues of pursuing modernity, Chapter Three will argue that the Biafran government did not endorse complete Westernization, or present the attainment of modernity as the final realization of progress. The final chapter will analyze how Biafran publications focused on the importance of developing nationhood in a modernized state and submerging ethnic-based, traditional ties that could divide a state's population, a process that Nigeria had not completed because, as Biafra's leaders argued, Northerners would not support Nigerian nation-building. At the same time, Biafra's leaders did not link the pursuit of modernity with the complete abandonment of traditional

connections. Thus, Chapter Three will also argue that, in many publications and addresses to African audiences, Biafra's leaders asserted the importance of an indigenous group to remain connected to their pre-colonial or traditional roots, and promoted the desire and ability of the Biafran people to successfully develop a Biafran nationhood that had modernized without losing their pre-colonial African-based identity.

## Chapter Three

### **The Biafran Government's Campaign for Support, Part II: Biafran Nationhood, Northern Nigerian Tribalism and the "Biafran Revolution"**

#### **Introduction**

The Biafran government identified and distinguished the Biafran and the Northerner enemy "Other" by, primarily, examining each group's respective willingness to pursue and adopt the Western ideas, practices and beliefs associated with modernization. This chapter will detail the value that the Biafran government attributed to Biafran nationhood as a significant part of its attempts to promote the Biafran identity throughout the crisis. The primary assertion associated with the Biafran government's presentation of Biafran nationhood was that the Biafran people had defied their ethnic diversity and collectively subscribed to an identity that united them as a single nation. More importantly to the Biafran government's aim to legitimize Biafra's existence, the identifiable boundary that allegedly distinguished the members of the Biafran nation from non-Biafrans coincided with the boundaries of the Biafran territory.

The following pages will discuss the Biafran government's campaign to promote the ability of the Biafran people to adapt to the modern era and unite as a Biafran nation that jointly strove to support the strength and stability of the state. The Biafran government frequently contrasted between the views of nation-building in a modernized state of the Biafran people and Northern Nigerians. In particular, Biafra's leaders aimed to show the development of Biafran nationhood, by comparing the willingness of Biafrans to de-emphasize their pre-existing, ethnic-based loyalties within the Western-oriented colonial system and modern sovereign state with the Northerners' persisting tribal loyalties in colonial and independent Nigeria.

The subsequent discussion will utilize the general interpretation of Nigeria's history, which was discussed in Chapter One, by analyzing how the Biafran government's representation of Nigeria's history reasonably presented the struggles of Nigeria's leading elites to overcome inter-group disunity. The Biafran government frequently embellished the past struggles of Nigeria's leaders to develop Nigerian unity, clearly in an attempt to support the secessionist leaders' aim to legitimize the Eastern region's secession. However, Biafra's leaders, similar to their depiction of the Biafran identity, did draw from actual events and processes in their arguments concerning Northerner tribalism and the determination of Eastern leaders to achieve Nigerian nationhood in colonial and independent Nigeria. This chapter will include an analysis of the Biafran government's comparison of the Easterners' attempts to achieve Nigerian unity with the Northerners' alleged penchant for neglecting Nigeria-wide nation-building in favour of a Northerner tribalist group that was unified by its members' pre-colonial connections.

This chapter will also discuss how Biafra's leaders frequently supplemented their arguments of how sub-Nigerian nationalisms had caused the secession with the promotion of a united Biafran nation. Biafra's leaders did recognize the existence of numerous ethnic groups within its boundaries, which included one dominant group – the Ibo – that numbered around nine million people, and a number of smaller groups that collectively added another five million to Biafra's population.<sup>1</sup> In constructing a united Biafra nation, the Biafran government attempted to convince audiences that Biafra's secession was not a fight for personal power or oil wealth by a small group of secessionist leaders, an accusation often

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<sup>1</sup> Population statistics obtained from "Appendix I: Population Statistics," in Christian Chukwunedu Aguolu, *Nigerian Civil War, 1967-70: an annotated bibliography* (Boston:G.K. Hall & Co., 1973), 155-7.

utilized by Nigeria's leaders to discredit Biafra's existence.<sup>2</sup> The people of Biafra, as argued in Biafran publications, were determined to collectively develop Biafran nationhood as a sovereign state. Consequently, it will be revealed that Biafra's leaders argued that the members of the Biafra nation did not deny the existence of ethnic groups in Biafra, but willingly rendered sub-Biafran affiliations subordinate to the national Biafran identity because it was believed to be more important to the well-being of an African state.

While the central importance of promoting Biafran nationhood was apparent in Biafran publications regardless of the target audience, this discussion will also examine the Biafran government's particular emphasis to African audiences of the Biafran people's desire to become modernized and achieve nationhood without succumbing to complete Westernization and losing ties with their pre-existing ethnic cores. In targeting this assertion toward African audiences, Biafran publications included ideas associated with neo-colonialism – a process in which a state, in theory, has independent sovereignty yet, in reality, is subject to foreign influences in its economic system and political policies.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Biafran publications frequently appealed to the existing pan-Africanist and nonaligned movements in noting the need for colonies and developing states, such as Biafra, to resist neo-colonialism in all its forms.

### **Recognizing the Controversy of Seceding from a modern State**

One of the core obstacles in legitimizing secession in any state is the idea that the state's disharmony is only intensified, rather than resolved, when a part of the state attempts

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<sup>2</sup> Ojukwu makes reference to the need for people to regard the war as a fight for Africa and the black man in "Address to delegation of WCC, Umuahia, March 28, 1968," *Biafra: selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 206.

<sup>3</sup> Skyne R. Uku, *The Pan-African Movement and the Nigerian Civil War* (New York: Vantage Press, 1978), 62-3. Uku refers to Kwame Nkrumah's interpretation of neo-colonialism, which is summarized in Kwame Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom: a statement of African ideology* (London: Mercury Books, 1961), xi-xiv.

to permanently separate.<sup>4</sup> In Nigeria, the leading sub-nationalist groups each believed that the greatest power in the state was derived from control of the state government.

Consequently, the Eastern region's secession only magnified the perceived unrest of the Nigerian state because, though Biafra's leaders had resolved their struggle to gain such power, for leaders of the existing Nigerian government, the East's secession threatened to dissolve the Nigerian state.

Any attempted secession also fundamentally affects the state's domestic and international standing by significantly reducing its pool of human and natural resources.<sup>5</sup> In the Nigerian case, the Eastern region's secession deprived the Nigerian state of 14 million citizens, many of whom were contributors to the Nigerian elite's aim to stabilize and strengthen the state's political and economic infrastructure. Furthermore, the secession deprived Nigeria of the oil reserves in the Niger Delta region of the East that were, during the 1960s, just beginning to produce significant revenues. Nigeria's leaders firmly believed that its legitimacy as a state could not be re-established while a mobilized sub-Nigerian movement was actively seeking political autonomy, or secession.<sup>6</sup> During the secession, the Federal Military Government promoted "One Nigeria," and acknowledged the state's issues with sub-Nigerian movements while asserting that the fight to restore the Nigerian state's territorial integrity was for the benefit of future Nigerian nationhood.<sup>7</sup> The determination of

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<sup>4</sup> Viva Ona Bartkus, *The Dynamic of Secession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the ramifications associated with secession, see Joshua B. Forrest, "Subnationalism and Post-Conflict Governance: lessons from Africa," in *Governance in Post-Conflict Societies: rebuilding fragile states*, ed. Derick W. Brinkerhoff (London and New York: Routledge, 2007). Also see Joshua B. Forrest, *Subnationalism in Africa: ethnicity, alliances and politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Joshua B. Forrest, "Subnationalism and Post-Conflict Governance: lessons from Africa," 226. Though Forrest focuses on sub-nationalist movements in Africa since the beginning of the 1990s, the author's arguments certainly relate to sub-nationalist movements in African states.

<sup>7</sup> The "One Nigeria" slogan was the base of the Federal Military Government's promotional campaign. Examples of publications that emphasize "One Nigeria" include: General Yakubu Gowon. *Sacrifice for Unity* (1969), Federal Ministry of Information, *The Struggle for One Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian National Press, 196-?), and Federal Ministry of Information, *Unity in Diversity* (Lagos: 196-?). Each of these publications can be found

the Federal Military Government to use force to reincorporate Biafra into the Nigerian state was also clearly shown in the mass suffering of peoples in the secessionist region whom Nigerian leaders, according to Federal publications, considered to be fellow Nigerians.

Biafra's leaders understood that the secession was vulnerable to international scepticism. Compromising Nigeria's territorial integrity – an integral concept for all modern states – was a fundamental violation of a state's right to preserve its boundaries, as established by the United Nations Charter's resolution that stated, "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."<sup>8</sup> The Organization of African Unity, which was formed in 1963 and modeled its principles after the UN, constructed a Charter that also included the principle that Member States would have "respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each State and for its inalienable right to independent existence."<sup>9</sup> Many African states were additionally troubled by the issue of secession because, in many cases, they feared that if Biafra succeeded in remaining independent, other marginalized groups elsewhere in Africa might be inspired to secede from their respective states as well.

In recognizing the controversy surrounding secession, a number of Biafran publications claimed that the leaders of the Northern region had actually threatened to secede on three separate occasions, when their survival had not even been remotely threatened: at the Ibadan Conference in 1950, if Northerners were not guaranteed at least one-half of the seats in the Central Legislature; in May 1966, unless General Ironsi withdrew the Unification Decree; and in July 1966, when Northern leaders reasoned the Northern Region's secession

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in Peter Butenschon, ed., *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]* (Oslo: Yrkesalghemmedes Kontoservice Bedrift Oslo A/S, [19--?]), Reel 3 of 5.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Article 2, Paragraph 4, accessed Spring 2010, <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/index.shtml>.

<sup>9</sup> Organization of African Unity, "OAU Charter," Article 3, Paragraph 3, accessed Spring 2010, [http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Treaties/text/OAU\\_Charter\\_1963.pdf](http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Treaties/text/OAU_Charter_1963.pdf).

could be the only means to end the killings of non-Northerners in the North.<sup>10</sup> Though these accusations were not all well-founded – the assumption that Northern leaders threatened secession in July 1966, in particular, was based solely on personal recollections of Ojukwu and other secessionist leaders. However, such claims demonstrate that the Biafran government understood that most international leaders disapproved of secession.

Biafra's leaders attempted to legitimize the secession by stressing the argument that the persistent disunity between Nigeria's various groups could not be resolved under the state's existing territorial boundaries. As Chapter Two detailed, Biafra's leaders asserted that "the democratic people of Biafra endorse the principal territorial integrity for all nations," and only chose to secede because they feared for their own survival in a Nigerian state controlled by Northern leaders and their Northern supporters.<sup>11</sup> This campaign also depended upon a widely-held notion – the importance of nationhood – that was shared among European powers and other state leaders throughout the world. Though the "national" idea has, through its global diffusion, taken on various meanings, Biafra's leaders were appealing to an increasingly universal ideology.<sup>12</sup> In the Biafran government's variation on the "national" idea, nationalism was argued to be integral to a state's ability to develop stability and strength in its domestic and foreign affairs. Throughout the campaign for support, Biafra's leaders proceeded to build upon the perceived importance of state nationhood by detailing

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<sup>10</sup> These claims are all detailed in Biafra Students Association in the Americas, Inc., *Why Biafra Became an Independent Nation* (New York, New York: 196-?), accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezero Eastern Nigerian Collection*, Box 4. Ojukwu also addresses these events in "Address by His Excellency Lt.-Col. C. Odumegwu Ojukwu to the OAU Consultative Committee Meeting at Addis Ababa on Monday 5 August 1968," in Markpress News Feature Service, *Press Actions: abridged edition covering period February 2<sup>nd</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1968* (Geneva: Biafran Overseas Press Division, 5 August 1968).

<sup>11</sup> "Biafra and Territorial Integrity: The Facts," *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 9, 15 March 1968, accessed at Butenshon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 2 of 5. The second quote is from the same issue as an enlarged slogan.

<sup>12</sup> Crawford Young, "Nation, Ethnicity and Citizenship: dilemmas of democracy and civil orders in Africa," in *Making Nations, Creating Strangers: states and citizenship in Africa*, eds. Sara Dorman, Daniel Patrick Hammett, and Paul Nugent (Boston: Brill, 2007).

the Eastern leaders' attempts to develop a Nigerian nationhood, which had failed, Biafran publications reasoned, because of persisting sub-Nigerian loyalties among Northern Nigeria's leaders and their supporters.

### **Northern Nigerian Tribalism in Colonial and Independent Nigeria**

The Biafran campaign for support drew extensively from the pre-colonial past of the region, aiming to show how the struggles of Nigeria's leaders to develop Nigerian unity originated with the long-standing boundaries between the region's groups prior to British colonial rule. In general, the Biafran government detailed the extensive histories of the region's numerous distinct ethno-linguistic groups prior to the colonial era in order to suggest that the creation of the Nigerian territory was not a "natural" development in the region's history, but a phenomenon imposed by British colonizers. For instance, in *Biafra: the making of a nation*, a 1969 book publicly endorsed by the Biafran government, Samuel Ifejika and Arthur Nwankwo explicitly stated that the political amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 was forced by the British colonial administration in spite of "deep-rooted differences and suspicions between the various tribal groups, arising from the factors of culture, language and geography, and the impact of foreign influence."<sup>13</sup>

A number of Biafran publications were especially effective in using quotes from past Nigerian leaders in stressing that sub-Nigerian movements had enduring historical roots. A publication by the Biafra Students Association in the Americas, a group of supporters of Biafra in the United States, revealed a quote in 1953 from Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nigeria's future Prime Minister, in an address to the Legislative Council:

Since the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Provinces in 1914, Nigeria has existed as one country only on paper. The country is inhabited by peoples and tribes

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel Ifejika and Arthur Nwankwo, *Biafra: the making of a nation* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 254.

who speak different languages, who have different religions, different customs and traditions and entirely different historical backgrounds in their way of life, and who have also attained different stages of development.<sup>14</sup>

The Biafran delegation at the Kampala Peace Talks in May 1968 used a similar tactic by including in its opening address a 1953 quote from Sir Ahmadu Bello, the first Premier of Northern Nigeria, who had conceded, “sixty years ago there was no country called Nigeria.”<sup>15</sup> Biafran publications also drew upon quotes from the present leaders on the Nigerian side of the war to expose persisting disunity between Nigerians. The most commonly used quote came from General Gowon, who, in his first speech following the counter-coup of July 1966, declared that “the base for unity was not there.”<sup>16</sup> Such quotes took advantage of the admission of Nigeria’s leaders, no matter their affiliation or motive in the war, that Nigerian unity could only be consciously constructed.

In highlighting such confessions by Nigerian leaders, Biafran publications also attempted to disprove claims by Nigerian leaders during the war that the secession was a hindrance to the development of Nigeria-wide unity rather than a predictable result of sub-Nigerianism. Nigeria’s present struggles were used by Biafra’s leaders to argue that the secession was not merely the culmination of recent events, notably the “pogroms” of 1966 against Eastern Nigeria, but clear evidence that “the conglomeration of territories formerly

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<sup>14</sup> Biafra Students Association in the Americas, Inc., *Why Biafra Became an Independent Nation*. It is, admittedly, unclear if all, some, or none of these students were actually from Nigeria. This reference, however, does not necessitate an understanding of the background of the authors because the document, similar to most other pro-Biafra publications that were not released by the Biafran government, were trying to legitimize Biafra’s secession by proving Biafrans were a nation that could no longer live in a disunited, divided Nigeria.

<sup>15</sup> “Opening Address at the Kampala Peace Talks by the Biafran Delegation,” Markpress News Feature Service (23 May 1968).

<sup>16</sup> An example of where this quote from Gowon appeared is “Vandalism of the Northern Nigeria Army,” *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 27 October 1967, accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezero Eastern Nigerian Collection*, Box 1, Folder 6.

known as Nigeria was never a nation.”<sup>17</sup> For Biafra’s leaders, emphasizing the history of disunity between sub-Nigerian groups in Nigeria was credible because such assertions, even when exaggerated, were historically-based rather than invented. Furthermore, such arguments were a part of the Biafran government’s aim to stress how any Nigerian nationhood could only be constructed, a process which depended on the cooperation of Nigerian leaders to collectively submerge their respective sub-Nigerian affiliations.

In relation to the colonial era of Nigeria, many Biafran publications compared the willingness of Easterners to pursue a unifying Nigerian nationalism and the general resistance of Northerners to stray from their sub-Nigerian loyalties. The Biafran government aimed to persuade their audiences that Biafra’s leaders did, in fact, respect the state’s right to territorial integrity. Andrew Brewin and David MacDonald, two Canadian Members of Parliament, provided a telling example of how Biafra’s leaders promoted their devotion to constructing nationhood in an account of their visit to Biafra in October 1968:

We were reminded by Mr. Onyegbula (Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs) and Mr. Ogwunba (Secretary to Head of State) that far from being inclined to separatism, the Eastern Nigerians more than any other group had invested substantially in the Federation. Indeed, Mr. Onyegbula suggested that the Biafrans had really been the only people entirely committed to the Federation... But when many lives had been lost... the Ibos had really no choice but to retreat inside their own region for protection, and inevitably saw self-determination as their only option.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “Support Biafra Openly,” *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 10, 29 March 1968, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 2 of 5. In *Nigeria: the challenge of Biafra* (London: Rex Collins, 1972), 34-5, Arthur Nwankwo describes the government’s creation of an External Policy Bureau which, among other responsibilities, oversaw the publication of journals such as the *Biafra Newsletter*.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Brewin and David MacDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy* (Toronto: James Lewis & Samuel, 1970), 17-18.

Though the Canadian authors' identification of "the Ibos" differed from the Biafran government's aim to avoid singling out any section of the secessionist region's population, this account of Biafran leaders speaking with Western leaders closely resembled other Biafran publications, which proclaimed that Biafrans respected the sovereignty of the state.

Similarly, Biafra's leaders attempted to dispel any possible notions among outside observers – African or non-African – that the present conflict was between two tribal groups in Nigeria who were fighting because of their conflicting traditional ties. Biafra's leaders, as did many other African leaders, distanced themselves from tribalism due to the term's implication among Western-influenced minds that a backwards group was stalling the drive for modernization in a colony or state because of its enduring traditional ties.<sup>19</sup> In comparing nationalism to tribalism, Western-influenced thought at the time of the war implied tribalism as an evolutionary stage in the development of human organization; tribal groups, in other words, had yet to progress from their traditional allegiances and become attached to a nation that based its unity upon collective support for the state.<sup>20</sup> Western thought at the time of the crisis also posited that, unlike a tribe, a nation could be self-defined because nationhood is desired while tribal affiliations are perceived as inferior and backwards.<sup>21</sup> In self-defining the Biafran people as a nation and describing the Northerner "Other" as tribal, Biafra's leaders attempted to assert themselves as superior to Northern Nigerians.

The aim of Biafra's leaders to define Northerners as backwards and tribal was pointedly discussed in *Biafra: the making of a nation*, which described tribalism as providing "gratification rather than enlightenment," and an expression that played upon "unconscious

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<sup>19</sup> Crawford Young, "The Dialectics of Cultural Pluralism," in *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism*, ed. Crawford Young (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 3-35.

<sup>20</sup> Walker Connor, *Ethno-Nationalism: the quest for understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 107-8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

mechanisms rather than by presenting facts and arguments.”<sup>22</sup> In describing Northern tribalism during a speech in July 1967, Ojukwu explained that, “by emphasizing the differences in their customs, traditions, and religion from the rest of Nigeria, they secured a separate identity for themselves within the country.”<sup>23</sup> In contrast, in a 1969 address to Biafran officer cadets, Ojukwu boasted that when he first became Military Governor of the Eastern Region, he erased “tribe” from all public documents in an effort to educate Nigerians away from tribalism.<sup>24</sup>

In relation to the colonial and independent eras of Nigeria, Biafra’s leaders depicted Easterners as the foremost believers in the pursuit of modernization in all of Nigeria. Biafran publications emphasized the willingness of Easterners to migrate and take up employment in every region, and asserted that Easterners “never complained that other regions were being developed at the expense of their region; they believed that what was good for one region was good for all.”<sup>25</sup> According to Biafra’s leaders, Eastern Nigerians were taking up high-level jobs in the civil service and colonial government more than any other group in Nigeria because they had acquired an acute understanding of, and desire for the well-being and development of Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> The assertion that Easterners were the most dedicated to nation-building was also supported by the notion that Eastern Nigerians were “the proudest Nigerians, within and without” and “took pride in speaking Hausa or Yoruba amongst

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<sup>22</sup> These quotes actually originate from Biafran intellectual, Dr. Ikejiani, who is referred to in Ifejika and Nwankwo, *Biafra: the making of a nation*, 90-1.

<sup>23</sup> Taken from a transcript of “Address to convocation of University of Biafra, Nsukka, July 1, 1967,” in Ojukwu, *Biafra: selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu*, 16-9.

<sup>24</sup> Transcript of this speech is found in “Address at the passing-out parade of officer cadets, Afor-Ugiri, March 2, 1969,” in Ojukwu, *Biafra: selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu*, 165-167.

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of Information, *The Problem of Nigerian Unity (The Case for Eastern Nigeria)* (Aba: Printed by the International Press), 9, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 5 of 5.

<sup>26</sup> Government of the Republic of Biafra, *Introducing Biafra, Vol. 1* (1967), 5, accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezera Eastern Nigerian Collection*, Box 1, Folder 6.

themselves.”<sup>27</sup> In general, the Biafran government seemed to argue that the people of Eastern Nigeria had become dedicated to modernizing all of Nigeria and developing Nigeria-wide unity because it was what a modernized people were expected to achieve.

The Biafran government compared its people’s desire to develop all of Nigeria’s regions with the Northerners’ hesitancy to accept Nigerian nation-building, and their fear of the extensive migration of non-Northerners to the North. For example, the *Nigerian Crisis* series of volumes on the history of colonial and independent Nigeria highlighted the Northerners’ belief that Easterners were “native foreigners” who were bent on dominating the North’s indigenous people and property when, according to Biafra’s leaders, Easterners had simply “genuinely accepted amalgamation and took its implications seriously by emigrating to, and investing their resources in, the North.”<sup>28</sup> Another Biafran scholar, Sam Uba, argued in a special report on Biafra in the Scottish newspaper, *The Scotsman*, that “every move to introduce progressive measures had been seen by Northerners as an attempt to reverse their domination of the country and had met with disastrous consequences.”<sup>29</sup>

When Biafran publications discussed the Northerners’ attempts to actually modernize in the late colonial era, the Biafran government claimed that Northern Nigerians did not pursue modernization for the benefit of Nigeria-wide development. Rather, Biafran publications often detailed how Northerners sought to benefit the Northern Region at the expense of the rest of Nigeria, referring to the implementation of the “northernization” policy in the 1950s as the primary example of such underlying tribal loyalties in their aim to modernize. A 1967 pamphlet issued by the Biafran Ministry of Information effectively noted

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<sup>27</sup> This argument is taken from Ifejika and Nwankwo, *Biafra: the making of a nation*, 267-269.

<sup>28</sup> *Nigerian Crisis 1966, Vol. 5: The North and Constitutional Developments in Nigeria* (Enugu: Government Printer, 1966), 3, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 4 of 5.

<sup>29</sup> Sam Uba, “Why Federalism Won’t Work,” *The Scotsman* (13 October 1967), 12-15, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 4 of 5.

that, during the 1950s and 1960s, “the North diverted Federal funds to develop projects mainly in that region to the detriment particularly of the East.”<sup>30</sup> Chinua Achebe, an internationally-known Ibo writer and Biafra sympathizer, reinforced such analysis of the colonial era, arguing Northerners “practiced a form of residential apartheid against all other Nigerians,” and forced non-Northerners to live in separate districts in Northern cities.<sup>31</sup> As the Biafran government noted with accuracy, even if nationalist sentiments had spread throughout the southern regions of Nigeria, Northern leaders, who were empowered by the region’s large population and support for the NPC, deliberately caused sub-Nigerian affiliations to overpower any attempts to build Nigeria-wide unity.

Biafran publications also, on occasion, supplemented their accusations against the Northerners with claims that Nigeria’s other major group, the Yoruba, also did not contribute to constructing a Nigerian nationalism, as they were more concerned with the well-being of the Western region. One Biafran publication also described the Yoruba as counterproductive to nation-building because “the Yorubaman has no mind of his own and because his primary aim is not to labour but to share in ill-gotten booty.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, Biafra’s leaders often claimed that even though Biafrans had “sincerely believed in the unity of Nigeria and met the challenge of nation-building in the most realistic and effective manner,” they were, ironically, “expelled from Nigeria by the very people who were scarcely Nigerians.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ministry of Information, *The Struggle for Survival* (Enugu: Government Printer, 1967), 6, accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, *Enuma Ozera Eastern Nigeria Collection*, Box 4.

<sup>31</sup> Chinua Achebe, *The Darkness of Africa* (9 June 1968), 28, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 1 of 5.

<sup>32</sup> Ministry of Information, “The Yoruba Personality,” *Biafra Spotlight: a weekly review of progress and development in Biafra. Vol. 1, No. 34*, 3 August 1967 (Enugu: Biafra Information Service Corporation), accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezera Eastern Nigerian Collection*, Box 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Nigeria and Biafra: The Parting of the Ways* (Enugu, 1967), 58, accessed at Clearing House for Nigeria/Biafra Information, *Nigeria/Biafra Information Collection [microform]*, Reel 5 of 7.

In contrast, Biafra's leaders reasoned that, even at the brink of disaster following the establishment of military rule in the Nigerian state, Ojukwu and other Eastern leaders continued to pursue Nigerian nationhood by helping to lead negotiations at the ad hoc Constitutional Conference in the fall of 1966 and the Aburi Meetings in January 1967. While recognizing the failure of both meetings to resolve Nigeria's internal disunity, Biafran publications directed the blame for these failures on the Northern leaders' refusal to concede any power or seek state-wide reconstruction.<sup>34</sup> On several occasions, Ojukwu, in particular, accused General Gowon, the Head of State in the Federal Military Government, of preferring to have a strong, centralized Government in order to increase his personal power and, potentially, establish a dictatorship.<sup>35</sup> Ojukwu also asserted, in an address at the Addis Ababa peace talks in August 1968, that Gowon had the opportunity to avert the secession entirely if he had only implemented the Aburi Agreements by Ojukwu's deadline of 31 March 1967.<sup>36</sup> According to Ojukwu, the ultimatum had made it clear that Biafra's leaders had been driven to preserve Nigeria's territorial integrity until it was a foregone conclusion that the interests of non-Northerners would never be represented in Nigeria which, according to Ojukwu, was confirmed by Gowon's resistance to implement the Aburi Agreements.

Thus, at the core of the comparison of Biafran nationhood and Northerner tribalism was the Biafran government's assertion that the only option for the people of Biafra to pursue nationhood without fearing for their collective survival was to secede and escape Northern hegemony. A number of Biafran publications articulated, in some form, the

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<sup>34</sup> Ifejika and Nwankwo, *Biafra: the making of a nation*, 216-225. In this section, the authors discuss the Aburi Meetings, concluding that Northern leaders failed to follow through on their promise to use their power to restore Nigeria's stability and ensure the well-being of all peoples in the state.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-5.

<sup>36</sup> Ojukwu mentions this deadline numerous times. One example is "Address by His Excellency Lt.-Col. C. Odumegwu Ojukwu to the OAU Consultative Committee Meeting at Addis Ababa on Monday 5 August 1968," Markpress News Feature Service (5 August 1968).

argument that “the democratic people of Biafra endorsed the principal of territorial integrity of all nations,” and had only seceded because of “the right of the fourteen million people of Biafra to self-determination.”<sup>37</sup> In the 15 March 1968 issue of the *Biafra Newsletter*, an article referred to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the eighteenth-century European philosopher, and the scholar’s concept of the social contract, in which a group of people give up their sovereignty to a governing authority in exchange for the authority’s agreement to maintain the social order of the people through the rule of law. According to the article, the Nigerian Government had lost the right to rule the people of the Eastern region once its leaders had failed to fulfill their obligation to protect all of Nigeria’s citizens, thus allowing Biafrans to seek an alternative.<sup>38</sup>

The Biafran government recognized the possibility that the January 1966 coup, in which the Northern-led government was overthrown by a group of military officers primarily of Eastern origin, could be interpreted as evidence that Easterners were also guilty of a tribal scheme to protect their interests at the expense of Nigerian unity. To allay possible criticisms, many publications echoed the sentiments of the Ironsi regime in describing the coup as a move against corruption by the Northern leaders of the Balewa government, and a measure used to restore stability and national consciousness – “true Nigerianism” – in Nigeria.<sup>39</sup> The countercoup of July 1967, on the other hand, was marked by the Biafran government as a tribal conspiracy by Northerners to restore Northern hegemony in Nigeria, which also resulted in the killings of an unnecessarily large number of Ibo officers.<sup>40</sup> For

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<sup>37</sup> “Biafra and Territorial Integrity: The Facts,” *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 9, 15 March 1968.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Ifejika and Nwankwo, *Biafra: the making of a nation*, 123.

<sup>40</sup> An example of this argument can be found in “Gowon’s illegitimate Gov not entitled to recognition, Biafra claims,” Markpress News Feature Service, *Press Actions: abridged edition covering period January 1<sup>st</sup> to June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1969* (Geneva: Biafran Overseas Press Division, 7 January 1969).

Biafra's leaders, this was merely a part of the aim to distinguish between the Easterners' dedication to nation-building and the Northerners' dedication to Northern power.

During the war, Biafran publications targeting Biafrans, Nigerians and international powers frequently included unfounded descriptions of the apparent continuing disunity between ethnic groups in the Nigerian army. During the fall of 1967, the Biafran government published press releases detailing that the Yoruba had been "induced and dragged into the war" and were "in a state of near mutiny."<sup>41</sup> Other publications focused on the disdain for Northern rule among the Tiv of the Middle Belt region: "Widespread rebellion has broken out in Tiv area of Northern Nigeria following the refusal of the Natives to allow more of their young men to be conscripted into the Nigerian Army."<sup>42</sup> The Biafran campaign for support also included war updates entitled "Army Mutiny: Vandals Kill Themselves," "The Old Tribal Dissensions Now Break Up Nigeria" and "Nigerian Mutiny?"<sup>43</sup> These attempts, however, did not induce major revolts in Nigeria during the secession. Additionally, the Yoruba-led Western region publicly sided with the Federal Military Government throughout the war, though it seemed the Yoruba mainly desired to preserve its influence in Nigerian affairs following a war that Nigeria seemed destined to win.

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<sup>41</sup> The first quote is taken from "Foreign Journalists Tour Bonny Island," a press release from Mr. Aggrey K. Oji, Special Representative of the Republic of Biafra in the United States, 26 October 1967 (Enugu), accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezera Eastern Nigerian Collection*, Box 4. The second quote is taken from "Mutiny Feared in Nigerian Yoruba Forces – Adebayo Rushes to Benin; Calabar Invaded – Attack Being Controlled," a press release by the Government of Biafra, 20 October 1967, accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezera Eastern Nigeria Collection*, Box 1, Folder 6.

<sup>42</sup> "Rebellion in Northern Nigeria," a press release by the Government of Biafra in the United States, 15 November 1967, accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Ezera Eastern Nigeria Collection*, Box 1, Folder 6.

<sup>43</sup> "Army Mutiny: Vandals Kill Themselves," *New Age Independent Daily*, Vol. 1, No. 223 (31 July 1968), accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 2 of 5, "The old tribal dissension now break up Nigeria," Markpress News Feature Service (28 November 1968), and "News Summary – September 19, 1969: Nigerian Mutiny?" Markpress News Feature Service, *Press Actions: abridged edition covering period July 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1969* (Geneva: Biafran Overseas Press Division, 19 September 1969).

Overall, it seemed that Biafran publications frequently gave reasons why they could no longer live as a people within Nigeria rather than describing the bases for their own developing nation. This was because, in reality, Biafra's unity could not be as easily proven by its own history as the disunity of Nigeria's diverse groups. After all, Eastern Nigeria's history was a microcosm of Nigeria's history, in which multiple histories existed due to the region's diverse societies prior to colonial rule. In one of the most revealing statements of the Biafran campaign about the Biafra nation, Samuel Ifejika and Arthur Nwankwo accurately noted that the nation is not an inflexible structure which is absolute and unchanging, but "an affirmative framework whose primary aim is the collective welfare of its peoples, and which should adjust itself with preponderating circumstances in order to maintain its ability to achieve its aim."<sup>44</sup> Ifejika and Nwankwo concluded that due to the conditions in Nigeria, in which the well-being of all its peoples was not provided, those unsatisfied groups – the peoples of Biafra – were both justified and obligated to establish for themselves a new sovereign state, Biafra, that would assure their welfare, and to set new territorial limits to correspond with the new Biafran nation.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the Biafra nation was defined, more than anything, by the Biafran people's collective distrust of Nigerians, reminiscent of how Nigerians had been primarily united by their opposition to British colonial rule.

### **Constructing Biafran Nationhood**

When the Biafran government did make attempts to publicize Biafran nationhood, the purpose was primarily to further legitimize the secession in the minds of international observers, as well as to instrumentally strengthen solidarity between the peoples of Biafra. Biafra's leaders seemed to recognize the contradiction of basing their secession, in part, upon

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<sup>44</sup> Ifejika and Nwankwo, *Biafra: the making of a nation*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

the argument that Nigeria was an artificial construction, when the Biafran region was a part of that same process. After all, the Ibo, Efik, Ibibio, Ijo, Eko and the other peoples of the secessionist region were not bound by the same political boundary until the advent of British colonial rule.<sup>46</sup> As discussed earlier, many Biafran publications effectively downplayed this reality by promoting the collective commitment of Easterners to a national identity, rather than their respective ethnic groupings, for the betterment of the Nigerian colony and state. With the secession, Biafra's leaders argued, the peoples of the Eastern region had finally gained the opportunity to construct a state-wide nationalism and collectively develop the stable and strong state they had long desired since the colonial era.

Throughout the secession, the Biafran government sought out the support of the peoples of the secessionist region, releasing numerous newsletters, pamphlets and other publications that centered on the aim to proactively construct Biafran nationhood between the peoples of Biafra. On 30 May 1967, the day the Eastern region seceded, a newspaper article in the newly-created *Biafra Sun* stated to its Biafran readers that the symbolic leaders of several ethnic groups had publicly voiced their support for the secession, including the Ijaw: "The Ijaw people have assured the Military Governor and Head of State of the Republic of Biafra, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, of the full cooperation and loyalty of the Ijaws in running the affairs of the new nation."<sup>47</sup> It was also integral to the Biafran government to assure Biafrans and other Africans that the traditional leaders of the secessionist region voiced their support for the educated elite-led secession. In a March 1968 issue of the *Biafra Newsletter*, Biafran publications were quick to assert that "Chiefs and elders" had "reaffirmed their faith in the leadership in the Head of State, Colonel Ojukwu

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<sup>46</sup> Joseph, "Nation Because of Differences," 61.

<sup>47</sup> "Ijaws Strongly Behind Ojukwu: Express Gratitude," *Biafra Sun*, Vol. XIV, No. 2132, 30 May 1967, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 2 of 5.

and his government.”<sup>48</sup> Ojukwu reinforced this argument throughout the secession, asserting that Biafrans could easily overcome their ethnic diversity: “Recognizing the diversity of local interests and the need to promote harmony among the various communities in the country, the Government of Biafra initiated discussions at all levels and this led to the idea of a Provincial system of government for the Republic.”<sup>49</sup>

A number of Biafran publications attempted to build upon the notion that Biafrans shared a common set of experiences in colonial and independent Nigeria by recalling the Biafrans’ common history of living in village societies and trading and communicating with each other long before the colonial era. Though avoiding the description of Biafrans as being members of a singular ethnic group, “Introducing Biafra,” along with several other Biafran publications, implicitly suggested that the secession would be further legitimized if the Biafra nation had pre-colonial roots.<sup>50</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, there were ethnic similarities that crossed over between groups in the Biafran region. “Introducing Biafra,” for example, asserted that the Biafran people had been trading, intermarrying, and acquiring similar linguistic and cultural traits over the course of more than 2000 years.<sup>51</sup> However, Biafran publications frequently argued that Biafrans had only remained unaware of their bonds prior to colonial rule because they lived in separate societies, and would have inevitably coalesced into a Biafran nation, if not for the British Empire’s creation of the Nigerian colony. Ojukwu proclaimed the inevitability of a Biafran nation in July 1967: “We would no doubt have emerged, in due course, as a nation-state but for the advent of colonial

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<sup>48</sup> “Provincial News in Brief,” *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 9, 15 March 1968.

<sup>49</sup> “‘We are Confident of the Future’ – By Ojukwu,” *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 28 June 1968, accessed at Butenshon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 5 of 5.

<sup>50</sup> Government of the Republic of Biafra, *Introducing Biafra, Vol. 1*, (1967).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12. A similar description can also be found in “Address by His Excellency Lt.-Col. C. Odumegwu Ojukwu to the OAU Consultative Committee Meeting at Addis Ababa on Monday 5 August 1968,” *Markpress News Feature Service* (Geneva: Biafran Overseas Press Division, 5 August 1968).

rule which retarded this logical and natural development.”<sup>52</sup> Biafran publications often noted that colonial rule led to the division of the region into Ibo, Ibibio, Ijo, Ogoja and other tribes based on British perceptions and their experiences with these societies rather than the actual histories of the region’s groups. In addition, Biafran publications admitted that the new political boundaries established during colonial rule caused many of these peoples to identify themselves by these divided groups. Notwithstanding such developments, Ojukwu and other Biafran leaders argued that since the Biafra nation had existed unconsciously among these groups for centuries, the Biafra nation was still able to become a reality in spite of the ethnic differences between many Biafrans and the interruption of colonialism.

On 1 June 1969, the Biafran government released the Ahiara Declaration, providing the secessionist region’s peoples and the international community with a seminal document that expressed the apparent strength and unity of the long-developing Biafra nation:

All Biafrans are brothers and sisters bound together by ties of geography, trade, inter-marriage and culture and their common misfortune in Nigeria and their present experience of the armed struggle. Biafrans are even more united by the desire to create a new and better order of society which will satisfy their needs and aspirations.

Therefore, there is no justification for anyone to introduce into the Biafran Fatherland divisions based on ethnic origin, sex or religion. To do so would be unpatriotic.<sup>53</sup>

The Ahiara Declaration essentially summarized Biafra’s campaign to prove to Biafrans and non-Biafrans that the Biafra nation was already firmly established. During a time in the war in which Biafrans had suffered for several months without a significant military victory,

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<sup>52</sup> “Address to the convocation of the University of Biafra, Nsukka, July 1, 1967,” in Ojukwu, *Biafra: selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu*, 124.

<sup>53</sup> This is taken from “The Ahiara Declaration: principles of the Biafran Revolution,” accessed Spring 2010, [http://www.biafraland.com/Ahiara\\_declaration\\_1969.htm](http://www.biafraland.com/Ahiara_declaration_1969.htm), 27-30. This document can also be found in “Ojukwu: the Ahiara Declaration,” Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 2*, 376-393, and “An address to the nation by Ojukwu on Thanksgiving Day, June 1, 1969,” Markpress News Feature Service (1 June 1969).

received no additional recognition from any influential states or experienced other boosts of morale, the Ahiara Declaration became a signature publication in Biafra's push to gain support throughout the world as it summarized, in a single document, the "Biafran Revolution" and the legitimacy of Biafra's secession.<sup>54</sup> The Declaration reached a number of audiences, as it was both announced in a speech by Lt.-Col. Ojukwu, in order to rejuvenate the morale and resolve of the peoples who remained in the Biafran territory, and distributed in written form to the international community.

In general, the Biafran government's construction of Biafran nationhood was not a complete fabrication, as the unifying characteristics of the Biafran people used by Biafra's leaders were not entirely drawn from a manipulated history of the pre-colonial, colonial, and independent eras of the Nigerian territory. However, the immediate pressures of the war and the realization that the secessionist region needed outside support to defeat Nigeria had influenced Biafra's leaders into promoting shakier arguments, notably the inevitability of a united Biafra nation. Biafran publications would also make appeals to the future, assuring leaders throughout the world that Biafra, unlike Nigeria, would contribute to the ideas and practices embraced by these leaders. As a result, a great portion of the Biafran campaign for support rested on concepts, such as pan-Africanism and nonalignment, that Biafra's leaders – and leaders of colonial and independent Nigeria, for that matter – had little investment in prior to the secession. Nevertheless, these ideas that Biafra's leaders frequently associated with the secession would become referred to as the principles of the "Biafran Revolution."

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<sup>54</sup> Ntieyong U. Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession, 1966-1970: a personal account of the Nigerian civil war* (London: F. Cass, 1971), 123-6. This book was written by a Biafran leader after the war had ended and Eastern Nigeria was reincorporated into Nigeria, allowing the author to obtain a sense of realism in recalling the events of the war. The Ahiara Declaration, for instance, was depicted as a desperate attempt to increase the morale of the peoples still residing in Biafra in a war that was already widely believed to be lost.

### **Promoting the “Biafran Revolution”**

Upon its release in June 1969, the Ahiara Declaration was the first publication in which the Biafran government proclaimed the “Biafran Revolution” and sought out to explicitly outline the purpose and principles of this supposed revolutionary movement. The main purpose of the “Biafran Revolution” was for Biafra to become free of neo-colonialist influences and serve as a leading example for Africans and peoples in other developing regions of a truly liberated and independent state. Unlike the Biafran government’s aim to compare Northern Nigerian tribalism and Biafran nationhood, the “Biafran Revolution” was used as a direct appeal to the peoples of the developing regions throughout the world. The description of the “Biafran Revolution” in the Ahiara Declaration, however, largely repeated sentiments of many Biafran publications since May 1967. From the beginning of the secession, Biafra’s leaders had argued that Nigerians “under the leadership of the Hausa-Fulani feudal aristocracy” were willing to remain dependent on foreign influences in administering the state of Nigeria, and compared these apparent failures with the assertion that Biafra’s leaders were driven to achieve liberation from colonial and neo-colonial influences as a truly independent state.<sup>55</sup> The Ahiara Declaration, therefore, was the summation of the “Biafran Revolution” rather than its beginning.

When Nigeria gained independence in 1960, many African and Western leaders looked to Nigeria as a leader for new African states, due to its large population, wealth of natural resources, and largely peaceful transition to independence. However, Biafra’s leaders commented on Nigeria’s unfulfilled potential, attributing Nigeria’s instability to the Northern leaders of the Federal Government. A number of Biafran publications readily included insight into Nigeria’s widely-regarded potential as a leader for African colonies and newly-

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<sup>55</sup> “The Ahiara Declaration: principles of the Biafran Revolution,” 7-10.

formed states, but mainly used this information to argue that the “uninformed leadership” of the Northerners had failed not only the future of Nigeria, but all of Africa, and were degrading the image of the African instead of elevating it.<sup>56</sup>

The Biafran government also frequently commented on the continuing willingness of Northern leaders to accept foreign assistance during the conflict. Ojukwu and other Biafran leaders would often label the conflict “an imperialist war” and re-affirm their position as the “superior” side, arguing that Nigerians were “deserving not of hatred but pity” because of their continued dependence on external assistance.<sup>57</sup> The Biafran government did recognize that Britain had already developed a long history of trading with Nigeria, acknowledging that British leaders assisted the Nigerian war cause due to their belief that cutting off Britain’s pre-existing trade relationship with Nigeria, which included the supply of arms, could be seen by Nigerians as a symbol of support for Biafra.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, Biafra’s leaders were far more interested in simply focusing on the fact that Great Britain and other Western states provided assistance to Nigeria during the war, as international press releases included titles such as “More British Arms for Nigeria – Biafra’s Reaction,” and “One Nigeria Maintained by British Arms.”<sup>59</sup>

In detailing a comparison of neo-colonialism in Nigeria and Biafra, Biafra’s leaders were attempting to garner support from any groups that had struggled with dominance by an imperialist “Other,” and consciously avoided excluding any possible bases of support. As a result, though Biafran publications did not make explicitly ideological appeals for support,

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<sup>56</sup> Ministry of Information, *39 Accusations against Nigeria* (Enugu: 1968), accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 5 of 5. In particular, this refers to the third accusation of the publication, “Degrading the black man’s image.”

<sup>57</sup> Ojukwu, *Biafra: selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu*, 196.

<sup>58</sup> “Details of British involvement in supplying arms and personnel to the Nigerian Army,” Markpress News Feature Service (11 May 1968). This press release is a detailed analysis of Britain’s supply of arms to Nigeria.

<sup>59</sup> “More British Arms for Nigeria – Biafra’s Reaction,” Markpress News Feature Service (19 November 1969), and “One Nigeria Maintained by British Arms,” Markpress News Feature Service (21 November 1969).

their wide-ranging rhetoric engaged the principles of two international movements prominent in the late 1960s: pan-Africanism and nonalignment.

The pan-Africanist and nonaligned movements contained differing bases of support. At the time of the war, pan-Africanism was a distinctly African ideology for the peoples of the African continent and self-identified Africans throughout the world, while the nonaligned movement included members from developing colonies and states throughout the world. However, the overlapping ideas of the two movements, namely resistance to neo-colonialism, allowed the Biafran government to appeal to both movements with the same arguments. As the following pages will show, Biafran publications also appealed to principles that were unique to each international movement.

The increased popularity of pan-Africanism during the first half of the twentieth century had led to the greater involvement of leaders and intellectuals on the African continent in the pan-Africanist movement, and also produced multiple interpretations of the pan-African ideology and African nationalism among indigenous leaders.<sup>60</sup> Despite diverging stances on pursuing pan-African unity, leaders were generally in agreement during the 1950s and 1960s that the overall purpose of the pan-Africanist movement was to liberate the African peoples from colonial rule, and to unite the colonies and sovereign states of Africa against political, economic, and social inequalities.<sup>61</sup> In 1963, the creation of the Organization of African Unity, which served to overcome Africa's diversity and represent the interests of Africa as a whole, provided African nationalists with an organized forum to further their aims for the liberation of African colonies and states. Differing interpretations of

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<sup>60</sup> For discussion on the various interpretations of the pan-Africanist movement, see Uku, *The Pan-African Movement and the Nigerian Civil War*.

<sup>61</sup> P. Olanwuche Esedebe, *Pan-Africanism: the idea and movement, 1776-1963* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982). For discussion on the pan-Africanist movement during the 1950s and early 1960s, see "Chapter 5: Attempts at Closer Union and the Emergence of the O.A.U."

how pan-African unity would be achieved persisted among African leaders within the OAU; in particular, early OAU leaders were divided into the “Casablanca” group, which favoured a political federation of the African continent, and the “Monrovia” bloc, which preferred economic cooperation and mutual support between independent African states.<sup>62</sup>

Nonetheless, the OAU represented the symbolic culmination of pan-African unity during the first half of the twentieth century.

By the time of the secession in 1967, most of the continent’s colonies had achieved independence, which caused a change in focus of pan-African unity and, by extension, the OAU. In particular, pan-Africanists had drifted from focusing on liberating African colonies, and became primarily associated with establishing the stability and strength of African states in the international community, as well as the liberation of the African peoples from neo-colonial influences.<sup>63</sup> The Kwame Nkrumah-led stance of politically uniting Africans had also decreased in influence by the late 1960s, in part, due to Nkrumah’s deteriorating reputation. Following nearly a decade of failed Ghanaian development, a coup in February 1966 ousted Nkrumah from power.<sup>64</sup> Thus, pan-Africanism in the late 1960s shifted considerably in the direction of encouraging unity between liberated African states, and strayed from Nkrumah’s ideas associated with unifying the continent into a single political territory. The prevalence of pan-Africanist sentiments in Biafran publications is interesting to

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<sup>62</sup> For a comparison of these two stances, which divided OAU member states into “Casablanca” and “Monrovia” groups, see Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001). For the involvement of Nigerian leaders as a part of the less radical “Casablanca” group, see Joseph Wayas, *Nigeria’s Leadership Role in Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

<sup>63</sup> See Uku, *The Pan-African Movement and the Nigerian Civil War*. Also see Organization of African Unity. “Resolutions Adopted by the Council of Ministers at its Ninth Ordinary Session held in Kinshasa, Congo from 4 to 10 September 1967,” resolution 103, accessed Spring 2010, [http://www.au.int/en/sites/default/files/COUNCIL\\_EN\\_4\\_10\\_SEPTEMBER\\_1967\\_COUNCIL\\_MINISTERS\\_NINTH\\_ORDINARY\\_SESSION.pdf](http://www.au.int/en/sites/default/files/COUNCIL_EN_4_10_SEPTEMBER_1967_COUNCIL_MINISTERS_NINTH_ORDINARY_SESSION.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> For analysis on Kwame Nkrumah’s career as the leader of independent Ghana, see Trevor Jones, *Ghana’s First Republic, 1960-66: the pursuit of the political kingdom* (London: Methuen, 1976) and C.L.R. James, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (Westport: L. Hill, 1977).

note, as there is little evidence that Ojukwu or any other leaders of Biafra had been vocal proponents of pan-Africanism prior to secession. In fact, the Nigerian colony's sub-Nigerian divisions had heavily influenced Nnamdi Azikiwe and other Nigerian leaders to limit Nigerian participation in pan-Africanism in the colonial and independent eras, though Nigeria had become a member-state in the OAU. The secession was not a part of an ongoing movement to strengthen pan-African unity or develop African nationalism. Biafran appeals to "African brotherhood" were, instead, merely a part of the secessionist leadership's war-time campaign, as Biafra's leaders hoped its pan-Africanist leanings – which implied Biafra had the potential of benefiting the future of Africa beyond the peace and stability that would ensue following the end of the war – would result in greater support for Biafra among African audiences. For instance, in an August 1967 broadcast, Ojukwu urged his audience to identify with the liberation movements of the remaining colonies in Africa and ensure "the nationalists are victorious and that the African is master in his continent."<sup>65</sup> Another Biafran publication later in the war concluded with the statement, "Support Biafra and you support African nationalism."<sup>66</sup> This rhetoric, no matter its authenticity among Biafra's leaders, was strident in its distinction between the neglect of Nigerians, and the enthusiasm of Biafrans concerning pan-African unity. Numerous publications asserted that Biafrans were driven to achieve progress for Biafra and the rest of Africa without sacrificing the traditional characteristics that defined the African-based identities of peoples throughout the continent. In his "State of the Nation" broadcast on 30 May 1968, Ojukwu depicted Biafra as striving "to achieve a workable balance between the claims of tradition and the demand for change and betterment," assuring readers and listeners that "our society remains progressive and

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<sup>65</sup> "Broadcast, August 10, 1967" in Ojukwu, *Biafra: selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu*, 222.

<sup>66</sup> "Biafra: The Antithesis of Katanga," Markpress News Feature Service (11 January 1969).

dynamic through the discovery and development of local talent as well as the acceptance of progressive foreign ideas which do not detract from the identity of our culture.”<sup>67</sup> Ojukwu also recognized the language barrier between many Africans of differing cultural backgrounds, and explained how Biafra’s leaders aimed to help Africans overcome this challenge to pan-African unity:

One great barrier which hinders progress toward interstate understanding and cooperation in Africa is language; that is, the inability of French- and English-speaking Africans to freely communicate their thoughts to each other. We in this Republic must take positive steps to break down this barrier by ensuring that the present generation of Biafrans have a working knowledge of the French language.<sup>68</sup>

Ojukwu publicly recognized the cultural disparities that represented significant obstacles to true pan-African unity between African states and colonies, and assured African audiences the secessionist region would make strides to overcome these boundaries. By comparison, Biafran publications often asserted that Northern Nigerian leaders had proven their unwillingness to sacrifice personal power and ethno-regionalism in favour of contributing to African nationalism. Biafra’s leaders frequently claimed that Nigerians were acting “against the pan-African concept of African brotherhood” by killing their “kith and kin” in the war.<sup>69</sup> In incorporating pan-Africanist concepts as a part of the “Biafran Revolution,” the Nigerian government’s attempt to forcibly restore its territorial integrity was viewed in Biafran publications as counterproductive to pan-African unity.

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<sup>67</sup> “State of the Nation, May 30, 1968,” in Ojukwu, *Biafra: selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu*, 263-4.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Ministry of Information, *39 Accusations against Nigeria*. This particular argument is described in accusation #2, “Rejecting the principle of African brotherhood.”

A considerable proportion of the Biafran leadership's campaign for African support was directed toward the OAU, which was a seemingly obvious strategy, given the organization's influence throughout Africa. However, the Biafran government's attempt to target the OAU for support is peculiar, as the Biafran secessionist movement directly conflicted with a fundamental principle of the OAU Charter.<sup>70</sup> As previously discussed, OAU member states had become, by the late 1960s, overwhelmingly in favour of preserving the power and influence of individual states amidst the organization's aim to liberate African peoples from colonialism and neo-colonialism. When the Biafran government appealed to OAU leaders for support of the secessionist movement at the expense of the state of Nigeria, Biafra's leaders had challenged the OAU's determination, as outlined by its Charter, "to safeguard and consolidate the hard-won independence as well as the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our states."<sup>71</sup> This contradiction between the basic goals of Biafra's leaders and the OAU, respectively, complicated any Biafran push for the support of the OAU, as well as the organization's member states.

In spite of the contradictions associated with the Biafran government's appeals to pan-Africanism and the OAU, two major developments contributed to the Biafran leadership's desire to target OAU leaders for support. The first development occurred during the spring of 1968, when four member states of the OAU – Tanzania, Ivory Coast, Gabon and Zambia – officially recognized Biafra as a sovereign state. Official support for Biafra by the four African states had given secessionist leaders hope, as pro-Biafrans had gained a greater voice

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<sup>70</sup> Organization of African Unity, "OAU Charter," Article III, Paragraph 3.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. Although OAU leaders in the early- to mid-1960s were divided into two groups that conflicted upon the OAU's most important goal – to support the sovereignty of individual states, or to pursue "true" pan-African unity – the original Charter of the organization respected the territorial integrity of its member states.

in the OAU, which carried the potential of inspiring further support towards Biafra among OAU member states.

The basis for Tanzania's recognition of Biafra on 13 April 1968, the first state to do so, resembled the Biafran campaign's claim to the right to self-preservation. C.Y. Ngonja, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs in Tanzania, stated in Tanzania's official recognition of Biafra: "When the state ceases to stand up for the honour, the protection, and the well-being of all its citizens, then it is no longer the instrument of those it has rejected."<sup>72</sup> The President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, who had helped to found the OAU in 1963 and had remained a leader of the pan-Africanist movement during the secession, expressed similar sentiments, reasoning Tanzania's recognition of Biafra was because "unity can only be based on the general consent of the people involved."<sup>73</sup> When the governments of Gabon, Ivory Coast, and Zambia respectively announced their recognition of Biafra's independence in May 1968, each country's official statement repeated Tanzania's stance: unity was the ideal framework for the development of an African state, but only when that unity is achieved by consensus rather than force.<sup>74</sup> In any case, with a base of support in the OAU that seemed to echo one of the lines of reasoning in the Biafran campaign for support, Biafra's leaders saw evidence of the effectiveness regarding their publication strategy. Official support from four states within a span of just over one month gave the secessionist government hope that the

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<sup>72</sup> C.Y. Ngonja, "Tanzania's Recognition of Biafra," 16, accessed at Butenshon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 5 of 5.

<sup>73</sup> "Why We Recognized Biafra' – President Nyerere," Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 2*, 211-3.

<sup>74</sup> "The Recognition of Biafra by Gabon," accessed at Butenshon *Material Concerning the Nigeria/Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 2 of 5. Quotes from the President of the Ivory Coast, Felix Houphouet-Boigny, can be accessed at "Address by his Excellency Lt.-Col. C. Odumegwu Ojukwu to the OAU Consultative Committee Meeting at Addis Ababa on Monday, 5 August 1968," Markpress News Feature Service (5 August 1968). The stance of the Zambian government is referred to in Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: the diplomatic history of the Biafran war, 1967-70* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972), 284.

publication campaign was a viable and productive strategy for not only gaining international attention, but also receiving active support.

The second major development that influenced the Biafran government's appeals to OAU leaders for support occurred with the considerable pressure exerted on the OAU to mediate a peaceful resolution between Nigeria and the secessionist region. Throughout the secession and war, the OAU's integral role in the crisis was heavily influenced by the UN, which resolved to consider the crisis "an African matter" and deferred responsibility for mediating the conflict to the OAU.<sup>75</sup> A separate front of pressure originated from the OAU's lingering need to prove its worth as the leading organization for pan-African unity, a role that the OAU had not fulfilled since the organization was created in 1963. Just a few years earlier, the OAU had been unable to negotiate an end to the Congolese conflict – a crisis which, incidentally, included an attempted secession by the Katangan region – causing global leaders outside the OAU to mediate a peaceful resolution.<sup>76</sup> By mid-1968, OAU leaders, largely due to pressure from the UN and pan-Africanists, formed a Consultative Committee in an effort to end the crisis in Nigeria.

However, all of the meetings organized by the OAU Consultative Committee - at Kampala in May 1968, Niamey in July 1968, Addis Ababa in August 1968, and Monrovia in April 1969 – were doomed to stalemate from the outset, as Nigeria refused to enter into negotiations for peace before Biafra announced its surrender and Biafra refused to begin peace talks before Nigeria officially recognized Biafra's sovereignty. Furthermore, the OAU refused to enforce an end to Nigeria's offensives or Biafra's secession, as the organization

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<sup>75</sup> The Secretary-General of the UN, U Thant, addressed the OAU in Algiers on 13 September 1968, urging the OAU Consultative Committee to help mediate a solution. The transcript of this address can be found in "U Thant's Address to the O.A.U. at Algiers," in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 2*, 327-8.

<sup>76</sup> Uku, *The Pan-African Movement and the Nigerian Civil War*, 10.

merely adopted resolutions that urged an end to the war without stating how it could be achieved.<sup>77</sup> More importantly, the OAU consistently recognized the war as an internal crisis in Nigeria which, therefore, required the OAU to adhere to its Charter's principle – modeled after the Charter of the UN – to not interfere in the internal affairs of its member states.<sup>78</sup> In recognizing the crisis as an internal affair, the OAU also, in effect, sided with preserving Nigeria's territorial integrity.

In addition to pan-Africanism, the Biafran government's references to neo-colonialism and the pursuit of sovereignty resonated with discursive elements of the nonaligned movement's ideology which, unlike pan-Africanism, contained a strong contingent of non-African advocates. Though the non-alignment was, during the late 1960s, in a period of decline as a unifying movement between developing regions of the world, nonalignment was still a relevant concept during the time of the secession, and has remained so into the twenty-first century. Prior to the secession and war, a peak of the nonaligned stance had occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in the years following the Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung, Indonesia in 1955.<sup>79</sup> The meeting of 29 leaders from Asia, Africa and the Middle East that year did not result in the creation of the non-aligned movements, but rather the crystallization of shared principles among representatives who realized that their common ground stemmed from a shared history of Western imperialism in Asia, Africa and the

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<sup>77</sup> OAU Resolutions during the secession were documented in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 2*. In particular, see "O.A.U. Resolution on Nigeria, September 1967," 172-3, "O.A.U. Resolution at Niamey," 244-5, "O.A.U. Resolution on Nigeria (Algiers)," 328-9, and "O.A.U. Resolution on Civil War passed at Addis Ababa," 445.

<sup>78</sup> Organization of African Unity, "OAU Charter," Article III, Paragraph 2.

<sup>79</sup> For recent analyses on the Bandung Conference and its impact on the nonaligned movement, see Christopher Lee, *Making a World after Empire: the Bandung moment and its afterlives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), and Vijay Prashad *The Darker Nations: a people's history of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007).

Middle East since the sixteenth century.<sup>80</sup> Consequently, the representatives at Bandung collectively articulated their desire to assert individual sovereignty from foreign influences.

Though Nigeria was not represented at Bandung, and only six of the 29 attendees at the Conference were African – most representatives were from Asia and the Middle East – the principles that emerged out of the “Bandung Spirit” resonated with leaders in developing regions throughout the world, including Nigeria, following the Conference.<sup>81</sup> The “Bandung Spirit” was propelled by the shared determination of colonies and states in the developing regions of the world to claim their own space in global affairs and refuse economic subordination, cultural suppression and other consequences of imperialism.<sup>82</sup> The assertion of individual sovereignty among nonaligned members also included the emergence of a self-defined “Third World” that was seen at the time as a positive term that signified the unity of its members and their collective resistance to foreign domination.<sup>83</sup> In Nigeria, the impact of nonalignment was publicly realized upon Nigerian independence in 1960 when the Nigerian Government declared its intention to pursue a foreign policy that included nonalignment.<sup>84</sup> The “Bandung Spirit” reached its peak in the early 1960s, as the “Non-Aligned Movement” officially convened for the first time in 1961 in Yugoslavia, clear evidence of the expansion in nonaligned supporters following the Bandung Conference. Momentum continued into the second conference in 1964, which had delegations from 47 states. Though the original fervour of Afro-Asianism that emerged out of Bandung had receded as colonialism disappeared in most regions of the world, the policy of nonalignment, as proven by the

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<sup>80</sup> Lee, *Making a World After Empire*, 10.

<sup>81</sup> See Introduction of Lee, *Making a World after Empire*.

<sup>82</sup> Prakash, *The Darker Nations*, 45-6.

<sup>83</sup> Lee, *Making a World after Empire*, 15. Lee notes that the term “Third World” originated in 1952, but achieved greater popularity following Bandung.

<sup>84</sup> Douglas G. Anglin, “Nigeria: political nonalignment and economic alignment,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 2, No. 2 (July 1964): 247-263.

N.A.M., had remained a prominent movement during the time of Biafra's secession, especially as the United States and the Soviet Union struggled to expand their spheres of influence in the Cold War context.

In relation to the events of the war, Biafran publications never explicitly cited nonalignment as a part of the secession's war-time principles. Since the nonaligned movement was not specifically pursued by the Biafran campaign for support, Biafran publications did not consciously attempt to focus their statements in a manner that included the principles that helped to define nonalignment, such as the inter-exchange of cultural ideas and practices, and the use of nonviolence.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, Biafra's leaders often made statements that fell in line with one of the nonaligned movement's primary aims: to protect the sovereignty of developing states by adopting the strategy of refusing to formally align with either the Eastern or Western bloc in the Cold War.

When Biafran publications included the Cold War as an additional way to distinguish Biafrans from Nigerians, Biafra's leaders put Nigeria on the side of the Eastern bloc, specifically focusing on the supply of arms to Nigeria by the Soviet Union, which actually did provide military assistance to the Federal side throughout the war. In their push to accuse Nigeria of being a mere "puppet" in the Cold War, Biafran publications emphasized Nigeria's willingness to enter into a neo-colonialist relationship with the Soviet Union, with *39 Accusations against Nigeria*, another Biafran government publication, going as far as asserting that "to make sure of a greater success of plunging Nigeria into the dark ages," Northern leaders had signed a military pact with Russia and "ensured the final and perpetual return to a pre-independence colonial status."<sup>86</sup> *The Biafra Newsletter* contributed to such

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<sup>85</sup> Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 41-45.

<sup>86</sup> *39 Accusations against Nigeria*, 7.

accusations by titling one of its articles “Nigeria Becomes Soviet Satellite.”<sup>87</sup> Several international press releases reinforced this notion, by meticulously describing who had supplied Nigeria with arms in certain battles: “Later, on Sunday, six Russian MIG 17’s were called in to strafe and rocket in relays.”<sup>88</sup> In contrast, Biafran publications asserted that the Biafran government had refused to accept military assistance from either side of the Cold War.<sup>89</sup> To emphasize the distinction between the views of foreign dependence by Biafran and Nigerian leaders, Biafran publications also assured its readers that Biafran troops were using weapons manufactured in the secessionist region, which had still helped Biafrans to hold their lines against Nigerian troops and, in certain instances, even “regained two and three miles of Biafran territory.”<sup>90</sup>

By associating Nigeria with the Soviet Union and assuring audiences that Biafrans refused Soviet support, Biafran publications were also seeking the attention of the leaders of the Western bloc. Nigeria’s two closest economic relationships were with Great Britain and the United States, both of whom had great interest in oil and needed convincing that Biafra was more trustworthy than Nigeria with such a valuable resource. By associating Nigeria with the Soviet Union, Biafra’s leaders hoped the Western bloc would, as they had in past conflicts, side with Nigeria’s enemy in an attempt to defeat the Soviet Union’s ally and prevent the Eastern bloc from establishing an influence in Nigeria.

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<sup>87</sup> “Nigeria Becomes Soviet Satellite,” *Biafra Newsletter*, 8 December 1967, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 2 of 5.

<sup>88</sup> “Nigeria Attack Repulsed,” Markpress News Feature Service (22 July 1969).

<sup>89</sup> Examples include: “Soviet Union steps up military aircraft to Nigeria,” Markpress News Feature Service (22 March 1968), and Kenneth Dike, “Biafra Explains its Case,” *The New York Times*, 28 April 1969, accessed at Michigan State University Main Library, Special Collections, MSS240, *Onuma Exera Eastern Nigerian Collection*, Box 5.

<sup>90</sup> “Soviet Union steps up military aircraft to Nigeria,” Markpress News Feature Service (22 March 1968).

## **Conclusion**

The Biafra nation was most often presented by the Biafran government to be a group of people that collectively desired to achieve Western-inspired modernization in a sovereign state that was free of tribalism and backwardness. In discussing the pursuit of Nigerian nationhood in colonial and independent Nigeria, the Biafran government commonly contrasted the desire of Eastern Nigerians for nationhood with the alleged tribalism of Northerners. In their reasoning for the failure of Nigerian leaders to construct a unifying Nigerian nationalism, Biafra's leaders blamed Northern leaders and their supporters, who had overwhelmingly voted based on a Northerner sub-Nigerian affiliation and helped to elect Northern leaders as the controlling members of the Federal Government.

In constructing Biafran nationhood, many publications recognized that the ethnically diverse peoples of Biafra were primarily united by their collective belief concerning the importance of nationhood in a sovereign state. However, a number of publications attempted to strengthen the perception of Biafran unity by arguing that the Biafran people were also connected by pre-colonial cultural similarities, notably language, and long-standing inter-relationships that included extensive trading and intermarriage. According to several Biafran publications, these pre-colonial similarities and connections had made the emergence of a Biafran nation a historical inevitability, and a development that was finally realized with the secession of the Eastern region. Such claims, far more than the Biafran government's accusations of the persistence of sub-Nigerian movements in Nigeria, were instances of constructivism in which Biafra's leaders attempted to appropriate the history of the region's peoples in order to promote a unity among Biafrans that stretched into the pre-colonial past.

Notwithstanding the inconsistencies in the Biafran government's campaign for support, most publications revolved around the central theme of asserting the existence of a Biafran

nationhood in which the nation's members sought to collectively construct a strong and stable modernized state. This theme was an appeal to the global powers that might benefit from an oil-rich African state that was politically and economically stable. More importantly, it seemed that Biafra's leaders were using this central theme to appeal to members of the OAU, which had been designated as the primary arbitrator in resolving the war. Consequently, the ideas that Biafran publications often put forth were used to gain the attention of the leaders who possessed pan-Africanist or nonaligned sentiments, or both. In either case, this central theme distinguished between a Biafran nation that was able to modernize without losing their traditional identity, and tribal Northern Northerners who desired power in the modern era yet remained strident in their tribal loyalties.

## Conclusion

On 11 January 1970, Lt.-Col. Ojukwu fled the Biafran territory and arranged for Major-General Philip Effiong to administer the Biafran government. At 6:00a.m. of that day, Biafran radio broadcasted a pre-recorded message from Ojukwu stating, “Our detractors may see this move as a sign of collapse of our struggle, or an escape from my responsibilities.” In the same recording, however, Ojukwu assured Biafrans, “I am now traveling out of Biafra to explore with our friends all these proposals further and fully and to be at hand to settle these issues to the best of my ability, always serving the interests of my people.”<sup>1</sup> It did not take long for Ojukwu’s statement to lose its veneer of confidence, as Philip Effiong announced Biafra’s surrender in a broadcast on Biafran radio the next day.<sup>2</sup> As Nigeria embarked on the process of reincorporating the Biafran territory into the Nigerian state and recovering from the war, General Gowon announced in a broadcast from Lagos on 15 January 1970 that “the dawn of national reconciliation” had begun in the Nigerian state.<sup>3</sup>

As the outcome of the war proved, the Biafran government failed to reach its goal marshalling enough international support to pressure Nigeria to withdraw from the war and recognize Biafra’s existence as a separate state. France and a number of less-influential states, notably Portugal and the white minority regimes in southern Africa, unofficially supported Biafra and actively supplied the region with arms and other forms of military assistance.<sup>4</sup> The steady supply of arms and other forms of support from these states were

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<sup>1</sup> A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, ed., “Ojukwu’s Message as he Flees Biafra,” *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: a documentary sourcebook, Vol. 2* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 449-450.

<sup>2</sup> “Lt.-Col. Effiong Announces Surrender of Biafra,” in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 2*, 451-2.

<sup>3</sup> “‘The Dawn of National Reconciliation’ – Gowon’s Victory Message to the Nation, 15 January 1970,” in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 2*, 457-461.

<sup>4</sup> An example of France’s public show of support for Biafra can be found in “De Gaulle Announces Support for Biafra,” in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 2*, 329.

welcomed by Biafra's leaders, but only helped Biafran troops to delay Biafra's surrender and prolong the suffering of the millions of peoples who remained in Biafra.

In unofficially supporting Biafra, the leaders of these states, for the most part, echoed the arguments of the Biafran government, declaring that the secessionist region's peoples had the right to self-determination – to live freely in a state in which their well-being and survival was not threatened.<sup>5</sup> However, doubts regarding France's underlying motives existed in the international community, as many observers argued Paris' real aim was to undermine British and, to a lesser extent, United States influence in West Africa, and gain access to Nigeria's growing oil industry.<sup>6</sup> Portugal – holding steadfast to its African colonies – was also believed to be seeking to expand its influence in the West African region, using its colonies in southern Africa, Angola and Mozambique, as bases for offering the secessionist region support.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Rhodesia and South Africa, the white minority regimes supported the disintegration of the Nigerian state in hopes of weakening the resolve of African leaders to maintain pan-Africanist solidarity, which included pushing for the liberation of the white minority-ruled colonies of southern Africa.<sup>8</sup> However, all of these pro-Biafra states and colonies stopped short of officially recognizing Biafra's existence as a state. France and Portugal were constrained by the Charter of the United Nations, which obligated member-states to respect and preserve the territorial integrity of other member-states, including Nigeria. The Portuguese colonies and white minority regimes of southern Africa, meanwhile, did not have the internationally-recognized authority to officially support Biafra.

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<sup>5</sup> France's Council of Ministers publicized the argument that Biafra had the "right to self-determination" in Paris on 31 July 1968. This statement can be found in "Pro-Biafran Statement by France's Council of Ministers," in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 2*, 245-6.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of France's role in the war, see Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: the diplomatic history of the Biafran war, 1967-70* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972), 194-209.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>8</sup> Oye Ogunbadejo, "Nigeria's Foreign Policy under Military Rule, 1966-79," *International Journal* 35, No. 4, Africa's Prospects (Autumn 1980): 757.

Biafra received official recognition as a state from just five states – Tanzania recognized Biafra on 13 April 1968; Gabon, Cote D’Ivoire, and Zambia followed Tanzania’s lead in May 1968. The progress of Africa, these supporters reasoned, depended on the peaceful co-existence of African groups; accepting the Biafran line, peace was seen to depend on permanently separating Biafra from Nigeria rather than its forcible reincorporation. Thus, official support from these states did not stem from belief in Biafra’s importance to the progress of Africa, but from a conviction that the secession would contribute to the stability of West Africa and Africa as a whole. Haiti, the only non-African state to recognize Biafra’s secession, declared its official support on 22 March 1969. In recognizing Biafra, President Duvalier proclaimed that it was Haiti’s duty as “the first independent Negro Republic in the world” to be an example and a source of inspiration for the government and peoples of Africa.<sup>9</sup> However, Duvalier’s reasoning for Haiti’s recognition of Biafra was peculiar, as the Haitian leader never explicitly stated why Haiti supported the secessionist region.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Haiti’s recognition of Biafra proved to be inconsequential, chiefly because Port-au-Prince was in no position to assist the secessionist cause and, second, owing to Haiti’s minimal international influence.

### **Nigerian Responses to the Biafran Government’s Campaign for Support**

In relation to any secessionist movement, most state governments perceive the deprivation of state territory as damaging to three major state interests – security, wealth and prestige.<sup>11</sup> This perception remained true for the Federal Military Government of Nigeria during Biafra’s secession, as Nigerian leaders desperately sought to restore Nigeria’s

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<sup>9</sup> “Statement by Dr. Francois Duvalier, President of the Republic of Haiti, on the Recognition of Biafra as a Sovereign State of Biafra” (22 March 1969).

<sup>10</sup> Crawford Young, “Comparative Claims to Political Sovereignty: Biafra, Katanga, Eritrea,” in *State Versus Ethnic Claims: African policy dilemmas*, eds. Victor A. Olorunsola and Donald Rothchild (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), 208.

<sup>11</sup> Viva Ona Bartkus, *The Dynamic of Secession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 54.

territorial integrity, even at the cost of innumerable lives of those whom they still recognized as Nigerian. Unlike the Biafran government, the Nigerian government did not need active international support to win the war. Following a few weeks of disorganization in July and August 1967, the Nigerian army dominated Biafran troops during most of the three-year conflict. Moreover, the leaders of the Western and Mid-West regions, following months of declared neutrality, declared their alliance with the Federal Military Government.<sup>12</sup> The regional leaders' hesitation to ally with the ruling Federal government revealed a persistent disunity among Nigeria's leaders, especially as they weighed their own chances for secession pending the conflict's outcome. For instance, as the East's secession appeared increasingly imminent during the spring of 1967, Obafemi Awolowo announced on 1 May 1967 that Western leaders of thought had agreed to secede if the Eastern region left the Federation.<sup>13</sup> However, Western leaders never acted upon these public warnings, and as the Nigerian army's dominance became evident, Western and other non-Northern leaders backed restoration of Nigeria's territorial integrity rather than its spiralling disintegration.

In spite of limited support for the Biafran state, Nigeria was unable to end the war via military victory before January 1970 because of the combined determination of Biafra's leadership, especially Lt.-Col. Ojukwu, not to surrender and international involvement in either supporting Biafra's war cause or, more importantly, alleviating suffering among the Biafran population through extensive humanitarian efforts. Due to the Biafran government's steadfast resolve, the Nigerian military adopted a strategy of complete encirclement in 1968, cutting off the breakaway republic off from external supporters with the aim of breaking

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<sup>12</sup> Joshua B. Forrest, *Subnationalism in Africa: ethnicity, alliances, and politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004), 164.

<sup>13</sup> "Awolowo Promises West will secede if the East does," in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, Vol. 2*, 114-8.

Biafran will and to compel the secessionist leadership's surrender. This strategy of attrition inevitably caused the widespread suffering of Biafran civilians which, as this study has shown, the Biafran government used to gain international attention towards the war.

Nevertheless, the Nigerian government was aware of Biafra's success in attracting such attention to the plight of Biafra's population. Though Biafra had not gained significant official recognition, the Biafran government had achieved great success in eliciting a supportive international response to the staggering civilian suffering. Even those state governments that refused to support the secessionist region admitted to the effectiveness of the Biafran government's campaign for support. Prime Minister Wilson, for instance, conceded that Biafra's campaign, which had attacked Britain as complicit in the genocide against Biafrans due to their military support to Nigeria, made a profound impression on public opinion in Britain, as well as in the British Parliament, which both shifted in sympathy toward providing support for Biafrans during the secession.<sup>14</sup> As the opposing side in the conflict, the Nigerian state was the most obvious target for blame, and Biafran press releases quickly tagged the Nigerian encirclement tactic a genocidal one.<sup>15</sup> To combat potential international outcry against Nigeria's actions as the war carried on and Biafran suffering magnified, the Nigerian government increasingly released publications arguing that the secession was not a people's struggle for survival, but a part of an ongoing internal struggle with disunity and sub-nationalisms among Nigeria's leaders vying for power.

Nigerian leaders addressed the same target audiences as the Biafran government, attempting to reveal what they viewed to be the "truth" in the ongoing crisis and clarify the

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<sup>14</sup> Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, 36.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of international press releases from Markpress News Feature Service, *Press Actions: abridged edition* (Geneva: Biafran Overseas Press Division) emphasizing Nigeria's genocide against Biafra include: "Genocide Proved: Nigeria says it will shoot down even mercy planes," (8 July 1968), "Investigate Genocide of Biafrans as well as Killing of White Relief Workers, says Biafra to Red Cross," (8 October 1968), and "A Policy of Genocide No Longer Denied," (28 June 1969).

misleading “stories” that were being presented by the Biafran side.<sup>16</sup> Most of the Federal Military Government’s attention focused on discrediting the Biafran campaign, particularly accusations that Nigerians had been attempting to commit genocide against Easterners since the colonial era. The Federal Military Government’s history of Nigeria did not contain narratives of barbarism among Northerners or deliberate attacks against Easterners. Nigeria’s leaders and intellectuals urged the peoples of Biafra, Nigerians and international observers to understand that the supposed “pogroms” of mid-1966 were neither a Northerner attack on Biafrans, nor an ethnic conflict between the Hausa and Ibo. One Nigerian government publication noted how millions of Ibo were living peacefully in Nigeria during the secession: “Ibos are holding high positions and over 2 million Ibos live in areas under Federal control... Many thousands live in other parts of Nigeria, including the States in the North. There are Ibos in the Nigerian Armed Forces fighting rebellion alongside their Nigerian comrades.”<sup>17</sup> Other publications, such as *Ibos in a United Nigeria* and *Unity in Diversity*, looked ahead to post-war Nigeria in which the Eastern region was, once again, a part of the Nigerian state and contributing to Nigerian nation-building.

Publications from the Nigerian Government usually stressed Nigeria’s desire to preserve its territorial integrity, often through the slogan of “One Nigeria.” For Federal leaders, it was also important to reveal that Nigeria’s ethnic diversity was common among most African and non-African states, and no impediment to national unity so long as all of the state’s distinguishable groups did not threaten stability by seceding. Additionally, the Nigerian government argued that many Western powers with similarly diverse populations

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<sup>16</sup> “Background Notes on the Events in Federal Republic of Nigeria: Creation of States,” *Nigerian Record* (Washington, D.C.: Embassy of Nigeria), 1 April 1968, accessed at Clearing House for Nigeria/Biafra Information, *Nigeria/Biafra Information Collection [microform]* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Photoduplication Department, 1973), Reel 5 of 7.

<sup>17</sup> Federal Ministry of Information, *Nigeria Answers Questions* (Lagos: Nigerian National Press), 6, accessed at Butenschon, *Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform]*, Reel 3 of 5.

and minority groups – the Welsh and Scottish nationalists of Great Britain and the Bretons of France were just two examples cited – had thrived as modern states.<sup>18</sup>

The Federal Military Government's publication campaign was a limited influence in the war's outcome; the Nigerian army's dominance of Biafran troops dictated the events and processes of the war from late 1967 to the surrender of the Biafran government in early 1970. The most significant impact of the Nigerian government's publication campaign was actually its continued prevalence in Nigerian diplomacy following the secession.<sup>19</sup> Before 1967, the Nigerian government attributed little importance to propaganda in diplomacy, especially as a state that suffered from internal sub-nationalist rivalries. Publications distributed from the Federal Ministry of Information and other press outlets organized by the Federal government remained minimal at the beginning of the secession, and continued to be dwarfed by the Biafran government's publication campaign for the duration of the war. However, following the end of the conflict, the Nigerian government expanded and added to its external publicity organs.

Most African leaders were also reluctant to risk their economic relationship with the Federal Military Government of Nigeria which, during the war, had consciously developed into one of Africa's strongest trading partners.<sup>20</sup> From 1966 to 1972, Nigeria's bilateral trade pacts with other African states had increased from nine to over twenty-five.<sup>21</sup> Finally, African leaders Nigerian leaders also took initiative to appeal to the pan-Africanist movement by emphasizing its determination to liberate the remaining colonies on the continent. In late 1968, the Federal Military Government advocated an increase in the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>19</sup> Olajide Aluko, *Essays on Nigerian Foreign Policy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 120.

<sup>20</sup> For discussion of economic factors in the reluctance of African leaders to side with Biafra, see Aluko, *Essays on Nigerian Foreign Policy*, 26-7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 30.

contributions made by all African states to the special fund of the Liberation Committee in the OAU, which offered military supplies, food, clothing and other forms of assistance to encourage liberation movements in regions such as South Africa and Rhodesia where African rule had not yet emerged. Furthermore, the Nigerian government increased its own contributions to the liberation movements through the Liberation Committee.<sup>22</sup>

The Federal Military Government also altered its position in relation to the non-aligned movement.<sup>23</sup> During the early 1960s, the Balewa government did adopt a public stance of non-alignment. In reality, however, the Nigerian government's actual participation in the non-aligned movement was rather hypocritical, as the Balewa regime willingly adopted a pro-West stance in many instances, strengthening the Nigerian state's trading relationships with the United States and Great Britain, in particular, for the purpose of facilitating Nigeria's economic growth.<sup>24</sup> The secession and war provided an impetus for the Gowon regime to stray from the Balewa government's openness to foreign assistance, especially as the Biafran government argued that the Nigerian state had become caught in the throes of neo-colonialism. Following the war, the Gowon regime became more assertive in emphasizing Nigeria's independence in its relations with the global powers following the war.

### **International Reluctance to Support the Secession**

Regardless of the wealth of publications released and distributed throughout the world by both sides of the conflict, most state governments were reluctant to become directly involved in the war. From a political perspective, most state governments throughout Africa

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<sup>22</sup> Aluko, *Essays on Nigerian Foreign Policy*, 26-7. Also see Timothy M. Shaw, "Introduction: Nigeria as Africa's Major Power," in *Nigerian Foreign Policy: alternative perceptions and projections*, eds. Timothy M. Shaw and Olajide Aluko (London: Macmillan, 1983).

<sup>23</sup> Aluko, *Essays on Nigerian Foreign Policy*, 122-3.

<sup>24</sup> Ogunbadejo, "Nigeria's Foreign Policy under Military Rule, 1966-79," 762-3.

and the rest of the world maintained neutrality. In most cases, state governments were constrained by their membership in the United Nations or the Organization of African Unity, or both organizations – Nigeria had become a member in the UN and the OAU during the early 1960s – which obligated member-states to respect the territorial integrity of other member-states and to exercise “non-interference in the internal affairs of States.”<sup>25</sup> These restrictions even limited the participation of those state governments which sought to actively support Biafra’s secession, notably France, because of their aversion to violating the UN Charter and risking their international reputation and existing diplomatic relationships.

On the other hand, the OAU, ceding to pressure from the UN and pan-Africanists into taking on an active role to end the crisis, agreed to negotiate an end to the war. Though agreeing to serve as the mediator between the Nigeria and the secessionist region of Biafra, the peace talks organized and mediated by the OAU during mid-1968 and early 1969 all failed to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The OAU, it seemed, struggled with how to reconcile the mass human suffering on the secessionist region’s side of the conflict with its principle to respect territorial integrity and non-interference in a situation deemed to be an “internal affair.” Members of the OAU were also far from unanimous in their stance on the crisis, as evidenced by the official recognition of Biafra by four African states. Consequently, the OAU’s impact on resolving an end to the war was rather limited considering its prominent role as a mediator between Nigeria and the secessionist region.

Aside from the continuing supply of arms to Nigeria from Great Britain and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union, as well as the assistance afforded to Biafra by France and Portugal, state governments outside of Africa did not become directly involved on either side of the

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<sup>25</sup> Organization of African Unity Charter, “OAU Charter,” Article 3, Number 2, accessed Spring 2010, [http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Treaties/text/OAU\\_Charter\\_1963.pdf](http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Treaties/text/OAU_Charter_1963.pdf).

conflict. However, the general inaction of the international community in the war was not because the Biafran government's campaign for support was perceived to be ineffective or unconvincing. Rather, international inaction was largely the result of a number of self-interests and diplomatic restrictions that, in all but five states, trumped any desire to officially support Biafra's existence as a state.

The Biafran government's campaign for support, however, did play a major role in publicizing the suffering that the population of Biafra were experiencing during the war, generating strong responses to the crisis in Western media and influencing initiatives by non-governmental organizations which combined to produce one of the largest humanitarian efforts on the African continent in the twentieth century. Humanitarian support for the secessionist region became particularly evident beginning in 1968, when the Biafran government, as well as visiting journalists and other outside observers, increasingly detailed the suffering of Biafrans with wrenching images and descriptions of starving, diseased and dying men, women and children. Thus, support for Biafra from the United States, Great Britain and a number of other states was rooted in humanitarianism rather than in some political or ideological sentiment that favoured the secessionist region. However, some leaders were hesitant to even show governmental support to humanitarian initiatives, reasoning that extending humanitarian support to Biafra could be perceived by Nigerians as straying from neutrality and an act of war.<sup>26</sup> For Canada, in particular, where public sympathy for Biafra was quite prominent, the government led by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau was troubled by its own issues with the possible secession of Quebec.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Brewin and MacDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy*, 51.

<sup>27</sup> Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, 324.

The mobilization of humanitarian efforts for the civilians of the secessionist region also helped to mute any public support for Nigeria, causing a perception that the Federal side was not as well-supported as it was in reality.<sup>28</sup> It is clear that, aside from some vocal African leaders and intellectuals, most international observers were primarily reacting to the images and descriptions of the starving, diseased and dying men, women and children of Biafra rather than the ideas associated with the nation, ethnicity, or modernization in Biafran publications. On the other hand, the Biafran campaign's success in attracting attention compelled the Nigerian government to organize its own campaign to assure international audiences of Nigeria's viability as a strong and stable state, and to counter the arguments put forth in Biafran publications. Indeed, in spite of the Biafran government's failure to garner enough international support to pressure Nigeria into conceding defeat, the Biafran campaign for support demonstrated how Nigerians, whether pro-Biafran or pro-Nigerian, attributed great importance to conveying their acceptance and understanding of the nation and modernization as members of an African state.

### **The Legacy of Biafra's Secession**

The Eastern region's reincorporation into the Nigerian state in January 1970 did not end Nigerian discourse on the legitimacy and meaning of the Biafran nation. Lt.-Col. Ojukwu, who would be exiled to the Ivory Coast for the next thirteen years, issued a final statement through the Markpress News Feature Service in Geneva, which was reproduced verbatim in *The Times* on 16 January 1970, four days following Biafra's surrender. Ojukwu conceded that military resistance against Nigeria had become futile, and that the starvation of Biafrans had become too catastrophic to continue fighting the war. However, Ojukwu also

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<sup>28</sup> Young, "Comparative Claims to Political Sovereignty: Biafra, Katanga, Eritrea," 209.

proclaimed: “Biafra lives. The struggle continues. Long live the Republic of Biafra.”<sup>29</sup> In the forty years since the end of the crisis, Nigerians have continued to examine the secession, either supporting or disputing its legitimacy.

During the 1970s, these contributions consisted mostly of personal and fictional accounts from those who participated, willingly or unwillingly, in the crisis. In 1971, N.U. Akpan recounted his experiences as a military officer and Cabinet member of Eastern Nigeria and Biafra until the end of the war, providing an interesting depiction of Ojukwu, who was presented in Biafran publications during the war as the foremost leader of the “Biafran Revolution” and in war-time Nigerian publications as an elitist lusting for power. Akpan’s descriptions of Ojukwu, on the other hand, revealed the Biafran leader’s strengths and flaws, noting that in spite of his genuine belief that Biafra’s separation from Nigeria was for the benefit of Nigeria and Africa, Ojukwu failed as a leader because he was driven by personal ambitions to succeed as a state leader.<sup>30</sup> Other authors similarly attempted to present the war in less partisan terms. S.O. Mezu’s *Behind the Rising Sun* and Flora Nwapa’s *Never Again*, for example, were both fictionalized accounts that aimed to detail the lives and struggles of civilians during a crisis, showing how their concerns were directed at the well-being and day-to-day survival of their family and community rather than the “Biafran Revolution” or the pursuit for “One Nigeria.”<sup>31</sup>

However, in most cases, personal accounts published during the 1970s were markedly one-sided, recalling the campaigns for support of the Biafran and Nigerian governments. Nigerians generally appeared to desire to move away from the crisis, as most Nigerian

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<sup>29</sup> “Ojukwu’s Call from Exile,” in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, Vol. 2, 453-6.

<sup>30</sup> N.U. Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession: a personal account of the Nigerian civil war* (London: Frank Cass, 1972).

<sup>31</sup> S.O. Mezu, *Behind the Rising Sun* (London: Heinemann, 1972). Flora Nwapa, *Never Again* (Enugu: Nwamife, 1975).

scholars and authors neglected to analyze or detail a period in Nigeria's history in which well over one million people were killed to prevent the Nigerian state's potential disintegration. In contrast, pro-Biafran publications continued the campaign to legitimize Biafra's secession. Wole Soyinka, a renowned Nigerian writer who spent much of the war in prison after being arrested by Federal authorities for attempting to independently broker peace talks, released his prison notes from the war in 1972. Soyinka used arguments resembling the Biafran government's accusations against the leaders of Nigeria, arguing that Nigerian leaders were "power profiteering" at the expense of the progress of Africa and attacking those who threatened their position of power.<sup>32</sup> In 1973, Chinua Achebe, a widely-regarded Ibo writer, contributed a volume of poems on the war highlighting the suffering and destruction of the war, contrasting a sympathetic view of Biafrans with cruel depictions of Nigerian leaders and troops.<sup>33</sup> In *Nigeria: the challenge of Biafra*, Arthur Nwankwo, co-author of *Biafra: making of a nation* during the war, continued to proclaim the importance of the "Biafran revolution," asserting that "Nigeria must learn from Biafra's attempts to represent the cause of the black man."<sup>34</sup> In contrast was Elechi Amadi, an Eastern Nigerian writer who published his experiences as a prisoner in Biafra and soldier for the Federal army during the war in 1973's *Sunset in Biafra*, one of the only personal accounts of the 1970s to clearly oppose Biafra's secession in favour of loyalty to Nigeria in spite of its disunity.<sup>35</sup> Notwithstanding the lack of objective analysis on the war, these accounts provide additional evidence of how soldiers and civilians involved in the war viewed the secession and war as a fight for progress and unity rather than a battle to survive.

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<sup>32</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died: prison notes of Wole Soyinka* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

<sup>33</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Christmas in Biafra and other Poems* (New York: Doubleday, 1973).

<sup>34</sup> Arthur Nwankwo, *Nigeria: the challenge of Biafra* (London: Rex Collins, 1972). Quote is taken from Nwankwo's conclusion.

<sup>35</sup> Elechi Amadi, *Sunset in Biafra: a civil war diary* (London: Heinemann, 1973).

Since the end of the 1970s, personal accounts of the war have become more prevalent. In 1980, Olusegun Obasanjo, a Nigerian military officer during the war and the Head of State of a military-led Nigeria in the late 1970s, effectively stated that the reason for an increased desire to examine the war was, simply, the passing of time: “I believe that the wounds inflicted by the war are by now sufficiently healed to enable some of the active participants to recall in writing their experiences, thoughts, actions and comments as they occurred.”<sup>36</sup> Most publications, however, have continued to be written by those who served on the Biafran side, suggesting the conflict’s legacy remains more salient for them. In 1989, Lt.-Col. Ojukwu finally recounted his experiences as Biafra’s foremost leader during the war in *Because I Am Involved*. Ojukwu stated that he did not regret his actions during the secession, and reiterated many of the arguments he put forth during the war, declaring he was simply striving for unity in order to further the progress of Africans and the African continent.<sup>37</sup>

Most accounts since the beginning of the 1980s have been concerned with providing a more accurate portrayal of the war instead of examining its ideological importance to African progress and unity. These accounts have also blurred the line between the pro-Biafran and pro-Nigerian sides. In 1985, Bernard Odogwu, the Director of Military Intelligence for Biafra during the secession, published a personal account, asserting he was driven to present an accurate depiction of the crisis rather than re-develop pro-Biafran sentiments among readers.<sup>38</sup> Hilary Njoku, a senior military officer in Eastern Nigeria who was jailed for much of the war by Ojukwu for alleged insubordination, similarly provided insight into some of the actual events and processes of the crisis, namely the personal trauma and suffering that

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<sup>36</sup> Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: an account of the Nigerian civil war, 1967-70* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980), x.

<sup>37</sup> Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Because I Am Involved* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1989).

<sup>38</sup> Bernard Odogwu, *No Place to Hide: crises and conflicts inside Biafra* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Col., 1985).

civilians experienced during the secession.<sup>39</sup> Novels and individual accounts have continued to be published into the twenty-first century, offering personal perspectives on the war. These include Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a story of the struggles of several civilians during the crisis and an exploration of the grey areas in between identifying one's self as a Biafran or Nigerian, and Samuel Umweni's, *888 Days in Biafra*, a personal account of the author's war-time experiences in a Biafran prison.<sup>40</sup>

### **Conclusion: Constructing Identity and the Biafran Secession**

During the secession and war of the late 1960s, the Biafran government powerfully articulated the vast importance that many Nigerian leaders have long attributed to uniting a diverse population in a modern state into a cohesive nation. The Biafran campaign for support also effectively argued, albeit from an overtly biased perspective, the failure of Nigeria's indigenous leaders in colonial and early independent Nigeria to negotiate a unifying Nigerian identity that bound the region's numerous distinct ethnic and ethno-regional groups. Though colony- and state-wide unity was widely held to be integral to Nigeria's future stability and well-being, Biafran publications showed how the development of an undisputed Nigerian unity was consistently overpowered by a number of sub-Nigerian loyalties among Nigeria's leaders and their supporters that were often based on a set of unifying factors which included cultural commonalities, shared historical experiences, and mutual territorial backgrounds. Thus, the Biafran government was quite successful in promoting, first, the inherent need for Nigeria's leaders to construct a Nigerian identity in a modern state and, second, the struggles of Nigeria's leaders to build Nigerian nationhood between the region's diverse groups.

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<sup>39</sup> Hilary Njoku, *A Tragedy Without Heroes* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1987).

<sup>40</sup> Chimamanda Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007). Samuel Umweni, *888 Days in Biafra* (New York: iUniverse, 2007).

Though effective in asserting that Nigeria's leaders could only achieve nationhood under constructivist terms, the Biafran government's attempts to promote a Biafran identity can also be described as a constructivist approach to identity. By and large, the primary issue with the Biafran government's construction of a Biafran identity was that, similar to Nigeria, the secessionist region contained numerous identifiable groups that had little basis for developing a common identity or nationhood. Consequently, the Biafran government sought to build and promote the existence of a fixed, undisputed identity shared by the peoples of Biafra that superseded the numerous ethnic identities in the secessionist region. The Biafran government appealed to an integral aspect of modern state politics in attempting to assert the Biafran population's ability to achieve state-wide unity, in spite of its ethnic diversity. The Biafran campaign for support was, in part, based on the argument that the secessionist region would, unlike Nigeria, be politically stable as a sovereign state because the peoples of Biafra subscribed to Biafran nationhood. In a number of publications, Biafra's leaders attempted to prove that the peoples of the secessionist region were, in fact, identifiable as a movement united because of their shared desire to contribute to the well-being and strengthening of the state.

In order to provide evidence that the interests of the Biafran people were consistent with the boundaries of the secessionist region, Biafra's leaders also vigorously sought to build and promote a set of cultural characteristics – namely common historical experiences and shared memories – to which the peoples of Biafra collectively subscribed. Though often exaggerated or altered to fit the Biafran government's aims, Biafran publications frequently included an emphasis on actual events and processes in colonial and early independent Nigeria that could support the idea that the peoples of Biafra had coalesced into a single identifiable group. Most notably, the Biafran government referred to the willingness of a

large number of Easterners to pursue the Western traits, beliefs and practices that allowed for modernization, as well as the leadership of Easterners in contributing to a Nigeria-wide nationalist movement during colonial and early independent eras. A number of publications even included assertions that pre-colonial factors, such as trading and intermarriage, had contributed to the development of a united Biafran people. In any case, such attempts by Biafra's leaders to attach cultural commonalities between the peoples of Biafra were pursued for the purpose of "hardening" a Biafran identity that connected the entire population of the secessionist region. In the context of the state, the Biafran government seemed intent on proving that the Biafran identity was uncontested by the secessionist region's diverse peoples whenever the Biafran state was of concern. Thus, the Biafran government used constructivism to defy any arguments that Biafra would suffer a similar fate to that of Nigeria, whose leaders struggled to negotiate a unifying Nigerian identity between its numerous identifiable sub-Nigerian groups prior to the Eastern region's secession.

In viewing this study within a wider scope, the Biafran government's attempts to project the ability of Biafrans to overcome the sub-Biafran identities within the secessionist region reflects the general instability surrounding identity and the process of identity formation. The failures of Nigeria's leaders to formulate a unifying Nigerian identity between the region's numerous distinct groups, which directly contributed to the Eastern region's secession in May 1967, confirms the ongoing challenges associated with the conceptual debates concerning identity among scholars, who have still yet to agree upon a conclusive definition for the term. Though Biafra's defeat cannot be directly attributed to the shortcomings of the Biafran government's campaign for support, the inability of Biafra's leaders to influence the development of a Biafran identity that bound the Ibo, Edo, Ibibio,

and numerous other identifiable groups within the secessionist region similarly serves to highlight the unstable nature of identity.

Nigeria's success in preserving its territorial integrity and, thus, avoiding state disintegration was not, as the Gowon regime suggested during the war, a turning point that helped to unite the Nigerian population into realizing its "destiny" as a cohesive nation.<sup>41</sup> In the years following the war, the state of Nigeria continued its struggles to develop a unifying Nigerian identity among its diverse peoples. As a result, contrary to General Gowon's assertions, the legacy of the attempted secession was its importance as a compelling reminder of the need to ensure Nigeria's stability by preventing any possible internal unrest in the future. From the beginning of the 1970s, Nigeria's leaders gradually divided the Federation into a larger number of states to allow minority groups the opportunity to gain power at the regional level; by 1996, Nigeria contained 30 states that were, for the most part, created for the purpose of allowing the state's minority groups a base of political power.

In their bid to foster Nigeria's development as a strong and stable state, Nigerian leaders also attempted to transition the state to civilian rule during the 1970s. Unfortunately, the Nigerian state experienced several failed attempts at returning to democratic governance, including the failed regime of Shehu Shagari of 1979-84 and the failed elections of 1993, as well as several military coups and widespread corruption among both military and political regimes that ruled Nigeria from the 1970s to the late 1990s.<sup>42</sup> In 1999, following thirty-three years of struggle to orchestrate a successful transition to civilian rule and accomplish a major step toward peace and stability in the state, Nigeria finally returned to democratic rule with

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<sup>41</sup> *That's False Nyerere*.

<sup>42</sup> Two contributions to the history of Nigeria under military rule include: Olayiwola Abegunrin, *Nigerian Foreign Policy under Military Rule, 1966-1999* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), and Adegboyega Isaace Ajayi, *Military and the Nigerian State, 1966-1993, A Study of the Strategies of Political Power Control* (Trenton: Africa World, 2007).

the election of Olusegun Obasanjo as President. However, in the years since President Obasanjo was elected, Nigeria has continued to suffer from corruption, disputed elections and state-wide instability.<sup>43</sup> As Nigeria's leaders continue their struggles to achieve unity and establish a sense of strength and stability for the Nigerian state in the twenty-first century, the Biafran government's promotion of state-wide unity and modernization in Biafra has long remained a representation of the ideal African state that Nigerian leaders have hoped to achieve.

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<sup>43</sup> See "Chapter 9: Civil Society and Democratic Transition, 1984-2007" in Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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