

Igbo Nationalism and Biafra

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Content

0. Foreword	2
1. Introduction	
1.1 The War and its Legacy	4
1.2 Trapped in Nigeria	8
1.3 Nationalism, Religion, and Global Identities	10
2. Patterns of Ethnic and Regional Conflicts	
2.1 Early Nationalism.....	14
2.2 The Road to Secession	19
3. The Defeat of Biafra	
3.1 Left Alone	23
3.2 After the War.....	27
4. Global Identities and Religion	
4.1 9/11 in Nigeria.....	32
4.2 Christian Solidarity	37
5. Nationalist Organisations	
5.1 Igbo Presidency or Secession.....	39
5.2 Internal Divisions	43
6. Defining Igboness	
6.1 Reaching for the Stars	46
6.2 Secular and Religious Nationalism	50
7. A Secular, Afrocentric Vision	
7.1 A Community of Suffering	54
7.2 Roots	57
7.3 Modernism	61
8. The Covenant with God	
8.1 In Exile	64
8.2 Black Jews.....	68
9. Conclusion.....	74
10. Bibliography	
10.1 Books and Articles	75
10.2 Newspapers and Journals	85
10.3 Igbo Periodicals.....	86

0. Foreword

When I was living in Igboland in 1993 and from 1994 to 1996, there was not much talk about Biafra, the secessionist republic that had been defeated by the Nigerian army in 1970. Not one Igbo politician suggested that his or her people in the southeast of Nigeria should secede again and proclaim a second Biafra. Since 1984, Nigeria had been ruled by the military, and political hopes focused on a return to democracy. Democracy did come in 1999, but it proved a big disappointment. It did not end the marginalisation of the Igbo but led to an increase in the number of ethnic and religious clashes, with Igbo 'migrants' in northern Nigeria as the main victims. It was Nigeria's fourth transition to democracy, and the Igbo lost out again. When I returned to Igboland for brief visits between 2000 and 2007, the option of a new Biafra was widely discussed. Many of my former colleagues at the University of Nsukka seemed to be in favour of the secession project. I talked to supporters of the main separatist organisation, Movement for the Actualisation of a Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), and I discussed the project with members of Ohanaeze, a loose association of Igbo politicians, most of whom had distanced themselves from radical secessionism.

In order to learn more about the resurgence of Igbo nationalism, I collected Igbo periodicals. A few of them, such as the *New Republic*, resembled newspapers; others, like *News Round*, *Eastern Sunset* or *Weekly Hammer* (with eight pages in A4 size), looked more like political pamphlets. Street vendors used back issues as wrapping paper, so they were easy to get. Most of them had been edited not in Igboland, but in Lagos, Nigeria's commercial centre and former capital which is home to a huge Igbo diaspora. Though written in English, these publications are addressed exclusively to an Igbo readership, discussing global and domestic affairs from a nationalist point of view.¹ Articles printed here, no matter their topic, are nationalist in the sense that they assess things from the standpoint of Igbo interests. The same is true of many articles on Igbo websites and of some books and brochures written for an Igbo audience.

Another source of information on Igbo nationalism are statements by Igbo governors, ministers, members of parliament and other professional politicians who are quoted in newspapers, such as *Vanguard* or *Guardian*, and in weekly magazines such as *Newswatch*, *Tell* or *The News* – all with a Nigeria-wide circulation and a multi-ethnic readership.² Nigeria's papers and magazines are among the best in Africa. They try to be balanced in their coverage of ethnic conflicts, and they give reliable information. The same cannot be said of periodicals produced by Igbo nationalists. They provide space for Igbo all over the world to voice their opinions, and they tolerate much controversy, but they are not accurate when reporting facts.

Most of the texts analysed here date from 1999 and later. My focus is on the present Fourth Republic, which has given rise to militant ethnic and religious movements all over the country. In Igboland it has become customary for politicians to present themselves first and foremost as defenders of Igbo interests, and to blame other ethnic groups for Nigeria's failures. They routinely deplore Igbo marginalisation, although many of them do not really care about the welfare of their people. Seeking public office is an avenue to wealth: "almost every rich man in Igboland is involved in politics".³ From the perspective of a radical nationalist movement like MASSOB, these career politicians who claim to represent Igbo interests are nothing but hypocrites. However, since their statements contribute to Igbo nation building, I will regard them as nationalist. Thus my study on Igbo nationalism covers the spectrum of political voices, from radical secessionists to establishment figures who have collaborated with Nigeria's government although it has discriminated against the Igbo for decades.

Nationalist debates deal with a wide range of topics. They comment on political events in Nigeria and abroad, and on social phenomena such as the increase in crime and the threat of occult forces. I will focus on texts that discuss Igbo history and identity (Chapters 6 and 7). My interest, however, is not

¹ As these publications are available only in printed editions, I have indicated the number of the volume and the page number when citing them. A list of these periodicals is given on page 122.

² Since these publications can be accessed through the internet, I have given the titles of the articles that I have cited. In some instances I have quoted from the print editions of *Tell*, *Vanguard* and other publications (which I have collected since 1993). In these cases, the page numbers have been added.

³ *Tell*, 10 March 2003, "Wild, Wild East", p. 22.

just in deconstructing nationalist discourses; I also want to understand the political development that led to the emergence of Igbo separatism. The first four chapters of this study narrate how Igbo leaders came to declare a secessionist republic in 1967, how Biafra lost the war, and how the Igbo have been marginalised ever since. In a deeply divided society like Nigeria, history is told, of course, in very different ways, reflecting the collective experiences of Muslims or Christians, Northerners or Southerners, or ethnic groups such as the Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa-Fulani. Ethnic groups or 'nations' are seen today as the main political actors, endowed with a common interest and a collective will. Most of them, however, are a recent creation. In the case of the Igbo, the idea that they belong together only emerged in colonial times under the influence of Western-educated elites.⁴ As will become clear in the discussion of nationalist discourses, Igbo identity is inchoate and fragile, and defined by very divergent interests and aspirations.

The following account of Nigerian history (in Chapters 1 to 4) is biased in several respects. First, its purpose is simply to reconstruct the political environment that has shaped Igbo nationalism. Thus when describing political events, I often add how they were perceived by Igbo.

Second, my own understanding of Nigerian history is influenced by my residence in Igboland, where it was common to discuss political affairs from an Igbo/Christian point of view. However, my study highlights aspects of Nigerian history that have normally been ignored or glossed over by Igbo nationalists. It also explains, though only briefly, how members of other ethnic and religious groups have interpreted major events.⁵ In order to present and compare these different perspectives, my historical narrative concentrates on a few periods of intense crisis that exposed antagonistic interests and attitudes: the military coups in 1966 and the ensuing war, the annulled election in June 1993 and the riots in the city of Jos in September 2001.

Third, after having read much of the literature on the civil war, it is obvious to me that the Igbo and other people from the Southeast suffered monstrous crimes. The pogroms of 1966 in northern Nigeria led to the expulsion of about a million people, and the food blockade imposed by the Nigerian government during the war killed a large part of the Biafran population. Thus it is legitimate, in my opinion, that nationalist organisations such as Ohanaeze demand compensation, primarily in the form of a power-sharing arrangement that would help to put an end to Igbo marginalisation. Moreover, I can understand the MASSOB separatists' dream of an independent republic where Igbo can manage their own affairs without interference by others. However, I have the impression that the campaign for a new Biafra has not improved the situation of the Igbo. Independence is not in sight. The threat to secede may have been just a means to compel the federal government to listen to Igbo demands. But this threat does not work because other Nigerians assume that the Igbo cannot risk secession. Their home area is landlocked, overpopulated, and with little industry, so it would not be a viable state.

If separatism is not a realistic option, what else can the Igbo do? Their capacity to influence politics at the federal level will remain very circumscribed. Thus it might be better for them to concentrate on improving the political situation in Igboland. I agree with critics of MASSOB who suggested that the Igbo nationalists should strive, first of all, to get their own elites under control: to check the excesses of Igbo governors and local government chairmen, and make them responsive to popular demands. With this purpose in mind, it would be better not to boycott state elections but to ensure that elections work.⁶ In Anambra, one of the five Igbo states, citizens reclaimed their local democratic institutions by fighting electoral malfeasance and chasing a corrupt governor out of office.

My analysis of Igbo historical experiences is done with a practical problem in mind: how can the Igbo get out of their predicament? In this respect, my study is a response to debates which are largely confined to Igbo publics – in Nigeria and the worldwide diaspora. I started participating in these debates as a lecturer at the University of Nsukka. At that time I was puzzled as to why so few Igbo politicians had joined the movement against military rule. There had been a chance to topple the regime, when

⁴ Nnoli 1980: 35–36; Harneit-Sievers 2006: 16, 67.

⁵ I learnt about political thinking among the Hausa-Fulani and the ethnic minorities in the North when I participated, from October 2000 to December 2002, in a research project on northern Nigeria sponsored by the University of Frankfurt.

⁶ Pini Jason and others, in *New Republic*, Vol.4, No. 6, 2006: 5–7, 12.

General Babangida annulled the presidential election of June 1993. However, only a minority of Igbo leaders was ready to fully support the pro-democracy movement which was dominated by politicians from Yorubaland, in southwest Nigeria. The reluctance to form reliable alliances with politicians of other ethnic groups has much to do with the way Igbo remembered the pogroms of 1966 and the civil war, 1967 to 1970. Nationalist discourses emphasise that the Igbo cannot trust other Nigerians and that the Igbo are outsiders because they tend to be more talented and successful than those living around them. Many Igbo liken their history to that of the Jews; some even claim descent from Jews who migrated to West Africa in Biblical times.

Claiming Jewish roots or talking of a common destiny appears arbitrary and phantasmagoric: an invention that obscures and distorts their historical experiences. However, it is more than a self-mythification. Telling stories about being God's chosen people who were destined to suffer, or about the Holocaust survivors who built their own successful state may help to deal with the trauma of the past. They organise collective experiences, and they link the Igbo to political and religious forces outside Africa. By comparing themselves with ancient and contemporary Jews, they can reflect their experience as a people and discuss who they are and what they are striving for. Nationalism can be used as a force of self-transformation. Thus it makes sense to experiment with alien identities. Nevertheless, I would argue in the case of the Igbo that assuming to be (like) Jews has, on the whole, a negative effect, as it alienates them from other Nigerians.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The War and Its Legacy

<1>

The return to democracy in 1999, after fifteen years of military rule, had an unexpected effect among the Igbo. It did not strengthen their identification with the Nigerian state but led to the emergence of a secessionist movement. Within two years of its foundation in November 1999, the Movement for the Actualisation of a Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) became the most popular political organisation in Igboland. The enthusiasm for a new Biafra Republic is strange, given the fact that the first Biafra (1967–1970), has been associated with traumatic experiences. When the Igbo proclaimed an independent state, the federal government in Lagos declared a war against the 'rebels' in its Eastern Region. The 30-month civil war may have claimed the lives of about a million people,⁷ many of them civilians who were starved to death by a food blockade which the Nigerian army imposed on Biafra. News of the humanitarian catastrophe led to a wave of protests in Europe and North America, with calls for a ceasefire and an arms embargo. But although public opinion was largely pro-Biafran, governments did not change their pro-Nigerian stance. Biafra remained almost completely isolated. Western governments and the Soviet Union, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the Arab world, all sided with Nigeria. It looked as if Biafra were confronted with an "international conspiracy"⁸ that defied all religious and ideological antagonisms. The only open support came from the International Red Cross, Caritas and the World Council of Churches that flew in relief material, and from four African countries: Tanzania, Gabon, Cote d'Ivoire and Zambia, that accorded international recognition to Biafra. There was also some covert

⁷ Estimates vary considerably. The only way to obtain reliable figures would have been to take a sample of regions in southeast Nigeria and inquire about the number of casualties. Harneit-Sievers (1992: 285) found in his research area that about ten percent of the population had died as a consequence of the war. If figures in other regions were similar, then the assumption of about one million casualties would be realistic.

⁸ Odumegwu Ojukwu, in *The Source*, 2 June 1997, "Why We Lost", p. 8.

support: the French government supplied weapons, though only belatedly and not in large enough quantities for the encircled Biafrans to repel the Nigerian army.⁹

<2>

Nigeria's main backer, the British government, made it clear that it would not bow to public pressure. It did not stop or reduce its arms supplies, even when the Nigerian air force shot down a Red Cross plane that had defied the blockade to bring food into Biafra. General Yakubu Gowon, the head of Nigeria's junta, was equally determined to see Biafra collapse. His regime refused to agree to a ceasefire, and ruled out any compromise: "This war must be fought to the finish".¹⁰ Why did Biafra not surrender? Its troops were poorly armed and vastly outnumbered. By October 1968, 15 months after the Nigerian invasion, all major cities had been lost and Biafra was reduced to a quarter of its original territory: a stretch of land less than 200 km long and 50 to 100 km wide, in its middle an airstrip where up to 40 planes landed each night, loaded with arms and hunger aid.¹¹ Biafra's leader, General Odumegwu Ojukwu, had no chance of military victory. His only hope lay with the international community which had to be swayed by humanitarian considerations to intervene on behalf of the secessionists: "Our aim all along has been to delay the enemy until the world conscience can effectively be aroused against genocide".¹² Biafran propaganda, backed by a public relations firm in Geneva, tried to convince the world that the Igbo were fighting a desperate war of survival against a regime of mass murderers that would annihilate them if they surrendered.¹³ Towards the end of the war, though, Biafra's news policy changed, as an official of its Directorate of Propaganda recalled: "Mere sentiment in our propaganda was getting nowhere ... the threat of genocide was no longer credible and simply not true".¹⁴ So it was suggested to "play down the starvation issue" and "portray Biafra as a viable state" that firmly defended its right of self-determination.¹⁵

<3>

Most Igbo fled when Nigerian troops invaded their towns and villages. They melted into the bush and kept in hiding for most of the war,¹⁶ or they followed the Biafran soldiers into the shrinking, starving, overcrowded enclave that remained cut off from all transport by road and by sea. Journalists who flew into Biafra observed an intense fear among its population: Igbo "believed with varying degrees of conviction that they were fighting for their lives. [...] as the situation became more desperate so the determination to struggle on hardened".¹⁷ Panic about the Nigerian invaders was not simply a result of Biafran propaganda. The Eastern Region was filled with more than a million refugees: the survivors of massacres in northern Nigeria who told graphic stories about the atrocities they had witnessed. Attacks on the Igbo had started there in May 1966, four months after a military coup which had brought an Igbo to power. Initially, the coup against the corrupt civilian regime had been greeted in most places with joy or cautious approval, but General Ironsi's rule soon fuelled suspicions that the coup had been an Igbo take-over. In July, Northern soldiers staged a counter-coup and killed about 200 of their colleagues, most of them Igbo. Under the new military regime, led by Northern officers, hostilities against the Igbo diaspora were not stopped and on September 29 violence exploded. Igbo and to a lesser extent other Easterners were hunted in all parts of the North, by both Muslims and Christians. Soldiers were often involved in the slaughter, instigating and leading

⁹ St. Jorre 1972: 211, 214–218, 229; Cronje 1972: 323; Stanley Diamond 2007: 343; Stremlau 1977: 24–233; Ugochukwu 2010: 16–18.

¹⁰ Obafemi Awolowo, Vice Chairman of Nigeria's Federal Executive Council, in Cronje 1972: 115.

¹¹ Harneit-Sievers 1992: 281; St. Jorre 1972: 272; Cronje 1972: 75.

¹² Odumegwu Ojukwu (1981: 353), in a speech on September 25, 1968.

¹³ Stremlau 1977: 109–117; 320–321; 328;

¹⁴ Uche Chukwumerije, in Stremlau 1977: 328.

¹⁵ Republic of Biafra, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Reviewing our Diplomatic Approach", December 1968, in Stremlau 1977: 321.

¹⁶ St. Jorre 1972: 150, 188–189, 255–257, 265, 268; Cronje 1972: 83, 88.

¹⁷ St. Jorre 1972: 220, 222, 223, 291, 346, 380.

the mobs, while the army leadership proved unable or unwilling to interfere.¹⁸ John de St. Jorre, a journalist with the *Observer* who wrote the most comprehensive history of the war, noted that the junta did not clearly condemn the massacres nor express its regret.¹⁹

<4>

There are no reliable figures about the casualties. From May to October 1966, between 5000 and 10,000 may have died, or perhaps many more.²⁰ The prime aim of the attackers was obviously to drive away the Igbo, although other migrants from the East, such as Ijaw, Ibibio and Efik, were also targeted.²¹ In many cases, local and Regional authorities, including the police, protected and rescued victims, but they made no serious attempt to stop the "ethnic cleansing": "Where local and regional authorities were unwilling or unable to protect them, they were left to their own devices, with little expectation of recourse. And where authorities did intervene on behalf of Igbos, it was generally not to protect their positions in the North or their right to remain there, but most often to escort them out of the region".²²

<5>

About a million people fled to the East where they were taken in by relatives. The west of the country, with the capital Lagos, had remained relatively calm, but even here most Igbo did not dare to stay. After weeks or months of hesitation, about half a million fled eastwards across the Niger.²³ It was only in the Eastern Region that they felt safe, because the July coup had not succeeded here. Lieutenant-Colonel (later General) Ojukwu, the Igbo military governor, did not recognise the central government, though both sides held talks over a new constitution that would allow the Igbo to remain part of Nigeria. Members of the Eastern government argued that their citizens could not feel safe under a federal army that was controlled by Northern officers. So each Region should have its own army. The only way of keeping Nigeria together would be to restructure it as a loose confederation that gave its constituent units far-reaching autonomy. As Ojukwu put it during negotiations in January 1967: "It is better that we move slightly apart and survive, it is much worse that we move closer and perish in the collision".²⁴ However, the military regime in Lagos refused to relinquish its monopoly on violence. In March 1967, it unilaterally decreed that the federal government shall have the right to control the army and to impose a state of emergency on any of the four Regions. Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon knew that these rules were unacceptable to the Igbo leaders, but he assumed that federal troops could easily break any resistance and bring the East back into line. Nobody anticipated a prolonged military confrontation, and when the antagonists found themselves locked in a bitter war with heavy losses, neither was ready to give in.

<6>

Both sides hastily recruited soldiers. At the height of the fighting, the federation had 200,000 men under arms while Biafra had 40,000, compared to a total of 8500 in mid-1966 before the army split.²⁵ Most of the soldiers were ill-trained and ill-disciplined; the federal army in particular lacked experienced officers and an efficient command structure. Its divisional commanders were more reminiscent of "war lords"²⁶ since they ignored orders, attacked with-

¹⁸ Anthony 2002.

¹⁹ St. Jorre 1972: 87, 99, 115.

²⁰ St. Jorre (1972: 86) speaks of 10,000 victims, though he assumes that the most reliable estimates are in between 6000 and 8000. This accords with the figure of 10,000 victims given by Ojukwu in January 1967 during the negotiations at Aburi (Stremlau 1977: 38). It was only later that the Biafran side spoke of 30,000 or 100,000 dead. In a recent *History of Nigeria* Falola and Heaton (2008: 174) put the figure at 80,000 to 100,000.

²¹ Anthony 2002: 86, 106–108.

²² Anthony 2002: 86, 112.

²³ St. Jorre 1972: 87, 98, 100, 102.

²⁴ Kirk-Greene 1971b: 335.

²⁵ St. Jorre 1972: 281; Stremlau 1977: 112.

²⁶ General Alexander, of the International Observer Team that monitored federal troops from August 1968 until the end of the war, in Cronje 1972: 97; cf. St. Jorre 1972: 274.

out prior consultation and often allowed their men to plunder.²⁷ Several massacres, committed by Nigerian troops, confirmed the worst fears of the beleaguered Igbo. Most civilians did not dare to return home when their towns and villages came under control of federal soldiers, yet at the same time there were strange scenes of fraternisation. Hungry Biafran soldiers slipped across to the enemy and returned with loafs of bread, or they attended drinking parties at night, when fighting was normally suspended, and resumed hostilities the next morning.²⁸

<7>

There was no federal policy to wipe out the Igbo population. When Biafran resistance collapsed in January 1970 and the 'rebels' were disarmed, the violence subsided.²⁹ Anxieties abated and the dominant feeling on both sides was relief. In the following months, Igbo began moving back to the northern and western parts of the country where most of them could reclaim their properties. Today there are probably millions of Igbo living in the North, as there are millions in the West, spread into the remotest villages. As traders, artisans and hotel owners they have often been more successful than the indigenous population, yet also more vulnerable to attacks. Since the 1980s, communal conflicts have increased in the North, and though many different groups are involved, Igbo have the impression that they are singled out for aggression: "anytime there is a problem in the north, they begin to kill the Igbo".³⁰ When riots erupted over the introduction of Sharia in 2000 and 2001, large convoys of refugees headed 'back home' to the Southeast, but within weeks or months, most had returned. Igboland does not offer them sufficient economic opportunities, so they are forced to live among people they fear. Since precolonial times their homeland has been one of the most densely populated areas in Africa, with grave consequences: "Perhaps the most important factor conditioning Ibo history in the nineteenth century and in our own time is land hunger. [...] the Ibo pressing against limited land resources had, of necessity, to seek other avenues of livelihood outside the tribal boundaries".³¹ Today the land is eroded and does not yield enough food to sustain its inhabitants. Moreover, there is little industrial production to offer employment or generate revenue, so the population has survived, in part, through remittances sent by their kin in the diaspora.

<8>

The main cause of the decades of insecurity that have plagued the Igbo is their exclusion from power. When the war ended, the federal government promised that there would be 'no victors, no vanquished'. Nigerians were to forget the enmities of the past and make a new start. However, the victors made sure that Igbo did not rise to top positions in the army and that they had little access to political decision making. Of course, all federal cabinets had Igbo faces, and from 1979 to 1983, the Vice President was an Igbo, but their influence on government policy was negligible. As a result, Igboland received minimal public funds to develop its infrastructure and to begin industrialisation. Its road network has decayed, the power supply is erratic, and hospitals have fallen into disrepair. However, Igbo elites who have participated in Nigerian politics as governors, ministers or local government chairmen bear much of the blame for the decay. Though they pose as ardent defenders of Igbo interests, they have often a cynical relationship to their people. They embezzle the money allocated to their states but then blame the federal government for marginalising the Igbo.

²⁷ Stremmlau 1977: 44.

²⁸ Njoku 1990: 171; St. Jorre 1972: 378.

²⁹ St. Jorre 1972: 404, 287.

³⁰ M. C. K. Ajuluchuku, in: *Newswatch*, 10 April 2000, "Why Confederation Is good for Nigeria", p. 14; Onu 2001: 6.

³¹ Dike 1966: 28.

"Nigeria now is like putting a rat, a snake and a cat in a cage.
They can never live in peace".³²

1.2 Trapped in Nigeria

<9>

The exclusion from power affects all Igbo, not just the political elite that compete for government appointments and contracts. What can the Igbo do to overcome discrimination and insecurity? Most Igbo politicians would argue that they have to reach out to representatives of other ethnic groups, build alliances and thus strengthen Igbo influence. The best way to right the wrongs of the past would be for an Igbo to become president and bring the Igbo back into the mainstream of Nigerian politics. Since the end of military rule in 1999, an Igbo presidency has been the main project of Ohanaeze, the most important association of Igbo politicians. Members of Ohanaeze, like other moderate nationalists, want to pursue Igbo interests within the framework of the Nigerian federation, but so far their strategy of cooperation has led them nowhere. Why should politicians from the North, who have dominated the country since independence, hand over power to the Igbo? For radical nationalists, who advocate secession, begging the political establishment in the capital to make an Igbo president is an exercise in futility. MASSOB leader Ralph Uwazuruike predicted that the Igbo will never be allowed to rule Nigeria even if they wait for another 40 years.³³ In his view, those politicians who joined the federal government, promising to fight for Igbo interests, have always settled for minor roles in Nigeria's patronage system. As ministers, permanent secretaries or chairmen of commissions, they have used their offices to line their pockets, not to improve the lot of their people. They were not even able to prevent the introduction of Sharia which has reinforced the marginalisation of the Igbo diaspora and of other Christians living in the North.

<10>

MASSOB has called on the Igbo not to participate in presidential elections. No matter which candidates the Igbo establishment may nominate, the elections will always be rigged by people who hate the Igbo. Trying to overcome this hostility, as moderate politicians have suggested, is dismissed as an illusion because the Igbo are faced with a "pathological hatred"³⁴ that nothing can change. Nationalist pamphlets and newspapers revive memories of the atrocities of the war, illustrating them with photos of starving children. Recalling these horrors is not meant to discourage fighters for a new Biafra but to harden their resolve. It reminds them that there can be no compromise with people who committed such horrendous crimes. The massacres of 1966 and the ensuing war are interpreted as an attempt to exterminate the Igbo, and MASSOB leaders claim that an "unrepentant" Nigeria is still determined "to stamp out our people from the face of the earth".³⁵ Ralph Uwazuruike spoke of a "conspiracy reached between the Hausa and the Yoruba immediately after the war [...] to exterminate the Igbos after 50 years. We are in the 30th year. In the next 20 years, according to their plan, Igbo would be annihilated".³⁶

<11>

Nationalist discourses emphasise historic continuities and construct Igbo collective memory as a chain of violent events that runs through successive generations: "cyclical killings, pogroms, and genocide [have been] committed against the Igbo by Northern nation(s) for over half a century".³⁷ The traumas of the past are recalled to interpret present conflicts, although the political constellations have changed. In the late 1960s, the Igbo stood almost alone against the rest of the federation, but with the resurgence of militant Islam in the 1980s,

³² Ralph Uwazuruike, in *News Magnet*, Vol.6, No. 8, 2003: 3.

³³ *Insider Weekly*, 20 Dec. 2004, "Nothing Works in Nigeria", p. 28.

³⁴ *News Service*, February 2002: 19.

³⁵ Ralph Uwazuruike, in *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 10.

³⁶ *The News*, 17 April 2000, "I Will Bury Nigeria", p. 16.

³⁷ *Eastern Sunset*, Vol. 3, No. 10, 2001: 4.

violence in north Nigeria has been also directed against other Christian minorities. Christian Igbo, Yoruba, Berom and Ibibio have a common interest in defending the secular elements of Nigeria's constitution, although so far they have cooperated only sporadically. Another major change concerns the security forces. Since the 1970s they have no longer participated in communal clashes but tried to suppress them. When riots broke out, Igbo often sought refuge in police stations and army barracks. In most cases, however, state authorities have failed to prosecute the attackers, so there is little hope that hostilities against the Igbo will end. Bouts of violence, which have claimed thousands of lives, keep memories of Biafra alive.³⁸ These memories are a constant reminder to Igbo residents in the North of what may happen to them if they provoke the 'indigenes'. Forty years after their defeat, Igbo still feel like a "conquered people",³⁹ reduced to "second-class citizens".⁴⁰ They cannot shake off discrimination, yet they are not allowed to quit the federation and govern themselves.

<12>

Bitterness and humiliation pervade Igbo society, provoking strong nationalist reactions, yet Igbo nationalism has assumed different forms. Members of the elite who obtain much of their income from holding political offices in Abuja (Nigeria's capital since 1991) or in one of the five Igbo states cannot openly reject the Nigerian federation and opt for secession. They have taken an oath to uphold the Nigerian constitution. Radical attitudes are more freely expressed by the less privileged, especially by younger people who were born after the war.⁴¹ Many of them are well-educated, with academic degrees, but since their career advancement is blocked, they are often unemployed and tend to accuse other Nigerians of discriminating against them. However, moderate and radical nationalists are not separated by clear-cut boundaries. When MASSOB declared a stay-at-home strike against the federation on August 26, 2004, it was respected by civil servants, businessmen and professionals in all parts of Igboland.⁴² Even in Lagos and in Kano, the biggest city of the North, Igbo traders kept their shops closed.⁴³ This does not mean that they have all joined the fight for Biafra. Most Igbo assume that the federal government will not allow them to secede, because their territory is too close to the Niger Delta and its oil fields. And even if Biafra could be achieved, this is not a desirable option to many.⁴⁴ Millions of Igbo, living as traders and artisans in other parts of the country, would have to abandon their investments and return to their overpopulated homeland. Yet they participated in the strike as it gave them the opportunity to vent their anger. MASSOB enjoyed enormous support at that time because its militant rhetoric expressed the sentiments of most Igbo, though not necessarily their political wishes.

<13>

The Igbo establishment has distanced itself from secessionist demands, though most politicians have an ambivalent relationship towards the militants. They resent MASSOB's uncompromising stance because it makes them look like traitors who collaborate with federal authorities merely for personal gain. At the same time they try to profit from the radicalism of the youth, as it is one of the few means to put pressure on the federal government. During the Sharia riots, when scores of Igbo fled the North, even moderate nationalists, such as the governors of the five Igbo states, warned that they would have to reassess "the continued existence of Nigeria".⁴⁵ If the Igbo seceded, so the underlying argument goes, Nigeria would probably implode, and the Hausa-Fulani elites in the North would lose access to the oil resources on the coast. In order to give credence to this threat, Igbo elders needed the

³⁸ In mid-2005, it was estimated "that at least 50,000 people have been killed in various incidents of ethnic, religious and communal violence since the return to civilian rule" in 1999 (Economist Intelligence Unit 2005: 13). Only a small minority of these casualties, however, were Igbo.

³⁹ *Tell*, 5 Nov. 2007, "New Anger of His People", p. 34.

⁴⁰ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 7 [or 8], 2006: 3.

⁴¹ Obianyo 2007: 9.

⁴² *Daily Champion*, 27 Aug. 2004, "MASSOB Shuts down S.East".

⁴³ *Newswatch*, 6 Sept. 2004, "It's Biafra Day", p. 32.

⁴⁴ Daniel Jordan Smith 2007: 195, 205.

⁴⁵ *Newswatch*, 23 Oct. 2000, "Their Stand On Nigeria", p. 16.

menacing scenario of separatist agitation which would only subside if their opponents in the North listened to Igbo demands.

<14>

There is another reason why moderates and radicals, elders and youth have so far avoided a confrontation. MASSOB, as the main separatist movement, has not taken up arms to fight for independence. It claims to be committed to the principle of non-violence, though its strategy to achieve Biafra by peaceful means is just a temporary expedient, dictated by pragmatic considerations because the organisation cannot risk an open confrontation with the security forces. Most Igbo are probably aware that the creation of a secessionist republic would trigger a wave of violence. Hausa-Fulani politicians would try to deploy the army to keep Nigeria intact because their homeland, in the semi-arid north of the country, is as backward and impoverished as neighbouring Chad or Niger Republic.⁴⁶ The wealth of the Hausa-Fulani elite derives from the oil resources in the South, which account for 85 percent of government income.⁴⁷ Without the oil money from the federation account, the authorities in the North could not pay the salaries of their teachers and administrative staff; there would be no funds for road construction and other public investments, and the luxurious lifestyle of the upper classes would be threatened. Keeping the vast country with its 500 ethno-linguistic groups together is, of course, only possible if Nigeria's fractured elites reach some compromise, and this is far from certain. But even if the federation and its army fell apart, it is unlikely that Biafra would emerge in peace. The borders of an Igbo republic are still in dispute, and there is no agreement on who would control the oil fields in the Niger Delta. Representatives of the minorities at the coast have already warned Igbo separatists not to include them in their Biafra project, as was the case in 1967.

1.3 Nationalism, Religion, Global Identities

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The relationship between MASSOB and Ohanaeze will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 5. The focus of this study, however, is not on nationalist organisations but on two other topics:

- on historical events such as the defeat of Biafra and the subsequent discrimination that have shaped Igbo nationalism (discussed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4),
- on current nationalist discourses, especially those that define Igbo identity by referring to Christian ideas and to faraway people such as the Jews (Chapters 6 and 7).

Before I go into the details of how Igbo nationalism emerged and how it changed with the defeat of Biafra, I will summarise the following chapters and identify the main difficulties in narrating Nigerian history. It is unavoidable to talk of collective actors such as 'the Igbo' and 'the Yoruba' or of their 'elites' who have an intense interest in manipulating communal antagonisms. However, these actors are plagued by internal divisions, and their identities are ambiguous. When rival groups clash, their conflicts may be perceived more in ethnic or religious terms, depending on local circumstances. Furthermore, the way conflicts emerge and develop is shaped by global identifications with faraway peoples such as Palestinians and Jews, Americans and Afghans. As I will show by analysing a week of riots in the city of Jos, political alliances and lines of cleavage can shift within a matter of days. This scenario indicates that imagination plays a central role in the definition of conflicts. When Igbo or Hausa-Fulani leaders discuss political strategies and alliances, they have to define their common interest, and this interest depends on who they are.

<16>

Nigeria's political geography has been determined by the cleavages between North and South, Muslims and Christians, and by the antagonism among the three largest ethnic groups: the

⁴⁶ Clapham 2004: 11.

⁴⁷ *The Economist*, 31 March 2010, "Signs of Life".

Hausa-Fulani in the far North, who are overwhelmingly Muslim, the Igbo in the Southeast, who are largely Christian, and the Yoruba in the Southwest, who are evenly divided between Muslims and Christians. Since the end of colonial rule, these groups – or their elites – have vied for control of the central government. The largest, the Hausa-Fulani who constitute about 30 percent of Nigeria's population,⁴⁸ had the upper hand most of the time, and they used their hegemony to advance the cause of Islam. When the Igbo seceded in 1967, they saw the Hausa-Fulani as their main adversary, and emphasised the religious divide between them.

<17>

The civil war, as the separatists interpreted it, was a religious war: "Biafra is a Christian Country, we believe in the ability of the Almighty God to come to the aid of the oppressed and give us victory as he gave victory to young David over Goliath".⁴⁹ Such religious fervour was not just a matter of state propaganda; Europeans who visited Igboland in those years found a widespread "self-consciousness of a Christian state facing a Muslim *jihad*".⁵⁰ For outside observers, this religious interpretation of the war was puzzling, as it seemed to be at odds with the political reality. Nigeria's head of state, General Yakubu Gowon, was a Christian from the Middle Belt, an area between the Muslim North and the Christian South, inhabited by ethnic minorities. His deputy Obafemi Awolowo was a Christian Yoruba, and most of the soldiers who invaded Biafra were also Christians. In the eyes of the Biafrans, however, these alleged Christians had betrayed their faith by siding with the Hausa-Fulani 'jihadists'. While Nigeria's government acted as "a tool of the world moslem league", Biafra defended itself as "the core of Christianity in this part of Africa".⁵¹ Among the beleaguered Igbo, Christianity became an ethnic religion. It seemed as if the God of Israel, who had led his people out of bondage and shown them the Promised Land, was also guiding the Igbo. They were destined to suffer as the Jews had, but in the end they would triumph, as promised in the Bible. Today's nationalists have revived this idea of being a chosen people, closer to God than others. When the Old Testament speaks about the Kingdom of God or the Promised Land, the holy scriptures seem to be referring to a project that has been entrusted to the Igbo. The divine messages are addressed not simply to individual Christians but to the Igbo as a people: "what the Holy Bible said about the Old Biafra and is still saying about the New Biafra".⁵²

<18>

Identifying with the fate of an ancient, mythical people has appealed to the Igbo who had no national history of their own before they were drawn into the orbit of Nigerian politics. However, religion is not a necessary ingredient of Igbo nationalism. The cause of Biafra can be propagated without recourse to the Bible or to pre-Christian religion. Among today's nationalists are former Marxists and pan-Africanists who prefer to define an Igbo identity without a spiritual dimension. In Chapters 6 and 7, I will discuss a secular version of Igbo nationalism, but my main interest is in the relationship between nationalism and religion, a topic which has received little attention in the literature on Africa.⁵³ One important aspect of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria is their global dimension. They link the Igbo, the Hausa-

⁴⁸ The most reliable figures on Nigeria's ethnic composition are to be found in the census of 1952/53, whose main results were reprinted in Larry Diamond (1988: 22). According to these figures, the Yoruba comprised 17, the Igbo 18, the Hausa 18 and the Fulani 10 percent of the population. Ethnic identifications are, of course, fluid, and it is likely that the percentage of people who claim to be Hausa or Hausa-Fulani has increased (Harnischfeger 2006). In the nineteenth century, when the Fulani preacher Usman dan Fodio proclaimed a jihad, the Fulani formed a distinct stratum of conquerors, but most of them gradually adopted the language and often the culture of the numerically dominant Hausa. Thus it has become common to talk of the 'Hausa-Fulani', though on the Jos Plateau and some other areas Hausa and Fulani often prefer to live in separate settlements.

⁴⁹ Odumegwu Ojukwu, 1968, in Walls 1978: 207.

⁵⁰ Walls 1978: 212.

⁵¹ *The Mirror*, a Biafran newspaper, 20 Feb. 1968, quoted in Walls 1978: 209. – Sir Francis Ibiam, a former governor of the Eastern Region, argued in 1968: "If the world, especially the churches, do not help us, we shall all die and Christianity in Nigeria shall die with us" (Omenka 2010: 369).

⁵² *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2006: 6.

⁵³ The most prominent exceptions are Hastings (1997) and Lonsdale (2005).

Fulani and other nations to people outside Africa. Chapter 4 will illustrate the entanglement of ethnic, religious and global identities by examining a conflict in the city of Jos, one of the most contested places in Nigeria. This conflict in September 2001 involved all of the main ethnic groups, yet the cleavages among them shifted within a matter of days. I want to analyse how these groups interacted and which role the Igbo assumed in this setting.

<19>

When violence erupted on September 7, the participants viewed it mainly as an ethnic conflict, pitting Hausa and Fulani 'settlers' from the North, who had migrated to the Jos Plateau in colonial times, against the 'indigenous' Berom, Anaguta and Afisare, on whose ancestral land the city had been founded. This scenario changed when news about the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington reached Jos. Muslim residents, most of them Hausa and Fulani, took to the streets and celebrated victory over the United States. Some of the demonstrators, while shouting anti-US slogans, attacked the shops of Igbo traders and other Christians from the South who had not been involved in the dispute. Two days later, after police and army units had restored order, an estimated 3000 people were dead.

<20>

It is common in northern Nigeria to see the Igbo as representatives of Western civilisation and to involve them in wars by proxy. No other people have so fervently striven to acquire Western education and lifestyle,⁵⁴ and when judging global events, the Igbo are generally more supportive of Western policies than are their fellow-Nigerians. However, as a minority of traders and small businessmen, who enjoy little protection from state authorities, they are anxious to avoid being drawn into local conflicts. Moreover, their relationship with the West is ambivalent. During the Biafra War, 'Christian' nations in the West did not come to their aid but supported their adversaries: "We have constantly been victimized by Muslim aggression. We hoped the outside world would take notice, but we are mistaken. In fact, the British government representing an arch-Christian country has done everything in its power to enable and support Muslims in Nigeria in [their] genocide against Igbo-Biafrans".⁵⁵

<21>

Although the Igbo still tend to side with governments in North America and Europe when global conflicts are concerned, they are more inclined to identify with the Jews who seem to have suffered a similar fate since they were also abandoned, without protection, in the face of genocide. It has become common to assume that Jews and Igbo share basic historical experiences and that their traditional cultures bear many striking similarities, as can be seen from Biblical descriptions of purity taboos, circumcision rites and animal sacrifices. Such similarities have been noted by Bible readers in many parts of Africa, and this gave sometimes rise to the idea that their ancestors were Jews. Claims to a common descent are nearly always fictitious,⁵⁶ but questions of belief are of minor importance in the discourse on Igbo Jewishness. When politicians and intellectuals refer to similarities with the Jews, it does not really matter whether they assume a genealogical link. Most would probably argue that common cultural and personality traits are due to common historical experiences. But this makes speculation about similarities and differences no less attractive.

<22>

Comparing themselves with Jews is attractive for various reasons; one of them has to do with the Igbo's relationship to the past. Since they had no national history in precolonial times, it is tempting to use the Old Testament as a "sort of alternative 'tribal' history"⁵⁷ and thus as a repertoire of metaphors, narratives and religious ideas that help to organise collective experiences. Adopting such an un-African past is not thought to be embarrassing or offensive. Although many nationalists talk of the need to "rediscover"⁵⁸ their Igboness, they are more

⁵⁴ Ottenberg 2006 [1959]: 179.

⁵⁵ 'Jihad Toll', on a nationalist website: www.biafraland.com/Jihad_Toll.

⁵⁶ Parfitt 2000.

⁵⁷ Marshall 1998: 291.

⁵⁸ Onuora 1995: 1.

interested in reinventing themselves and become modern people. Like Pentecostal Christianity, nationalism can be used as a means to break with a past that prevents them from getting ahead. What the Igbo reject first and foremost is the stigma of defeat that has followed them since Biafra: "They are used to do dirty jobs only to be dumped later. In offices, Igbos despise themselves. [...] When you speak Igbo language to them, they reply you in English because they are ashamed of speaking Igbo. [...] They prefer cash and carry business instead of investing in industries. Persecution complex and self-defeatism have become a way of life".⁵⁹ Discrimination and humiliation have damaged their self-esteem, yet they know that they are gifted people who can achieve far more than their present situation allows: "the Igbo have lost a generation of people" who wasted their talents on "buying and selling of spare parts and cosmetics".⁶⁰

<23>

The wish to shake off the past applies to both their life in Nigeria and to the precolonial past. The old ways of life are still remembered in town, village and family histories.⁶¹ Moreover they have been preserved in novels such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* which is read today as a description of archetypical Igbo village life. They have also been recorded by ethnographers who wrote studies of the 'Igbo', although they had just investigated a few villages. Some of the old practices are still celebrated faithfully, such as the rite of 'breaking kola nut' which is often used when opening a political meeting. Another marker of Igbo identity is the New Yam Festival, a first fruits festival that used to open the season of yam harvest but is now staged by Igbo communities in Lagos and other urban centres.⁶² But apart from such folkloristic events, there is little interest in reviving the world of the ancestors. For most Igbo, as for many other Nigerians, the past has "failed to provide the moral grounding for a good society in the present".⁶³

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Biblical stories and reports about modern Jews are fascinating because they seem to prove by referring to a real, world-historic case that a people can recreate themselves. The Jews used to live scattered all over the world and suffered repeated persecution but mustered the strength to form their own political community, guarded by a powerful independent state. The quest for a life in freedom and dignity that led to the foundation of modern Israel has been a constant theme throughout their history, intimately linked with their belief in God in His promises. The Old Testament provides a "model of nationhood" that fits well into modern nationalist discourses because it "fused land, people, language, and religion".⁶⁴

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Other features of Jewish history that have fascinated Igbo nationalists are its time depth and its dramatic turns of events. It comprises stories about slavery in ancient Egypt and the grandeur of Solomon's kingdom, about the Holocaust and Israeli tanks invading the Gaza Strip. All these stories, however divergent, are understood as referring to one and the same people that have existed for thousands of years. Jewish history combines an extreme diversity of personal and collective experiences, from the agony of the concentration camps to the security of an imposing military might. Thus its narratives can be used to express conflicting experiences and self-perceptions. For the Igbo who went through shocks and dislocations and who have had to find meaning in their suffering, it is important to reflect their fate in a discourse that can integrate a wide range of contrasting views. Their discourse on Igbo Judaism is not a rigid ideology but a venue for intense debates.

⁵⁹ Igbokwe 1995: 42.

⁶⁰ Igbokwe 1995: 53.

⁶¹ The most valuable collection of local histories is Isichei's 'Igbo Worlds' (1977a).

⁶² Bersselaar 1998: 19.

⁶³ Marshall 2009: 123.

⁶⁴ Anthony Smith 2008: 4, 62–66, 73–74; Hastings 1997: 186, 195.

2. Patterns of Ethnic and Regional Conflicts

2.1 Early Nationalism

<26>

Igbo-speaking people used to live in hundreds of autonomous village groups, without overarching political or religious authorities. As they did not imagine themselves as a community and never strove for a common cause, they had neither leaders nor any unifying symbols: "Many times the various Igbo pre-colonial polities did not make any contact whatsoever before colonisation, and were even in certain cases oblivious of the existence of one another. [...] in what is today known as Iboland there was no history of common pre-colonial consciousness and identity".⁶⁵ The terms Ibo, Eboe, Heebo or Hackbous were first used by outsiders. The earliest known reference dates from 1627 when a Spanish priest in Cartagena listed the names of nineteen places in Africa from which slaves originated from. Among the coastal people of the Bight of Biafra, who had regular contact with European slavers, the term 'Ibo' was used to mean 'slave' or 'people from the north'. Among the riverine people at the lower Niger, 'Ibo' denoted the less civilised communities in the eastern uplands that provided the bulk of slaves traded on the river.⁶⁶ The inhabitants of this vast stretch of land, north of the coastal strip and on both sides of the river, did not have a common ethnonym. They named themselves after their villages or village groups, and their histories of origin also referred to these local political units. It was only under colonial rule that they reluctantly accepted the word 'Igbo' as a name for themselves, though in 1931 a colonial officer still observed that "none of the peoples described to-day as Igbo by the European will admit the term as descriptive of his race or language nor will he use it of himself".⁶⁷ Some communities, such as the Aro, only came to identify fully as Igbo during the Biafra War.⁶⁸

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Most ethnographies of 'the Igbo' and most colonial reports since the 1930s stressed the fundamentally democratic and republican nature of the Igbo. This idea became "a core element of Igbo ethnic self-perception throughout the twentieth century".⁶⁹ However, the political organisation of village groups used to be quite diverse. In Onitsha and a few other riverine settlements, much authority lay with the king and his royal lineage, and with other privileged families. In some other Igbo areas, power was largely shared by members of secret societies or title societies. These institutions were not typically Igbo. The famous *ekpe* (leopard) society, for instance, had originated among Ekoi-speakers at the coast, from where long-distance traders had spread it to the hinterland. Communities that are today called Igbo, Ibibio, Ekoi or Efik shared many cultural practices. The main distinction between the Igbo and neighbouring groups was their language. For the Tiv living to the north, the Igbo language is as remote and incomprehensible as the language of the Swazi in southern Africa.⁷⁰ There is more linguistic similarity among Igbo, Yoruba and Igala, all of which have been classified as members of the Kwa language family. But even with respect to Igbo and Yoruba, linguists assume that the language communities must have split thousands of years ago. This gave rise to the idea that the Igbo are a very ancient people. Professor Afigbo, the most eminent Igbo historian, assumed that they started emerging as a distinct people about 6000 years ago.⁷¹ At a conference on Igbo civilisation, some scholars claimed that "the Igbo people are the oldest people in the West [of] Africa and one of the very oldest in the world".⁷²

⁶⁵ Nnoli 1980: 36.

⁶⁶ Bersselaar 1998: 54–62, 68, 72; Harneit-Sievers 2006: 16,112–113.

⁶⁷ M. D. W. Jeffreys, in Bersselaar 1998: 54.

⁶⁸ Harneit-Sievers 2006: 17.

⁶⁹ Harneit-Sievers 2006: 114; Bersselaar 1998: 188–197.

⁷⁰ Lloyd 1970: 2.

⁷¹ Afigbo 1975: 36; Afigbo 1999: 75.

⁷² In Owerri, in *Vanguard*, 24 Jan. 2009, "Igbo reject 3rd largest position, claim Ife ownership".

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Although language is most important for nation building,⁷³ it does not reliably delineate the boundaries of belonging. The Ikwerre communities around Port Harcourt, although speaking an Igbo dialect, were divided about their ethnic affiliation and maintained an ambiguous position. When Biafra was founded, most Ikwerre emphasised their common origin with the Igbo; after the defeat of Biafra, they opted for a separate identity.⁷⁴ Today, some Igbo nationalists find it unacceptable that the Ikwerre have denied their Igboness: "as rain cannot wash off the spots of the leopard, no dibia (native doctor) can cleanse him [the Ikwerre man, J.H.] of his Igbo blood".⁷⁵ But what makes the Igbo so indistinguishable? Colonial anthropologists, who were sent to Igboland in order to record its culture, found that "Daily habits, [...] taboos, religious conceptions, vary bewilderingly".⁷⁶ Even within a single town, there was no uniform 'native law' which the colonial administration might have codified.⁷⁷ Since towns and villages had run their affairs autonomously, there was little interest in forming common institutions.

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Igbo unity only began to matter when party politics started and politicians were looking for constituencies. The most famous Igbo politician was Nnamdi Azikiwe, a US-trained journalist, who became the leader of Nigeria's 'nationalist' movement and, after independence, Nigeria's first president (though this office, created in 1963, was largely ceremonial). At the beginning of his political career he did not see himself as a politician from Igboland but as a native of Onitsha, a town at the Niger whose inhabitants resented being labelled Igbo.⁷⁸ In 1944 he was among the founders of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) that tried to unite all anti-colonial forces. When its president Herbert Macaulay, a Yoruba, died in 1946, Azikiwe took over the office. Two years later, he accepted the presidency of the Ibo State Union which was founded to advance pan-Igbo interests and create an ethnic consciousness.

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Concerned about Igbo dominance in the NCNC, in 1951 a young Yoruba intellectual, Obafemi Awolowo, formed a regional party with the explicit aim of furthering Yoruba interests and gaining control of the Western Region. His Action Group (AG) fought for an independent Nigeria that would be a loose federation of ethnic groups. Azikiwe had also called for a federation that would divide "the country along the main ethnic and/or linguistic groups (i.e., ten) in order to enable each group to exercise local and cultural autonomy".⁷⁹ However, in 1951 he suddenly abandoned federalism and demanded a strong unitary government.⁸⁰ This was in line with Igbo interests. The Igbo, more than any other group, had used the opportunity, created under the Pax Britannica, to move to urban centres all over the country. In the cities of the North, where they had to live in strangers' quarters, they led the protests against discrimination of Southerners. As traders, artisans and government employees, who had made the whole of Nigeria their home, they had a vital interest in freedom of movement and equal rights for all citizens. These interests of a scattered people could best be protected by a central government that was strong enough to enforce civil rights in all parts of the country. There is a further reason why Igbo politicians did not advocate regional autonomy. They were not

⁷³ The Anang and other Ibibio-speakers were initially regarded as Igbo, but when the British administration realised the linguistic differences, these groups were re-classified (Bersselaar 1998: 70).

⁷⁴ Bersselaar 1998: 69–70, 200–201; Afigbo 1987: 14–16.

⁷⁵ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2006: 3.

⁷⁶ Leith-Ross 1937: 206.

⁷⁷ Thomas 1969 [1913]: 126.

⁷⁸ In his 'Fragments of Onitsha History', published in 1930, Azikiwe (1930: 478) called the Igbo a "neighbouring tribe". He traced his own paternal and maternal descent to the royal dynasty of Benin in mid-west Nigeria (Azikiwe 1994: 1–7; cf. Afigbo 1989: 12–15). His transformation into an Igbo nationalist is described by Ogban-Iyam (1989: 194–207).

⁷⁹ Nnamdi Azikiwe, 1950, in Coleman 1986: 348, 277, 324, 347, 388.

⁸⁰ Coleman 1986: 348.

afraid of living under a powerful central administration because they expected to play a major role in it.

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Looking back at the formative years of party politics, today's Igbo nationalists argue that Awolowo split the anti-colonial movement by playing the ethnic card. In 1952 he whipped up ethnic sentiments among Yoruba politicians to make sure that his rival, Nnamdi Azikiwe, who lived in the capital Lagos in Yorubaland, was not elected to the Federal Legislative Council. Though Azikiwe had spearheaded the opposition to colonial rule, he was denied the mandate for the national parliament.⁸¹ So he left Lagos and moved to his ethnic home base in the East where he became Premier of the Regional Executive Council, an African-led government created under the federal constitution of 1954.

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From a Yoruba perspective, the story of their rivalry with the Igbo is, of course, told differently. Tensions had been rising long before Awolowo founded the Action Group. In the late 1940s, disputes between Igbo and Yoruba politicians degenerated into a "war of words".⁸² One of Azikiwe's newspapers, the *West African Pilot*, called the pan-Yoruba association Egbe Omo Oduduwa (a precursor to the Action Group) a "Fascist Organisation" that "must be crushed".⁸³ While denouncing Yoruba tribalism and defending the unity of Nigeria, Azikiwe made a statement that seemed to envisage an Igbo hegemony:

it would appear that the God of Africa has specially created the Ibo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of ages. ... The martial prowess of the Ibo nation at all stages of human history has enabled them not only to conquer others but also to adapt themselves to the role of preserver. ... The Ibo nation cannot shirk its responsibility.⁸⁴

<33>

Political parties that sought to take over the state apparatus from the British had emerged among the western-educated elites in Lagos and other Southern cities. They were led by Igbo and Yoruba politicians who paid little attention to the interests of the North, assuming "that the so-called backward north could be manipulated at will".⁸⁵ The Northern Region encompassed three quarters of Nigeria's territory and half of its population, but in its economic development it lagged far behind. In 1952, its per capita income was just half of the West's.⁸⁶ The development gap was caused, in part, by the policy of the colonial power, whose system of indirect rule administered the North and the South quite differently. In the North it preserved the rule of the Fulani aristocracy, whose emirate states had subjugated in the course of a jihad large parts of the North. Since the authority of the emirs rested mainly on their religious legitimacy, the British were anxious to seal off the emirate areas from Christian-Western influences: "Whatever threatened the Muhammedan religion threatened the authority of the Emirs and so imperilled the organization of 'Indirect Rule'".⁸⁷ For decades, Christian missionaries were not allowed to operate in the emirate regions, so they concentrated their activities on the South and on some 'pagan' areas in the North that had not been conquered by the Fulani. Mission work was accompanied by the establishment of schools and hospitals, thus the Christianised areas acquired a lead in Western education. In 1957, only 185,000 chil-

⁸¹ Coleman 1986: 349; Lynn 2001: LXI.

⁸² Larry Diamond 1988: 46

⁸³ *West African Pilot*, 9 Sept. 1948, in Coleman 1986: 346.

⁸⁴ *West African Pilot*, 6 July 1949, in Coleman 1986: 347.

⁸⁵ Coleman 1986: 352.

⁸⁶ Larry Diamond 1988: 27.

⁸⁷ Statement of the Colonial Office, 1917, in Crampton 1979: 60. – British as well as French colonisers in West Africa gave Muslims the chance to spread their faith: "in half a century of European colonization Islam progressed more widely and more profoundly than in ten centuries of precolonial history" (Lewis 1980: 82). Today, these aspects of the Islamic encounter with the West seem to have been forgotten and confrontations between Muslims and Christians have been projected into colonial times: "the British imperialists were infidels and grandsons of the crusaders whose aims and objectives were to wipe out Islam from the face of the earth" (*Hotline*, 7 May 2000, "The Islamic Agenda", p. 33).

dren in Northern Nigeria attended primary school; in the South the number stood at 2,343,000.⁸⁸ Thanks to their educational advantage, Southerners were in a far better position to gain employment in government offices and other parts of the modern sector. While they made rapid careers, Northerners held, at the beginning of independence, just one percent of the positions in the federal civil service.⁸⁹

<34>

The traditional rulers of the Islamic North only began to organise themselves in a political party, when Nigeria's transition to independence had already set in and they were facing the first election, in 1951. The Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), which was created to perpetuate the rule of the Fulani aristocracy and their Hausa allies into the period of independence and Western-style democracy, was a purely regional party, controlled by the emirs and their officials in the 'native administration'.⁹⁰ In the early 1950s, the political prospects of the Hausa-Fulani elite looked grim. Executive positions in the state machinery would be filled by an 'educated' elite, and it looked as if European criteria alone would define who was 'educated'. Young Nigerians, who had learned English in the mission schools, now held the key to success, while all forms of Islamic learning had been devalued: "Southerners will take the places of the Europeans in the North. What is there to stop them? [...] They have control of the railway stations; of the Post Offices; of Government Hospitals; of the canteens; [...] in all the different departments of Government it is the Southerner who has the power".⁹¹ Resentment of Southerners long predated the transition to independence. The editor of a Hausa paper said in 1943: "We despise each other; [...] the South is proud of Western knowledge and culture; we are proud of Eastern (culture). ... To tell you the plain truth, the common people of the North put more confidence in the white man than in either their black Southern brothers or the educated Northerners".⁹² The 'indigenous' population in the North, be they Muslim, Christian or traditionalist, tended to perceive the 'settlers' from the South as arrogant and tribalistic, claiming that "southern clerks in the north discriminated against northerners in government offices, in railroad ticket offices, and in commercial firms".⁹³

<35>

When Northern politicians were given control over the Regional government in 1954, they began to purge their administration of all Southerners. In order to get rid of the Igbo, Yoruba, Bini and Ibibio, their jobs were sometimes handed over to expatriates from India, Pakistan and Europe, who were offered work on a contract basis. By August 1958, 2148 Southerners in the Regional administration had been dismissed.⁹⁴ One year later, all had lost their employment,⁹⁵ regardless of whether they had been born in the North or lived there for decades. Many did not return to the South, but established themselves in their new homeland as traders and craftsmen. Their success in the private sector, however, also caused resentment among the 'indigenes'. Thus the Prime Minister of the North could count on wide approval when he announced, in the name of 'Northernisation', to drive the 'strangers' from their economic positions:

The Northernization policy does not only apply to Clerks, Administrative Officers, Doctors and others. We do not want to go to [Lake] Chad and meet strangers (i.e., southern Nigerians) catching our fish in the water, and taking them away to leave us with

⁸⁸ Coleman 1986: 134.

⁸⁹ Larry Diamond 1988: 27.

⁹⁰ The Fulani aristocracy did maintain its control over the party apparatus into the postcolonial era. In 1961, when elections were held for the Northern Region's parliament, 40 percent of the elect were members of royal families, a further 28 percent belonged to other noble families, and only two percent were descendants of slaves, (Whitaker 1970: 322) although slaves had comprised between 25 and 50 percent of the emirates' population (Lovejoy 1986: 240).

⁹¹ The editor of a Hausa weekly, 1950, in Coleman 1986: 362.

⁹² Coleman 1986: 360.

⁹³ Coleman 1986: 360.

⁹⁴ Sklar 1983: 327.

⁹⁵ Larry Diamond 1988: 50.

nothing. We do not want to go to Sokoto and find a carpenter who is a stranger nailing our houses. I do not want to go to the Sabon-gari Kano and find strangers making the body of a lorry, or to go to the market and see butchers who are not Northerners.⁹⁶

<36>

The Northernisation policy was popular and helped the Northern Peoples' Congress to consolidate its authority in the North, but with independence approaching, the Northern rulers could not feel secure in their Region. Everything depended on who would take over the federal government. Azikiwe, Awolowo and other 'progressives' in the South had left no doubt that they would dismantle the emirate system and abolish 'feudal' privileges. This meant that the rulers in the North would not only lose political influence, they would lose the very basis of their existence. Their entire way of life was threatened. If Southern hegemony could not be averted, separation looked like a better option. In 1950, when delegates from the North and South met for the first time to discuss constitutional reforms, the Emirs of Zaria and Katsina threatened to lead the whole Northern Region, including the Middle Belt, out of Nigeria.⁹⁷ In 1953, after NPC delegates had been abused by the crowd in the streets of Lagos, the Premier of the Northern Region called the creation of Nigeria a "mistake", and the Northern House of Assembly passed a motion that called for separation from the South in all matters except defence, external affairs and customs.⁹⁸ However, at these and similar occasions, the British were able to dissuade the NPC from secession.

<37>

Throughout the period of transition to independence, the Colonial Office was guided by two main objectives: to preserve the unity of their largest protectorate in Africa and to make sure that an independent Nigeria pursues a pro-Western policy. "A united Nigeria", as London envisaged it, would be "a major player in African politics and thereby a vehicle, it was hoped, for maintaining British interests [...] in an independent Africa".⁹⁹ In order to stop the NPC leaders from seceding, the British granted them major concessions, thereby encouraging Northern intransigence: "secession, as so often in these years, was the threat the North was prepared to use to get its way".¹⁰⁰ When negotiating the constitution of an independent Nigeria, the NPC had two key demands:

- give the Regions much autonomy, with control over the police and the judiciary,
- maintain the Northern Region as the largest political unit in the federation, with half of Nigeria's population and half of the seats in the federal parliament.

The unity of the Northern Region was disputed, since representatives of the Middle Belt minorities, most of whom were Christians, demanded autonomy. Their political alliance, the United Middle Belt Congress, called for its own separate Region in order to break free from Hausa-Fulani hegemony. However, the colonial administration resisted any partitioning of the North. It accepted that NPC leaders sought to maintain the North's numerical advantage as "the sole defence against political and economic domination by the South".¹⁰¹ It also accepted that Hausa-Fulani leaders would tighten their control over the entire Region by intimidating opposition parties.

<38>

British support for the NPC had several reasons. The wish to preserve the unity of Nigeria may have been crucial, but "the preservation of the North's traditional ruling class [...] was at least as important a motive in British policy".¹⁰² It was already obvious in the beginning of colonial times that the British favoured the Muslim aristocracy of the North. The Fulani

⁹⁶ House of Chiefs Debates (mimeo), 19 March 1965, p. 55, in Albert 1999: 73.

⁹⁷ Tamuno 1970: 568.

⁹⁸ Sklar 1983: 128, 132; Lynn 2001: LXVI.

⁹⁹ Lynn 2001: LXX; St. Jorre 1972: 301.

¹⁰⁰ Lynn 2001: LVIII.

¹⁰¹ Sharwood-Smith: Recollections of British Administration, 1969, in Larry Diamond 1988: 29.

¹⁰² Larry Diamond 1988: 29–30.

rulers, whose ancestors had created the biggest empire in nineteenth-century sub-Saharan Africa, were the most trusted allies of the colonial officials in their system of indirect rule: "We feel that the Fulani and the English races have much in common. Both have had a long experience and special aptitude for administering their own and other people's affairs".¹⁰³ The decision to administer large parts of northern Nigeria with the aid of Fulani emirs was born out of pragmatic considerations, but it was also motivated by personal preferences. The Fulani's courtly culture and their literate religion, with its complex judicial and moral regulations, seemed to be evidence of a 'higher' civilisation. Most British officials who served in Nigeria preferred being posted to the residential towns of the emirs where living conditions were more comfortable and where their work conferred greater prestige than it did among the "uncivilised pagan tribes".¹⁰⁴ Igboland in particular held little attraction to administrators because it appeared as "the most lawless part of Nigeria".¹⁰⁵ The fact that large numbers of 'pagans' in the South converted to Christianity did not necessarily lend them more respectability in the eyes of the British. Many colonial officials did not disguise their contempt for the 'semi-civilized mission boys', who tried to emulate the behaviour of the whites.¹⁰⁶ While the large majority of the Muslim population was subservient and willing to cooperate, the Christian converts were often perceived as tiresome competition. They were eager to appropriate the knowledge of the Europeans, but with the intention of taking over the privileged positions that the Europeans held. Consequently, the mission schools were seen as breeding grounds for African nationalism. It was here that the modern elite which later revolted against white rule evolved.¹⁰⁷ The British administration did not have the power to halt the move towards decolonisation, but it was influential enough to shape its outcome. In a time of rapid change, the conservative elite in the North seemed better suited to ensure stability than radical 'nationalists' from the South. Furthermore, Northern leaders would pursue a pro-Western, anti-communist policy, while Azikiwe and Awolowo might follow the anti-imperialist course of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana.¹⁰⁸

2.2 The Road to Secession

<39>

The colonial administration had made the Northern Peoples' Congress the strongest contender for power at the centre, but it had assumed that Nigeria's tripartite structure would force the rival parties to seek a compromise. None of the three Regions would be powerful enough by itself to dominate the whole country; each would have to form an alliance with another Region to gain control at the federal level. The elections in 1959, which paved the way for Nigeria's first independent government, confirmed this expectation: they did not produce a clear majority. Although the NPC and its local allies came out as the largest party, gaining more than 80 percent of the Northern constituencies, it was 8 seats short of an absolute majority in the federal legislature.¹⁰⁹ Nigeria's future was open to negotiations, and it is said that Awolowo approached Azikiwe to propose a coalition of the 'progressive' forces in order to prevent a take-over by the 'feudal' North.¹¹⁰ But Azikiwe's NCNC preferred a coalition with the Muslim ruling class. Together they used their control of the central government to destroy the main opposition party, Awolowo's Action Group. Taking advantage of factionalism within the AG, they dislodged the party from its stronghold, the government of the Western Region. In 1962 the Region was placed under a state of emergency and its government suspended. Awolowo, with his main associates, was arrested, charged with treason and

¹⁰³ Lt. Colonel Beddington, 1934, in Omolewa 1989: 11.

¹⁰⁴ Lord Lugard, in Ballard 1972: 3.

¹⁰⁵ Meek 1937: XI.

¹⁰⁶ Barnes 1995: 413–427; Coleman 1986: 145–150.

¹⁰⁷ Ayandele 1966: 241–280; Kastfelt 1993: 195–196.

¹⁰⁸ Schwarz 1968: 115–122.

¹⁰⁹ Post 1963: 349, 358, 367.

¹¹⁰ Schwarz 1968: 113; Post 1963: 349.

sentenced to ten years in prison. Moreover, the Western Region was split in 1963, creating a new Region for the non-Yoruba minorities living close to the River Niger.¹¹¹

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Initially, many Igbo profited from the disempowerment of the Yoruba elite. In the contest for jobs in state-owned corporations and federal ministries, the Yoruba had been their main rivals, so it was convenient to eliminate Yoruba political influence. However, Igbo politicians soon lost out, because the Northern People's Congress, representing the most populous Region, was the dominant partner in the NPC/NCNC coalition. Three years after independence, internal opposition in the North was largely subdued; the Region came to resemble a one-party state,¹¹² and the ruling party could expect to win nearly all constituencies.¹¹³ Moreover, with the imprisonment of AG's top leaders, the NPC had installed a docile government in the Western Region, so it felt strong enough to turn against its coalition partner in the East.¹¹⁴ The federal elections of 1964, the first under an independent government, were "fraudulent and brutal confrontations";¹¹⁵ they made it clear that NPC hegemony could no longer be challenged by democratic means. In Yorubaland where riots erupted, the public administration began to collapse. In other Regions, people shied away from a confrontation, but the regime, which had turned the country into "the most perfect example of kleptocracy",¹¹⁶ was widely resented, even in the Muslim cities of the North. Thus it looked like a liberation to most citizens when some young army officers (six Igbo and one Yoruba) staged a coup on January 15, 1966. The British High Commissioner in Lagos, commenting on the events, had the impression that the "mood up and down the country is one of reformist exaltation, and the universal rejoicing at the disappearance of the politicians who have hung like a millstone round the neck of the country for 15 years, has almost eclipsed the distress of the loss of Abubakar [the prime minister who was killed by the coupists, J.H.]".¹¹⁷ The new head of state, however, antagonised large sections of the population when he surrounded himself with Igbo advisers and enhanced the influence of Igbo officers in the army. Of 21 senior officers he promoted, 18 were Igbo.¹¹⁸ His most controversial measure was the Unification Decree, promulgated on May 24, 1966, which dissolved the federal constitution and created a centralised administration. Every observer immediately knew that this would strengthen Igbo influence in the state apparatus. The Northernisation policy, implemented by the Regional government, would be reversed, and 'strangers' from the South would regain their dominance, against the wishes of the 'indigenous' population. Thus only a few days after the announcement of the decree, riots broke out against the Igbo living in the North. Two months later, on July 28, 1966, General Ironsi was killed in a counter-coup.

<41>

The coup plotters under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Murtalla Mohammed had initially aimed for secession. At the army headquarters in Lagos they had hoisted a flag that heralded a Republic of the North. The soldiers, however, were divided. The majority of the rank-and-file had been recruited in the Middle Belt, among the Tiv, Bachama, Berom and other minorities that were largely Christian or 'traditionalist'. Most of them had little interest in joining a Republic of the North that would be dominated by the Hausa-Fulani. Under the NPC government, the minorities had never been given a chance to rule themselves. Their main political association, the United Middle Belt Congress, had continued its agitation for an autonomous Middle Belt Region, but the Hausa-Fulani elite had suppressed all separatist tendencies. Members of opposition parties had been bought off, intimidated or detained, and

¹¹¹ Schwarz 1968: 128–151; Larry Diamond 1988: 93–130.

¹¹² Dudley 1968: 190.

¹¹³ In the 1961 election for the Northern Regional House of Assembly, the NPC scored 94 percent of the vote (Kirk-Greene 1971a: 17; Post 1963: 367).

¹¹⁴ Anber 1967: 175–176.

¹¹⁵ Larry Diamond 1988: 41.

¹¹⁶ Andreski 1968: 108; Achebe 1975: 82.

¹¹⁷ In a letter to the Commonwealth Relations Officer, 4 Feb. 1966, in Uche 2008: 118.

¹¹⁸ Stremlau 1977: 34.

when the Tiv, the largest non-Muslim minority in the North, had risen in open revolt, their rebellion had been crushed by the army. Furthermore, in 1963 the Premier of the Northern Region had embarked on an Islamisation campaign to consolidate Hausa-Fulani hegemony in the potentially seditious Middle Belt.¹¹⁹ The entire North, with its heterogeneous population, was to be united by a common faith and language, namely Hausa. This pacification strategy had created strong resentment among the minorities, but it seems that the fear of Igbo domination was stronger. When the army broke apart, the minorities did not side with their fellow-Christians from the South but joined the mobs that attacked the Igbo: "the killing spread out of the Muslim North into the Middle Belt areas where it was particularly savage. It was also much more indiscriminate with Christians and pagans as active as the Muslim soldiers among the killers".¹²⁰

<42>

With the July coup that eliminated the predominance of Igbo officers in the army, the Middle Belters found themselves suddenly at the centre of power. They became the major force that held Nigeria together, with Lieutenant Colonel Gowon, the most senior Northern officer, as their spokesman. He was backed by high-ranking officials in the federal administration, who had an interest in the preservation of Nigeria, and by British government officials, who also took a strong stance against political disintegration. In addition, Gowon forged an alliance with Muslim soldiers and politicians from the Far North, yet he pressured them to accept a constitutional change: The federation had to be restructured to give the minorities autonomy. The old Regions, inherited from the colonial regime, were to be replaced by 12 states. Of the six states planned for the North, only three would be dominated by Hausa-Fulani while the others would mainly encompass ethnic minorities. In order to protect these minority states, Gowon insisted that there be a strong federal centre. This set him on a collision course with the military governor of the East, Colonel Ojukwu, who called for a looser association: a confederation of Regions with their own security forces and with the right to veto decisions at the centre.

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In official statements by the British government, Gowon was described as a "Christian gentleman":¹²¹ honest, fair and complaisant. But British officials knew better, as can be seen from confidential documents that have recently been declassified. At a conference in Aburi, Ghana, in January 1967 Gowon had accepted a confederal solution. The treaty he had signed included the promise of financial assistance to the Eastern Region in its effort to cope with the influx of a million refugees, and the promise to pay, at least until March 1967, the salaries of Eastern civil servants who had fled from the massacres in north and west Nigeria. Gowon, however, kept none of these.¹²² Behind the scenes, the British High Commissioner had urged him not to take any measures that would push the Igbo towards secession,¹²³ yet that was exactly what he did. He imposed economic sanctions and severed all postal and telecommunication links with the East. On March 10, he unilaterally decreed that the central government reserved the right to place any Region under a state of emergency. When Igbo leaders rejected this federal prerogative and prepared for secession, Gowon went a step further and implemented the 12-state structure. According to this new federal arrangement, the Eastern Region was to be split into three states. For the Igbo, who comprised two-thirds of the Region's population, only one state was envisaged, the East-Central State. Its boundaries were drawn to leave the Igbo without a sufficient resource base, thus precluding any future attempts at secession. Their state would not contain enough arable land to sustain its population. All coastal areas, with the oil fields, would be removed from Igbo control, cutting off access to the sea. Although the biggest harbour in the East, Port Harcourt, was mainly populated by Igbo, it was to become

¹¹⁹ Paden 1986: 566–569.

¹²⁰ St. Jorre 1972: 85.

¹²¹ Cronje 1972: 93, 128.

¹²² Kirk-Greene 1971b: 313, 318–320; St. Jorre 1972: 95, 115; Cronje 1972: 18–20; Forsyth 1977: 90–94.

¹²³ Uche 2008: 120–121.

the capital of Rivers State, meant for the Niger Delta minorities. Throughout the war, Gowon maintained that the 12-state structure and other basic issues were non-negotiable.¹²⁴ The Biafrans had to surrender, and Gowon was determined to achieve this aim "whatever the cost in [...] human lives".¹²⁵

<44>

The creation of 12 states was also meant to sway the Eastern minorities to the federal side and instigate a revolt within the East. By taking charge of their own states, the minorities would have a chance to shake off Igbo rule. Under the administration of the Eastern Region, led by an Igbo prime minister, they had not been repressed as brutally as the Middle Belt minorities had been;¹²⁶ nevertheless most of them resented Igbo influence. Their main grievance was probably that Igbo traders and professionals had assumed such a prominent role in their economy.¹²⁷ Writing in the mid-1960s, a British social anthropologist described how one of these minority groups, the Kalabari, had experienced Igbo competition:

there was no longer anything to stop Ibo fishermen and fish traders from penetrating far into the Delta, and penetrate they did, in large numbers. Large-scale Ibo infiltration was bad enough in itself. What made it worse was the Kalabari man's conviction that his Ibo neighbour, being far more willing to forego the elementary amenities of life, while still struggling to make his fortune would be able to undercut him sharply in the purchase and resale price of fish. Later still, large numbers of Ibo labourers began to drift into the seaport town of Abonnema, where again they competed all too effectively with local labour [...]. Discontent over Ibo infiltration came to a head in 1947, with disturbances in Abonnema and other places and rumours (probably unfounded) of an impending massacre of Ibo. A great many Ibos left the Delta at this time; and their exodus relieved much of the tension. But although Kalabari fishermen and fish traders are far better organised today (1960s) than they were in the 1940s, they are still haunted by fears of an Ibo economic take-over of the Delta.¹²⁸

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Ojukwu knew that the minorities were reluctant to support secession, and he attempted to win them over to the new republic. He subdivided Biafra into 20 provinces with some internal autonomy, and he placed representatives of the Ijaw, Ibibio and Ekoi in important civil and military positions. Such measures, however, could not give them long-term security. The Nigerian option was more appealing. Dealing with three major ethnic groups that were competing with each other offered them more room for manoeuvre than being lumped together with one numerically dominant people. They could ally with faraway groups like the Yoruba or Hausa-Fulani in order to balance the regional predominance of the Igbo. Given this preference for a large federation, the minorities showed little enthusiasm to fight for Biafra, yet they did not openly revolt against it either. Some joined the Nigerian army, but on the whole the Eastern minorities did not trust either party. During the pogroms of 1966, many of them had suffered along with the Igbo, when gangs of soldiers had attacked the strangers' quarters of Northern cities. A year later, when federal troops invaded the minority areas of Biafra, villagers fled into the bush. But they soon returned and joined the soldiers in looting the property of the Igbo who had lived among them.¹²⁹

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In the Western Region, among the Yoruba, mistrust of the Northern-led army was even more pronounced. From the imposition of a state of emergency in 1962 to the rigging of Regional elections in 1965, people had suffered from the interference of the federal government and its armed forces. Therefore, secessionists in the East speculated that the Western Region would

¹²⁴ Cronje 1972: 337; Stremlau 1977: 305, 300–301.

¹²⁵ St. Jorre 1972: 236.

¹²⁶ Larry Diamond 1988: 34.

¹²⁷ St. Jorre 1972: 117; Tamuno 1972: 275–277.

¹²⁸ Robin Horton: Seven Elections in Kalabari [unpublished], quoted in Afigbo 1987: 93, 94.

¹²⁹ St. Jorre 1972: 148, 142–143.

also break away from Nigeria. Its leader Awolowo, who had been released from prison after the July coup, designated the Northern troops stationed in Yorubaland as an "army of occupation"¹³⁰ and demanded their removal. On May 1, 1967, he announced that the Western Region would leave the federation in case the East pulled out.¹³¹ Nigeria seemed to be at the verge of collapse. But four weeks later, when Ojukwu declared secession, Awolowo did not follow. Instead he accepted an offer by Gowon to become finance minister and vice chairman of Nigeria's Federal Executive Council. Ojukwu called it a betrayal, and this interpretation is still widely accepted among Igbo. I have often been told that there is no point in making arrangements with 'the Yoruba' because they are not trustworthy: "the Yorubas would not stand with us to fight [...], they would chicken out".¹³² However, it seems that in 1967 Awolowo was simply weighing soberly the pros and cons of secession. The very fact that the Igbo were leaving the federation made it more attractive for the Yoruba to stay in, because they could take over the government jobs vacated by the Igbo.¹³³ Moreover, they realised that they were dealing now with a different class of Northern rulers: less monolithic, with a strong representation of the Middle Belt minorities.

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Accusing Awolowo of betrayal would only have made sense, if the Igbo and Yoruba (or their leaders) had been bound to a common cause. However, each side had treated the other with distrust and often with open hostility. From a Yoruba perspective, the Igbo had sided with the Northerners "to isolate and punish the Yorùbá. [...] It was this conspiracy that eventually sent Awolowo and his supporters, mainly Yorùbá, to prison. If the two allies in the coalition against the Yorùbá were now tearing at each other's throats, why should the Yorùbá be expected to come and side with the Igbo who, in pursuit of material gains, had repeatedly betrayed the south to keep the north in power?"¹³⁴ Igbo leaders had been part of the government that had detained Awolowo, and they had kept him in jail under the Ironsi regime. He was only released after Gowon took over. When talking about the events that led to the war, Igbo normally gloss over the shameful way Yoruba politicians were treated. And when they do mention it, they often blame Awolowo for starting the hostilities.

3. The Defeat of Biafra

3.1 Left Alone

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In 1967, shortly before Biafra's secession, Awolowo allegedly said: "The maintenance of unity of the Federation is not worth one drop of blood".¹³⁵ After joining the federal government, however, he turned into a hardliner who argued that the rebels had "committed a crime and must be punished".¹³⁶ Cutting the food supplies was for him a legitimate means to break Igbo resistance: "all is fair in war and starvation is one of the weapons of war. We should not feed our enemies fat in order to fight us harder".¹³⁷ With the beginning of the war, large

¹³⁰ St. Jorre 1972: 109.

¹³¹ Kirk-Greene 1971b: 415.

¹³² Ezebuilo Ozubo, Chairman of Onanaeze, in *Tell*, 2 Dec. 2002, "No Igbo Man Will Play Second Fiddle Again", p. 21. – The internet contains more emotional and less restrained statements on Yoruba treachery: "The wild, wild west [Yorubaland, J.H.] was/is characterised by abuse, betrayal, fearful cowardice, sycophancy, house slave mentality etc... What do we expect from the offspring of a snake?" (16 Feb. 1996, in Igbo-net, an internet discussion group, most of whose participants were Igbo living in USA, quoted in Simola 2000: 99).

¹³³ Lloyd 1970: 11.

¹³⁴ Afolayan 2006: 301–302.

¹³⁵ St. Jorre 1972: 121.

¹³⁶ Cronje 1972: 116.

¹³⁷ Obafemi Awolowo, in Stremlau 1977: 336. – Igbo sources claim that it was Awolowo who advised Gowon to starve the Igbo into submission: He was the "principal architect" of the starvation strategy (Ekwe-Ekwe 2003: 118; Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 91, 112). This assumption, whether true or not, had a lasting effect on Igbo-

numbers of Yoruba were recruited into the army. They formed the bulk of troops that invaded Biafra from the sea. Their commander, Colonel Adekunle, the 'Black Scorpion', who claimed that 95 percent of his men were Yoruba,¹³⁸ boasted that he dealt ruthlessly with the enemy: "I want to prevent even one Ibo having even one piece to eat before their capitulation. We shoot at everything that moves, and when our forces march into the center of Ibo territory, we shoot at everything, even at things that do not move".¹³⁹ The military campaign was not led as brutally as this quotation suggests, though officers tolerated widespread looting and a couple of times mass executions. When Adekunle's division conquered Port Harcourt in May 1968, they were greeted as liberators by the Nigerdelta minorities who had stayed in the city while the Igbo had fled. However, the soldiers rather behaved like an army of occupation, looting and raping. Adekunle was later replaced by Olusegun Obasanjo, another Yoruba officer, who took care to restrict his troops to camps outside town.¹⁴⁰

<49>

Reports of a possible genocide in Nigeria made headlines in the Western media. In 1968, Biafra was "the most important foreign issue in public opinion surveys throughout Western Europe, and it was regarded as second only to Vietnam among the majority of Americans".¹⁴¹ For the secessionists, public opinion in the West was an important factor in their political calculus, because they had no chance of winning the war without help and official recognition from outside. Since media coverage played such an immense role in shaping the course of the conflict, it has been suggested that Biafra was "the world's first public relations war".¹⁴² Closely associated with the international publicity was another salient feature: the strong involvement of international relief organisations. It was the first time that dozens of religious and secular agencies coordinated their aid operations. Although the Nigerian government vehemently protested their interference, humanitarian organisations such as Caritas, Oxfam and Médecins sans Frontières insisted that they had a right to intervene on behalf of the suffering civilians, even if it meant breaking international law.¹⁴³ Public opinion in the West was largely on the side of Biafra,¹⁴⁴ but Western governments, though under strong pressure, tenaciously refused to give in to popular demands.

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Igbo leaders had hoped, when preparing for secession, that the British government would back Biafra or stay at least neutral.¹⁴⁵ The Igbo were clearly the wronged party, and their government presented itself as a pro-Western, Christian force. Ojukwu did not differ ideologically from his rival Gowon,¹⁴⁶ and he did not give any hint that he was going to harm British business interests. Managers of Shell-BP operating in the East were sympathetic to the Igbo, and it seems British government officials believed that the Igbo had "strong grounds for secession".¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, there was no reason to accuse the Biafran leadership of any provocative acts. Ojukwu had not participated in the coup that had toppled Nigeria's conservative, pro-British leadership in January 1966. The young coup plotters, though mostly Igbo, had not trusted him because he did not share their radical pan-Africanist views. He looked

Yoruba relations: "The bitterness resulting from this has made it impossible for Yoruba and Igbo to cooperate in dislodging the Hausa-Fulani in Nigerian politics. Therefore, since the war, the central government in the country has been controlled by the 'victorious' northerners" (Albert 1999: 76).

¹³⁸ *Tell*, 27 March 2000, "I Can See War Coming", p. 18.

¹³⁹ Col. Benjamin Adekunle, in Stremlau 1977: 331.

¹⁴⁰ Robin Horton, personal communication, Port Harcourt, 12 Jan. 1996.

¹⁴¹ Stremlau 1977: XII.

¹⁴² Sampson 1994: 103.

¹⁴³ Pérouse de Montclos 2009: 70. – It has been said that Biafra marked the beginning of Western humanitarian interventionism. However, Pérouse de Montclos (2009: 70, 71) has pointed out that the "international responsibility to protect" had been invoked on earlier occasions, for instance during the Boer War: "The real innovation of the Biafran crisis was worldwide humanitarian mobilization for Black Africans".

¹⁴⁴ St. Jorre 1972: 209, 211, 272, 302, 358–360.

¹⁴⁵ St. Jorre 1972: 295.

¹⁴⁶ Stremlau 1977: 41, 112.

¹⁴⁷ Uche 2008: 123, 126, 131.

like an exponent of the new African bourgeoisie, with strong links to pro-British circles. His father, Sir Louis Philippe Odumegwu-Ojukwu, one of Nigeria's richest businessmen, had sent him to exclusive schools: King's College in Lagos, Epsom College in Surrey and Oxford University. Since his childhood, he had been in close contact with the colonial establishment, and he had cultivated these links when he returned from England. The Ojukwu biography by Frederick Forsyth relates that the Governor of Eastern Nigeria, Sir Clement Pleass "had known Emeka [Ojukwu] since he was a schoolboy, and Emeka had for years called him Uncle Clem. Sometimes on a summer evening Emeka would take his sports car [...] and motor over to Enugu for a game of tennis or a cool beer with the Governor".¹⁴⁸

<51>

The British government had tried to remain neutral and mediate in the conflict between Nigeria's federal government and the Eastern Region, but when federal troops invaded the East in July 1967, Britain became their main supplier of arms. Moreover, the government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson played a crucial role in Biafra's diplomatic isolation: "Britain's intrinsic support (arms, technical assistance, advice) and the immeasurable but profound influence Britain's backing had in shaping other governments' policies (those of the United States, Canada and several key Commonwealth African countries, for example) were critical, perhaps decisive, in ensuring that Nigeria won the war".¹⁴⁹ An important part of the war was waged in newspapers, on radio and television: in this arena, Britain became Biafra's main enemy. The government in London declared that most of the accusations against the Nigerian regime were false: the Igbo had not been victims of genocide, Nigeria had good reasons to invade Biafra, and Gowon's behaviour towards the rebel republic was "reasonable", "flexible" and "magnanimous".¹⁵⁰ Half a century after the lost war, anger about "British perfidy"¹⁵¹ has not disappeared. The historian Ekwe-Ekwe accused the former colonial masters of having planned the genocide of the Igbo,¹⁵² and he warned that British authorities have not given up their hostile attitude. Suspicion runs so deep that an Ohanaeze chieftain blamed Britain for the introduction of Islamic law in the years of 2000 to 2002, arguing that "[i]t is in the British interest to support Sharia".¹⁵³

<52>

As main backer of Nigeria's regime, Britain cannot be exonerated from responsibility for the many civilians who starved to death. It is unlikely, however, that the British government instigated the hostilities against the Igbo. Chibuike Uche, an Igbo scholar who studied recently declassified documents, found "no evidence that [Britain] encouraged the [July 1966] massacre. Archival evidence points to the contrary. The British High Commissioner at the time made spirited efforts to get Gowon to do more to stop the killing of Ibos".¹⁵⁴ After his talks with the Nigerian leadership in August and September 1966, the High Commissioner wrote to London that Gowon refused "to face up to the stark facts of the scale of brutalities in the North, and the extent of the Army's positive responsibilities for them".¹⁵⁵ For British diplomats, this denial was dangerous as it threatened the unity of Nigeria: "The Northern murderers are certainly making it as difficult as possible for the East to refrain from secession. The disastrous consequences for the Northern economy are brushed aside by even sophisticated Northerners as secondary to the need to make it quite impossible for the Ibos ever again to aspire to play any decisive part in the North".¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁸ Forsyth 2003: 22–23.

¹⁴⁹ St. Jorre 1972: 298–299.

¹⁵⁰ Cronje 1972: 72.

¹⁵¹ *The News*, 10 Aug. 1998: 24.

¹⁵² Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 79, 14, 58, 76.

¹⁵³ M. C. K. Ajuluchukwu, in *Tell*, 31 July 2000, "Sharia: The Road to Confederation or Disintegration", p. 27.

¹⁵⁴ Uche 2008: 120.

¹⁵⁵ Sir Francis Cumming-Bruce on October 1, 1966, to the Commonwealth Office, in Uche 2008: 120.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

<53>

In a secret memo, Britain's High Commissioner in Lagos summed up the British position in September 1966: "Nigeria is potentially one of the most powerful African states. [...] a fission of Nigeria into smaller states will lay several of them open to undesirable outside influence. [...] A particular danger in this respect is the traditional links of the North with Cairo. We regard it as an important British interest therefore that the unity of Nigeria should be maintained".¹⁵⁷ With the massacres and expulsion of the Igbo in 1966, this unity was threatened by Northern army officers and politicians. In order to stop further disintegration, the British government urged Nigeria's military rulers to acknowledge their failure and listen to Igbo demands. When Gowon signed the Aburi accord that granted the Eastern Region far-reaching autonomy, it looked as if secession had been averted. The British envoy Malcolm MacDonald was pleased with the new confederal arrangement, which seemed to create a basis for co-operation between the two deeply divided parts of the country.¹⁵⁸ But then Gowon reneged on his promise and decreed his 12-state structure. British diplomats had opposed this unilateral change of the constitution which split the Eastern Region into three and removed the oil-producing areas from Igbo control. Since it weakened the resource base of Ojukwu's government and undermined his political position, it aggravated the crisis and accelerated the move towards secession.¹⁵⁹

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After Biafra's declaration of independence, Britain adopted a wait-and-see attitude. Anxious not to antagonise the Biafran side which controlled two-thirds of the oil resources, the British government did not interfere when Shell-BP agreed to pay the secessionist republic £ 250,000 as a first instalment of oil revenues, thereby giving a tacit recognition to Ojukwu's government as the de facto owner of the oil fields.¹⁶⁰ The Nigerian side, however, reacted strongly in defence of its sovereignty. Its navy sealed off the Biafran coastline to stop tankers from loading oil. The British High Commission protested the blockade which threatened to have dramatic consequences for Britain's oil supplies.¹⁶¹ Just a week after the Biafran declaration of independence, the Six-Day War (June 5–10, 1967) between Israel and its Arab neighbours had constricted the flow of oil. The Suez Canal had been closed, and some Arab countries had placed an oil embargo on Britain. In this tense situation, British officials warned the Gowon regime that they would stop the delivery of weapons, which they had been supplying since independence, if the Nigerians did not lift the oil blockade.¹⁶² But Gowon did not give in. His government had already begun negotiations with the Soviet Union over arms supplies, and in August 1967 it received its first consignment of MiG fighter jets. The threat that their most loyal ally in Africa might establish closer links with communist countries raised serious concern in British government circles. The most pressing need, however, was to secure the flow of Nigerian oil which was ten per cent of British oil use.

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When the British threw their weight behind the federation, they assumed that the war would be over in a matter of weeks. The federal campaign did indeed make quick progress against the poorly armed Biafrans. The main oil-producing areas were 'liberated' by early 1968, but in the core Igbo areas, fierce resistance led to a war of attrition that produced shocking stories. The Biafran government allowed foreign journalists to travel freely through its territory and document the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the food blockade and by air strikes against civilian targets: "markets, hospitals, churches, villages [...] were indiscriminately strafed and bombed".¹⁶³ The International Committee of the Red Cross spoke of "the gravest emergency"

¹⁵⁷ Uche 2008: 121.

¹⁵⁸ Stremmlau 45.

¹⁵⁹ Uche 2008: 120–121.

¹⁶⁰ Uche 2008: 123.

¹⁶¹ Jorre 1972 140.

¹⁶² Uche 2008: 124–126, 131.

¹⁶³ St. Jorre 1972: 291; Cronje 1972: 111, 120–122; Ugochukwu 2010: 9–11, 35.

it had handled since the Second World War.¹⁶⁴ Public protests calling for a ceasefire and an arms embargo placed England's Labour government in an embarrassing situation.¹⁶⁵ It had played down the role of oil interests¹⁶⁶ and justified its support for the Gowon regime as a matter of principle, arguing that it was in the best interest of Africans to crush separatist rebellions: If Nigeria fractured along ethnic lines, this would encourage secessionist movements elsewhere in Africa and contribute to the Balkanisation of the entire continent. Given this principled stance which coincided with the position taken by the Organisation of African Union, the British government found it difficult to reverse its policy. It even increased its arms sales,¹⁶⁷ relying on Nigerian assurances that the final offensive against Biafran positions was imminent. At the same time it tried to conceal the number of weapons it supplied and to trivialise press reports of war crimes, though it became increasingly difficult to dismiss the enormity of civilian suffering.¹⁶⁸ Behind the scenes, British diplomats tried persuading the Nigerians to ease the food embargo: "We kept telling them you must, if only for presentational reasons, be as generous as you can on the relief matter".¹⁶⁹ In public, however, they defended the conduct of the war. Lord Hunt, a British envoy, went as far as justifying the hunger blockade: Gowon had taken this measure in order to "persuade his adversary, Colonel Ojukwu, to come to terms without further bloodshed. [...] brutal and inhuman though it is, the very essence of siege tactics is to reduce the defenders to physical conditions which they can no longer endure".¹⁷⁰ Targeting the civilian population, however, did not have the desired effect. The Biafrans kept on fighting until the soldiers, debilitated by the lack of food, were overrun by federal troops: "whole units had not received their rations for days, perhaps weeks, and some of the soldiers were so hungry they collapsed".¹⁷¹ The food which Caritas and Joint Church Aid had flown in had not been sufficient to prevent mass starvation. Though the intervention of relief organisations was meant to avert a humanitarian catastrophe, it may have had the opposite effect. It did nothing to solve the conflict but prolonged the war and thus the suffering of the Biafran population.¹⁷²

3.2 After the War

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The coalition that defeated the Biafrans soon broke apart. Gowon had promised that he would hand over to a civilian administration after the war, but in October 1970 he announced that the military would remain in power for another six years, and in 1974 he postponed the transition to democracy indefinitely. A year later he was toppled. Yet things did not improve

¹⁶⁴ St. Jorre 1972: 209.

¹⁶⁵ Heerten 2009.

¹⁶⁶ Uche 2008: 111, 122, 125, 131.

¹⁶⁷ Cronje 1972: 154; St. Jorre 1972: 297–298.

¹⁶⁸ Cronje 1972: 57–65, 121–122; St. Jorre 1972: 296–298.

¹⁶⁹ Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart, in Stremlau 1977: 282.

¹⁷⁰ Cronje 1972: 135. – Prime Minister Wilson cited the example of Abraham Lincoln to justify Gowon's starvation strategy: "it is worth recording that Abraham Lincoln, as a fundamental strategy in his conduct of that war, so far from aiding the movement of food and other supplies to the secessionists, deliberately and systematically set out to deny and destroy every ton of food which might reach them. There was the scorched earth policy in the Shenandoah Valley, destroying grain and slaughtering herds" (Cronje 1972: 130). Following such paradigms, Wilson maintained that the suffering of the Igbo, despite the high number of casualties, did not amount to genocide (Cronje 1972: 80). A member of the International Observer Team that monitored the conduct of the federal army saw it similarly: "starvation is a legitimate weapon of warfare" (Brigadier-General Hamilton of Canada, in Cronje 1972: 90). The question of genocide is still disputed today, and its answer depends on how one assesses the killings of civilians. John de St. Jorre, who had initially sympathised with the Biafrans but later justified the federal campaign, argued that "air-raids on civilian targets have become an accepted part and parcel of modern warfare. [...] 35,000 people died in one terrible night when the British and Americans bombed Dresden; and 78,000 men, women and children were killed with one bomb at Hiroshima – yet no one accused the perpetrators of genocide" (St. Jorre 1972: 286).

¹⁷¹ Cronje 1972: 161.

¹⁷² Pérouse de Montclos 2009.

for the Igbo. Nigeria's new leader, General Murtallah Mohammed, was known in Igboland as the 'Butcher of Asaba' because his troops had committed the worst massacres of the war. All the generals that succeeded him as head of states: Obasanjo, Buhari, Babangida, Abacha and Abubakar, had fought against the Igbo. They ruled in a more or less tight alliance with the Hausa-Fulani elite who thus managed to dominate Nigerian politics for decades. People in the South had only two major chances to break Northern hegemony: in 1979, with the beginning of the Second Republic, and in 1993, with the (failed) transition to the Third Republic.

<57>

1. In 1979, Awolowo had a good chance of becoming president, until his rival Azikiwe suddenly entered the presidential race and split the Southern vote. The Northern candidate, Shehu Shagari, won and leaders of the Igbo dominated NPP joined his government. With its coalition of Hausa-Fulani and Igbo politicians, the Second Republic looked like a replica of the First, and it was just as short-lived. Its government was so discredited after four years in office that people celebrated in the streets when the army stepped in and arrested the civilian leaders.
2. The presidential election of June 12, 1993, was supposed to end another ten years of military dictatorship and usher in Nigeria's Third Republic. But General Babangida declared the election void when it became clear that Moshood Abiola, a Yoruba, had defeated the Northern candidate. The election had been largely free and fair, and if all civilian politicians had accepted the results they would have prevented the military regime from aborting the transition to democracy. However, most politicians in the North supported the annulment of the election. Hausa-Fulani leaders had already stated on earlier occasions that the North would commit "political suicide" if it gave the presidency over to a politician from the South.¹⁷³ Even the highest religious authority, the Sultan of Sokoto, collaborated with the military in betraying the victorious candidate, though Abiola, a committed Muslim, was the Vice President for Nigeria's Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs. In the end, the Yoruba stood almost alone in their campaign to have Abiola sworn in as the rightful president. In Lagos and other cities of Yorubaland, the population went on strike, but elsewhere in Nigeria people had little interest in fighting for a Yoruba president. When I asked civil servants in Igboland, why they did not participate in the general strike, they replied: "Would the Yoruba strike for us, if an Igbo had been elected president?"

<58>

The strikes and violent protests which paralysed Yorubaland for weeks proved futile. Even though some militants called for secession, the federal government remained unimpressed by "the noise being made by the south-west": "whoever tries to go we will force him to remain. [...] we have all the resources to put down any upheaval [...] ruthlessly".¹⁷⁴ The refusal to listen to the wronged party shattered what little trust was left among the rival factions of Nigeria's elite. "[T]rust is some sort of belief in the goodwill of the other",¹⁷⁵ yet Northern politicians made it clear that they had no interest in the well-being of their adversaries. There was nothing the Yoruba could appeal to: no commitment to rules of fairness and reciprocity, not even the idea of a common good. An overwhelming majority of the Hausa-Fulani elite preferred a military regime, however brutal, to a democratic government headed by a Yoruba president. They supported the regime of Sani Abacha, the successor to Ibrahim Babangida, to the end, rejecting any accommodation with their rivals in the South. Moshood Abiola, the winner of the elections, was detained without trial and kept in jail until he died in 1998.

¹⁷³ Okechukwu Okeke 1992: 114.

¹⁷⁴ Abubakar Buba Galadima, a minister of the Abacha regime, in *TSM. The Sunday Magazine*, 4 Dec. 1994, "The North: "Our fear and worries"", pp. 10, 17.

¹⁷⁵ Seligman 1997: 43.

<59>

The break-down of trust, prompted by the trauma of the annulled election, gave rise to a wave of Yoruba nationalism. Why should the Yoruba share a polity with people who excluded them from ruling it? Wasn't it better to rule themselves, without interference of strangers who harboured no good intentions? Many Yoruba intellectuals, disillusioned with multi-ethnic democracy, turned to ethnic nationalism. Ethnic mobilisation proved a better means of confronting the military government than the campaign for democracy.¹⁷⁶ The main weapon which the Yoruba elite used against their opponents in the North was a militant liberation movement, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), named after the mythical ancestor of the Yoruba people. During the Abacha years, the security forces had suppressed OPC activities, but after the sudden death of the general in 1998, when the military regime was weakened and internally divided, violence spun out of control. Militants vented their anger against the Northern rulers by attacking the large Hausa diaspora in Lagos and other cities of Yorubaland. These riots played an important role in convincing the generals to enter into a power-sharing arrangement that brought Olusegun Obasanjo, a Yoruba, into the presidential palace. Another development that gave cause to compromise was growing rebellion in the Nigerdelta where armed groups attacked the oil installations, forcing the federal government to grant the Delta states a bigger share of the oil revenues. Here too, the rebels were organised on an ethnic basis, as self-determination groups such as the Ijaw National Congress, Urhobo National Assembly or Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People.

<60>

The partial success of ethnic nationalism in Yorubaland and the Nigerdelta inspired Igbo politicians. Ex-General Ojukwu remarked that ethnicity, which used to be a "swear word", has turned into a "word of pride".¹⁷⁷ The pan-Igbo organisation Ohanaeze, in one of its policy papers, appreciated this revaluation: "in black Africa, ethnic groups alone have the tradition, strength and the stability to create an effective opposition against tyranny and oppression. [...] in the absence of strong democratic tradition, tyranny would be inevitable in Nigeria unless our ethnic nationalities are politically organized and vigilant. [...] The legislature can be made to capitulate. The judiciary can be dictated to. The armed forces easily become the tool of the tyrant. Only the people themselves, in their grassroots institutions, stand firm in the end".¹⁷⁸ However, the Igbo have contributed little in bringing the military regime to its knees. Ojukwu, for instance, staunchly supported General Abacha. When the junta faced international sanctions because it had executed Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Nigerdelta activists, it sent Ojukwu, Gowon and Shagari on lobbying tours to Europe and the USA.¹⁷⁹ Even after the death of the dictator, Ojukwu praised him: "Of all the military men in power I met on my return from exile [in 1982], he was the one who gave me the greatest respect".¹⁸⁰ Abacha and all the other Northern rulers only succeeded in staying in power because the elites in the South were unable to unite. Many Igbo politicians collaborated with successive military regimes though this did not benefit their people. The generals ruined the economy and turned Nigeria into the world's most corrupt country.¹⁸¹ Moreover, General Abacha treated the Igbo with disdain; in 1994, after staging his coup, he did not appoint a single Igbo to his Provisional Ruling Council. In the scramble for federal appointments and government contracts, a few Igbo were able to amass great wealth but, as nationalists would point out, finding favour with the ruling circles was only possible, if they betrayed Igbo interests: "Igbos that find

¹⁷⁶ Sklar 2004: 42.

¹⁷⁷ *Newswatch*, 20 March 2000, "Sharia Is a Sabotage", p. 20.

¹⁷⁸ Ohanaeze 2006: 4.

¹⁷⁹ *The Week*, 12 Feb. 1996, "The Return of the Envoys", p. 27; Igbokwe 1995: 43, 66.

¹⁸⁰ *Africa Today*, January 1999, "Interview: Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu", p. 25. – In an interview with *Newswatch* (24 June 1996, "I am a Victim Of Jealousy", p. 15–16) Ojukwu stated that Abacha "will remain a hero till the end of time". When asked about Abacha's human rights abuses, Ojukwu responded: "his human rights abuses, what are they? What are they? That he did not allow himself to be slaughtered". "*Newswatch*: Arresting journalists and detaining them indefinitely! *Ojukwu*: If journalists are irresponsible, [...] they must earn the consequences".

¹⁸¹ According to the ranking by Transparency International.

themselves in the corridors of power have often become political vultures who only work for their private pockets, feeding fat on the injustices against the Igbo people while trumpeting the cacophonous rhetoric of their pay masters".¹⁸² This criticism, however, has not been raised against Ojukwu who has remained a "hugely popular", "cult-like"¹⁸³ figure, especially among younger Igbo. Material considerations were not crucial in his decision to back a ruthless regime. Some assumed that his support for the generals and their annulment of the June 12 election was just a devious means to achieve his old aim of Igbo independence. This time, however, the burden of fighting the federal government should not fall on the Igbo but on their rivals: "Ojukwu [...] seems to be working towards provoking the Yoruba into quitting the federation so that the Igbo could achieve their secession without firing one shot".¹⁸⁴

<61>

While most Igbo politicians sided with those in power, some tried to confront the military by forging an alliance with other aggrieved sections of the population: the Yoruba, the Nigerdelta minorities and disgruntled elements in the North. Getting together with the Yoruba meant supporting them in their fight to have Moshood Abiola, the winner of the 1993 election, installed as president. Igbo politicians knew that Abiola was not a good choice for a new start. One of the wealthiest businessmen in Nigeria, he had made most of his money through his links with the military. Moreover, during the election campaign Abiola had not approached Igbo leaders with offers of influential positions in his government. His strategy had been to neglect Igbo voters and to appeal instead, on the basis of their common religion, to the vast constituency of Muslims in the North. Nevertheless, some Igbo politicians argued that the crucial question was not whether Abiola was the right person and whether the Igbo would benefit from his presidency. The elections had been largely free and fair, so it was a matter of justice to support the duly elected candidate. As a journal in Lagos argued: If you "refuse to back a just cause by the Yoruba because they have always been your competitors for jobs, contracts, scholarships [...] you will have under-cut the principle by which you may hope to be defended in your time of need. [...] those who do not want to be marginalised must learn to defend the interests of others".¹⁸⁵ Old memories of who had wronged whom were a poor guide for the future. In order to break the cycle of mistrust the Igbo had to forget what the Yoruba had done to them. Democracy could only work if its rules were defended as a matter of principle, regardless of who was the wronged party.

<62>

How realistic was this strategy of reconciliation? Let us look at the encounter between Igbo and Yoruba politicians in the Fourth Republic. A few weeks after Abacha's death in 1998, his rival Abiola was found dead in his prison cell, supposedly of heart failure. While a wave of violent protests swept Yorubaland, the military decided to return the country to democracy. However, they closely monitored the transition process and planned its outcome. In order to appease the Yoruba, they resolved that the first president of the Fourth Republic should be a Yoruba. Yet they did not leave it to the Yoruba people to nominate suitable candidates. Instead a clique of generals and ex-generals decided in closed-door meetings who would be the best choice. They needed a Yoruba who was not anti-North, and they settled on Olusegun Obasanjo, a retired four-star general who had the reputation of being 'detribalised'. Obasanjo was duly elected in April 1999, but it was the money and influence of Ibrahim Babangida and other former generals that paved his way, first at the convention of the new People's Democratic Party, which nominated him, and then during the campaign. Obasanjo's main contender within the party, who was defeated at the PDP convention, was Alex Ekwueme, an Igbo.

¹⁸² *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 7 [or 8], 2006: 3.

¹⁸³ *Tell*, 16 June 2003, "Ikemba's New Front", p. 34.

¹⁸⁴ *Tell*, 15 July 1996, "Set for an Arewa Republic", p.10.

¹⁸⁵ *The News*, 10 Aug. 1998, "Igbo Leaders Against Igbo", p.25. – Dr. Chukwuemeka Ezeife, a former governor of Anambra state and a member of Ohanaeze's inner circle, put it this way: "If what is being done to Mr. A today would be done to you tomorrow, would you like it? If you do not like it, go and fight for Mr. A. because that fire that is consuming his house, next time, it may be consuming your own. Even if Mr. A. did not help you when your house was burning" (*The News*, 29 Aug. 1994, "The Cabal Will Beg", p. 16).

Ekwueme accepted his defeat and called upon his supporters to campaign for Obasanjo. However, after Obasanjo assumed office, he sidelined the Igbo leader and tried to destroy Ekwueme's support base in his native Anambra State. Two successive governors, who had been close allies of Ekwueme, were forced from office. For this purpose the president relied on local strongmen who operated gangs of thugs that intimidated politicians and rigged the elections. In Anambra's capital, these gangs burned down the governor's lodge, the House of Assembly, the judiciary complex, two radio stations and other public buildings, while the federal police stood by and watched.¹⁸⁶ The citizens of Anambra, who were staunch supporters of their governor, were powerless to protect their political structures. The government of Obasanjo corrupted and then destroyed the democratic institutions that citizens could have used to control the local political elite.

<63>

In north Nigeria, where the Igbo diaspora had always exercised little influence on political decision making, the transition to democracy only confirmed their subordinate position. The chance of democratic self-determination was used by their rivals, the Muslim majority, to impose strict forms of Sharia. Against the protests of Christian minorities, the parliaments in twelve states of the far North passed Islamic laws that were meant to transform all spheres of social and political life along Islamic lines. The claim of the 'indigenous' population to own Kano, Sokoto and other Northern states and to organise these states according to their own religious traditions meant that non-Muslims were excluded from political participation. Christians from the South were expected to accept the laws passed by the Muslim majority, or else leave the region.¹⁸⁷ Under the new elected governors, attacks on the Igbo (and other Southerners) increased, reviving memories of Biafra.¹⁸⁸ The 'non-indigenes' were made to understand that large-scale killings and ethnic cleansing might reoccur any time, if they resisted their subjugated position. They are allowed to make some money as traders, but they have to stay out of politics, lest they provoke the rage of their 'hosts'.

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After a series of attacks in the North, Igbo leaders said that the ghosts of Biafra were haunting them and that they had to lay these ghosts to rest.¹⁸⁹ However, they had few opportunities of involving other Nigerians in a debate over Biafra. One of these opportunities was the Oputa Panel instituted by the Obasanjo government to investigate human rights abuses under military rule. Like South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it travelled through the country and organised public hearings where citizens could report their experiences. Ohanaeze used this occasion to broach the issue of the war crimes and the continued marginalisation of the Igbo, yet Igbo leaders did not succeed in initiating a national dialogue. The Oputa Commission had no intention of investigating claims from the period before 1970. Moreover, most former generals who had been invited to testify declined; those who did attend, such as Gowon and Obasanjo, did not express regret for their role in the Biafra campaign. In their home areas, nobody pressured them to discuss their role in the conduct of the war. It was only in Igboland that commentators were enraged about the unwillingness to talk about genocide and admit personal guilt. The historian Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe compared the genocide of the Igbo to the Holocaust and criticised the callousness of its perpetrators. Gowon's statements were a provocation, he said. It was as if Adolf Hitler had declared at a press conference: "'I have nothing to apologise for the six million Jews my forces annihilated between 1939 and 1945. What I did was right.' That would be an unimaginable monstrosity. But this was precisely what Gowon did".¹⁹⁰ Ekwe-Ekwe and other Igbo nationalists suggested that Gowon,

¹⁸⁶ *P.M. News*, 24 Nov. 2004, "Turning Anambra State into Nigeria's Darfur Region"; Human Rights Watch 2007: 3, 67–79.

¹⁸⁷ Harnischfeger 2008a: 108–109.

¹⁸⁸ Daniel Jordan Smith 2005: 37.

¹⁸⁹ *Newswatch*, 20 March 2000, "Sharia Is a Sabotage", p. 21–22; *Newswatch*, 29 May 2000, "Biafra not The Answer", pp. 11–12, "MASSOB Will Fizzle out", p. 15.

¹⁹⁰ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 118.

Obasanjo, Buhari and other 'genocidists' be extradited to the International Court of Justice in The Hague.¹⁹¹

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Ohanaeze, in its petition to the Human Rights Violation Investigation Commission, was less confrontational. It listed the losses of 34 years of marginalisation, spoke of a "scorched earth policy" during the war and demanded 8.68 trillion Naira in reparations.¹⁹² The petitioners knew, of course, that the federal government would not pay any money. Their aim was to press for a political compensation: an Igbo to be made president. In this, they followed the precedent of the Yoruba who had been "compensated [...] over the injustice of June 12".¹⁹³ Six years after the annulled election and less than one year after the suspected murder of Abiola, the presidency had been handed over to a Yoruba. The Igbo, by contrast, had not received any compensation even though they had suffered more than anybody else at the hands of their fellow citizens. As a gesture of goodwill and in order to recognise them as equal citizens, it was necessary to entrust one of them with the presidential office: The "time for the Igbo to rule is now or never".¹⁹⁴

4. Global Identities and Religion

4.1 9/11 in Nigeria

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Igbo nationalism, in its various forms, is not just a response to the ethnic environment, but also to global forces. In recent years, many riots in Nigeria have been triggered by global events. When the US army attacked Afghanistan and Iraq, Muslim militants in Kano marched into the Christian quarter of town, shouted anti-US slogans and burned the churches and stores of Christians, most of them Igbo.¹⁹⁵ When a Danish newspaper published caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed, another clash loomed. In order to forestall bloodshed, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), speaking on behalf of all churches, was the first to denounce the 'blasphemy' committed by Danish artists, but this did not calm Muslim anger. In the city of Maiduguri, 56 church buildings were razed and 51 Christians were killed.¹⁹⁶ Another occasion for attacks on the Igbo diaspora has been the annual celebration of Al Quds Day (Jerusalem Day), instituted by the Iranian government as a worldwide day of protest against the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Each year at the end of Ramadan, when Shiite militants take to the streets chanting anti-Israel slogans, Igbo fear for their lives.

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The most violent reaction to a global event occurred in September 2001 after the attack on the Twin Towers in New York. 9/11 had a strong polarising effect, because many Nigerians interpreted it as part of a global confrontation between Muslims and Christians. As a religious event that involved worldwide communities, it could be replicated by actors in Nigeria. When images of the attack spread in Jos, a city in the Middle Belt, they emitted a strong mimetic impulse. People took to the streets and re-enacted the clash, creating what an observer called "our version of the American 9/11".¹⁹⁷ According to the police, more than 3000 lives were lost in the course of the riot and its suppression by police and army units.¹⁹⁸ I want to take a

¹⁹¹ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 16, 92, 118, 120, 131; *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 9, 2006: 5.

¹⁹² *News Mirror*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 2001: 4–5; *Newswatch*, 14 May 2001, "The Eight Trillion Naira Case", p. 21–22.

¹⁹³ Governor Achike Udenwa, in *Vanguard*, 7 April 2002, "Ndigbo 2003 and political empowerment", p. 42.

¹⁹⁴ Odumegwu Ojukwu, in *Newswatch*, 1 April 2002, "It Is Our Turn", p. 30.

¹⁹⁵ According to *Newswatch* (29 Oct. 2001, "Harvest of Death", p. 36) the "Osama bin Laden riots" in Kano, following the US attack on Afghanistan, claimed 200 lives.

¹⁹⁶ Christian Association of Nigeria 2006: 109; *Africa Research Bulletin*, Feb. 1–28, 2006: 16549.

¹⁹⁷ Gotan 2004: 69.

¹⁹⁸ Haz Iwendi, a police spokesman, in *Tell*, 1 Oct. 2001, "We Were Fair to Both Sides", p. 64. – Danfulani and Fwatshak (2002: 243, 249) have adopted this figure, while a report by Human Rights Watch (2001: 2, 10) talks of "more than 1000" casualties.

closer look at this conflict, exploring the ways in which global news reshaped local antagonisms. The idea of a universal clash between Islam and Christianity was the main model for translating a remote event into a local Nigerian context. By assuming that the same religious forces were at work in New York as in Jos, people could relate their personal experiences to international events and participate in a global drama. Muslims who picked up the fight against Western supremacy identified with the sufferings and aspirations of people in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan, up to the point of risking their lives for a common cause. Igbo residents, by contrast, were disinclined to playing their part in this confrontation. As we shall see, they had various reasons not to act as defenders of Christianity or of a Western way of life.

<68>

The tension that erupted in Jos during three days of street fighting had its roots in local hostilities. Since the 1980s, clashes between Muslims and Christians, often overlapping with ethnic antagonisms, had claimed thousands of lives in northern Nigeria. The worst clashes, with about 2000 dead, had occurred in February and May 2000 in Kaduna, where the state parliament had passed Islamic laws although nearly half of the population were Christians. These 'Sharia clashes', however, had not spread to Jos which was the centre of Christianity in the largely Muslim North.¹⁹⁹ Since Muslims in Jos formed just a third or a quarter of the population, they had no chance of bringing Islamic laws through parliament and thus had not risked a confrontation over Sharia. Given the clear Christian majority in the city and the surrounding Plateau State, nobody expected a major religious crisis, though in September 2001, just four days before 9/11, some quarters of town were afflicted by violence which claimed hundreds of lives. This conflict was perceived, however, less as a religious than an ethnic conflict. Since the city in the geographical centre of Nigeria has no dominant ethnic group, control of its administration has been strongly contested. The Berom and some dozen other 'indigenous' peoples see themselves as the owners of the Jos Plateau. Yet their claim to their ancestral land and to the city erected on it has been challenged by migrants from the North, mainly Hausa.²⁰⁰ The violent confrontation between 'settlers' and 'autochthones' had already abated by September 10, after the army had enforced a curfew. A 'second round' of fighting, however, started on Wednesday, September 12, when Muslims took to the streets and celebrated the victory over the world power USA. Their demonstration turned violent, when some of the protestors called for the introduction of Sharia and attacked the shops of Igbo traders and other Christians from the South who had not been involved in the dispute.²⁰¹

<69>

News of the events in New York did not just trigger more violence; they structured the urban conflict in Jos in a new, more dangerous way. Despite the fact that the Hausa were Muslims while most of the 'indigenes' were Christians, religious affiliations did not play a central role before 9/11. The dispute revolved around a local issue and had a rather ethnic colouring. Members of the Hausa community, which was concentrated in Jos North, vied for administrative control over the northern part of the city, accusing the chairman of the local government, a Christian Anaguta, of discriminating against them. In September 2001, both sides were preparing for a violent clash. A member of the local Igbo diaspora, which had kept out of the dispute over indigeneship, told me how the conflict in Jos had been designed initially. According to him, representatives of the Igbo community had been contacted by Hausa leaders who had briefed them about the upcoming confrontation and urged them to keep out of it: Igbo Christians would not be affected; the affair only concerned the Hausa and their Anaguta, Afisare and Berom adversaries. But things changed with 9/11, when the attacks against the financial and military nerve centres in the US highlighted a seemingly global con-

¹⁹⁹ The Middle Belt has been administered most of the time as part of the Northern Provinces or the Northern Region. Therefore, Jos is often called a Northern city.

²⁰⁰ Though the first Hausa settled in Jos when the town was founded by the colonial administration in 1915, most came in recent times, driven by land shortages and deteriorating climatic conditions in the far North (Plotnicov 1967: 45-47).

²⁰¹ *The Guardian*, 13 Sept. 2001, "Jos boils again"; Danfulani and Fwatshak 2002: 251.

flict. Now Hausa youths turned their aggression against all Christian communities, particularly against the Igbo who have played a prominent role in the business community of Jos.²⁰²

<70>

By bringing in religion, more actors were drawn into the conflict, and violence spread to all parts of town. In addition, the confrontation became more intractable. As long as it was framed as a conflict between ethnic communities that fought over local government jobs and public funds, the parties involved stood a better chance of settling their dispute. But the chance of reaching a compromise diminished when some Hausa residents, on receiving the news from New York, celebrated the assault on infidels and called for the introduction of Islamic law. Nobody had expected that the Muslims 'migrants' would openly challenge the Christian hegemony in Plateau State. As the bulwark of Middle Belt Christianity, the state capital Jos had looked like a place where Christians could feel safe. Just a year ago, when Sharia clashes had erupted in Kaduna, Kano and other Northern cities and thousands of Christians had fled in panic, many had taken refuge in Jos.²⁰³ But with 9/11, religious violence caught up with them. Some of the refugees simply left the Middle Belt and fled further south to their home areas in Igbo- or Yorubaland or in the Nigerdelta, while others who decided to stay put up a fierce resistance to what they interpreted as a Muslim (or Hausa) encroachment on a Christian stronghold.

<71>

By staging a "clash of civilisations",²⁰⁴ the inhabitants of Jos shattered the little trust that had existed among them. The religious polarisation affected state institutions as well, revealing cracks in the police and the army. Christian police officers complained that the Police Commissioner in charge of Plateau State, Mohammed Abubakar, had made sure that they were only armed with batons to contain the riot, while Muslim officers were given guns which they used to guard mosques and other Muslim property.²⁰⁵ Similar allegations were levelled against members of the army. Muslims reported that an Igbo officer gathered a few fellow soldiers under his command and hounded Muslims, while Christians told the case of a Muslim soldier who went on a killing spree: When encountering Muslim demonstrators he fired into the air, but when sighting Christians he immediately shot at them. So far, soldiers have not turned their guns against each other, but mutual suspicion has increased. Muslims and Christians in the army are monitoring each other, anticipating a situation where ethnic and religious antagonisms may gain the upper hand, overriding military discipline and professional loyalty. This is not an unlikely scenario. After all, Nigeria's descent into civil war, in the 1960s, began with the disintegration of the army when high-ranking officers killed each other.

<72>

Switching from an ethnic to a religious confrontation had severe consequences for the security forces and other state institutions. Moreover, it accelerated segregation among the inhabitants of Jos and divided the city in two religious halves. Districts in which Christians drove out the Muslim inhabitants were given new names such as Jesus Zone, New Jerusalem or Promised Land, while Muslims renamed their quarters Jihad Zone, Saudi Arabia or Seat of [bin] Laden.²⁰⁶ By moving apart they anticipated further clashes which did indeed occur. However, the long-term consequences of 9/11 in Jos are not the topic of this study. For our understanding of Igbo nationalism it is important to analyse why Igbo were reluctant to be drawn into a religious confrontation. In Jos as in other Northern towns it is obviously not in the interest of the Igbo diaspora to be seen as representatives of American and European 'crusaders'. Their role as stooges of the West has been imposed on them by their adversaries, in

²⁰² Danfulani and Fwatshak 2002: 247–251; Higazi 2007: 84.

²⁰³ Sharia "triggered an avalanche of immigrants [...] pouring into Jos" (Danfulani and Fwatshak 2002: 244; Human Rights Watch 2001: 5).

²⁰⁴ Maduagwu 2005: 24.

²⁰⁵ *Tell*, 1 Oct. 2001, "The Fallout of a Carnage", p. 62, "We Were Fair to Both Sides", p. 64, "We Had Over 7,000 Refugees", p. 65; *Newswatch*, 24 Sept. 2001, "Mayhem in Tin City", p. 33.

²⁰⁶ *Tell*, 15 Oct. 2001, "To Their Tents", p. 36.

an attempt to discredit them. Muslim newspapers cast them in the role of traitors who allowed themselves to be used as instruments of the erstwhile colonial masters and their American successors: "Nigerian Christians are [...] doing their own part of work as stipulated by the American New World Order".²⁰⁷ The Igbo are indeed more Western-oriented than other peoples in Nigeria, but their relationship with the West is fraught with bitter experiences. During the war, Biafrans presented themselves as "the most 'westernised' of all Africans, indeed, perhaps, of all Third World peoples".²⁰⁸ But this did not sway the British government to their side.

<73>

Today, after a long history of persecution, there may be no other people in Africa as keen as the Igbo on joining the fight against Muslim 'fanatics'. The American president, who – in a reaction to 9/11 – appealed to all nations to join the US-led 'coalition of the willing' to eliminate terrorism, could have found a close ally in the Igbo. Yet such an alliance never materialised. Although the Igbo are one of Africa's biggest nations with about 25 million people, their attempts to enter into an alliance or a relation of patronage with other 'Christian' nations has always been rebuffed. While conflicts in Nigeria have increasingly assumed a religious colouring, Western states have become even more reluctant than in the 1960s to choose African allies on the basis of common religious bonds. Thus it is strange for observers in Europe to be told by Muslim critics that Western policies are guided by a religious strategy that aims at destroying Islam. Of course, President Bush fuelled suspicions, when in an early reaction to 9/11 he announced a 'crusade' against terrorism. But allegations that Western statesmen are bent on effecting the downfall of Islam predate the presidency of George W. Bush. When his predecessor Bill Clinton visited Nigeria and met its democratically elected president (the first after 15 years of military rule), the Supreme Council for Sharia claimed that he had come on a religious mission: invited by President Obasanjo, a reborn Christian, "to complete [...] the Christianisation of Nigeria".²⁰⁹

<74>

The pact between Nigerian Christians and the West, based on their common religion, is largely fictitious. Why do Muslims in the North implicate their foes in a religious conspiracy? Among the Hausa and Fulani elites there has been a long tradition, dating back to the early nineteenth century, of emphasising their Islamic identity and defining their adversaries in religious terms.²¹⁰ However, the religious passions that flared up in Jos are not just a result of the political elites manipulating popular anger. The idea that local conflicts are associated with a global opposition between Muslims and the West is propagated by Islamic clerics, and it appeals to many faithful. Since the attempt to modernise themselves along European models has failed, it makes sense to revalue their Islamic heritage and seek a stronger identification with the Arab world whose inhabitants seem to share a similar disappointment with Western promises. Rejecting the values of a "morally degenerate"²¹¹ West finds support in all strata of society, not the least among ordinary Muslims, who may have seen the introduction of Sharia as the only remedy for the moral decay and corruption that has penetrated all spheres of life. Purging themselves of these alien influences is a collective endeavour. It requires fighting immorality in their midst by confronting all those who are not willing to go along with the project of a moral renewal: "With Sharia, [...] [a]ll those unwanted customs that are not in our blood, are going to go away".²¹² What the faithful reject has been personified, above all, in the Igbo. Like the distant West with its secular-Christian culture, the Igbo have become the

²⁰⁷ *Hotline*, 12 March 2000, "Shari'ah Has Come to Stay", p.31; cf. Back 2004: 214. – Igbo newspapers, in turn, have portrayed their opponents as stooges of Arab interests: "Nigerian and African Muslim communities [...] serve as foot soldiers and cheerleaders for the Middle Eastern fraternity of terror" (*New Republic*, 4 March 2006, "Osama Bin-laden", p. 11).

²⁰⁸ St. Jorre 1972: 360.

²⁰⁹ Dr. Datti Ahmed, in *The News*, 25 Sept. 2000, "North's Plot Thickens", p. 52.

²¹⁰ Harnischfeger 2008a: 42–81.

²¹¹ J. J. Amoloye, in Falola 1998: 85.

²¹² *BBC. Focus on Africa*, Oct. – Dec. 2000, "Sharia Marches On", p. 53; Krings 2008: 61.

embodiment of depravity: "the general belief in the North is that 'every Igbo man is a criminal'. [...] these people (Southerners) have lowered our moral standards, debased our value system and introduced vices that were hitherto unknown to us [...]. I cannot wait to see them carry back with them the only things they brought to us. These are: armed robbery, prostitution, cultism".²¹³

<75>

When seeking a renewal of society it makes sense to identify the forces one wants to combat. However, localizing evil may raise passions that are difficult to control. In Jos, religious enthusiasm has had unintended consequences. Fired by the triumph over the USA, militants escalated the conflict in a way that harmed the interests of the local Hausa community. By turning an ethnic conflict into a religious one, they provoked all local Christian communities and stiffened their determination to resist. Christian Igbo, Anaguta and Berom, who had often been divided over local issues, united and launched fierce counter-attacks while the Muslim minority suffered heavy casualties. It seems the images of the glistening twin towers, collapsing at the onslaught of a few determined fighters, had blinded Muslim militants. They lost sight of local realities and were lured into a confrontation they could not win, at least not for the time being. When conflicts erupted again in November 2008 and in January 2010, they followed the religious pattern that had emerged with 9/11, dividing the city into two hostile halves. Members of the 'indigenous' ethnic groups, who had occasionally clashed over ownership of land, set their differences aside and fought side by side as they had done in September 2001. Christian migrants from the South, such as the Igbo, found themselves almost automatically in the same Christian camp. However, members of the Igbo diaspora told me that this alliance, based on a common antagonism towards Muslims or Hausa, was fragile. Though the Igbo were afraid of Muslims assuming control over the whole of Plateau State, they did not trust the 'indigenous' Christians either.²¹⁴

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Christian Igbo, Yoruba, Berom and others have a long-term interest in warding off rising Hausa influence, yet there is much resentment among them. The Igbo call all Northerners 'Hausa', whether they are Christians or Muslims, ethnic minorities or Hausa proper. 'Hausa' are the people who killed them during the 1966 riots and the war. Thus the Igbo are not disposed to distinguish one ethnic group from another. Though most of them have no personal recollections of the war, they still refuse to acknowledge that many Berom and other Middle Belters are devout Christians who cling to their faith because they want to distance themselves from the Hausa and preserve their distinctive ethnic identities.²¹⁵ Since all Northern minorities allied with the Hausa 'jihadists', most Igbo dislike embracing them as fellow-Christians. In Jos or Kaduna, Igbo often attend other churches than the indigenous Christians; they are mostly Catholics and Anglicans, while the majority of Middle Belters belong to evangelical churches.²¹⁶

<76>

During the war the Biafrans saw themselves as a people that had closer and more intimate relations with God.²¹⁷ The texts of the Old Testament seemed to speak directly to them,

²¹³ *Hotline*, 3 April 2000, "Enough of the Blackmail", pp. 17, 20.

²¹⁴ The level of cooperation among Christians has, of course, increased. A few years before 9/11, an Igbo lecturer at the university told me that the Igbo in Jos had only superficial contacts with members of other ethnic groups, including Christian Berom (Jos, 22 Sept. 1995).

²¹⁵ Harnischfeger 2006.

²¹⁶ In Kaltungo, a main site of my research in 2001 and 2002, the majority of indigenous Tangale were affiliated with the Evangelical Church of West Africa. Some were Catholics, as were most members of the local Igbo community, yet they would not normally celebrate Mass together. Igbo Catholics insisted on a Sunday service in English, while the Tangale Catholics had theirs in Hausa. Pentecostal churches, however, which are gaining adherents all over Nigeria tend to level such differences.

²¹⁷ Walls 1978: 210, 213–214. – Biafra's Anglican Church split off and formed the National Church of Biafra. A high-ranking government official even suggested that the various Christian denominations in Igboland should overcome their differences and create "One united and national Church of Biafra" (Walls 1978: 215).

explaining their plight and giving them orientation for the future. Thus the identification with the ancient Hebrews helped create an ethnic Christianity that excluded others. The God they worshipped took particular interest in their people's fate and promised them salvation from their suffering. Today, the idea of being a chosen people is again attractive to Igbo nationalists, and it fulfils the same function: to distance them from both Western Christianity and non-Igbo Christians in Nigeria.

4.2 Christian Solidarity

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So far, I have described how a pro-Western identity has been foisted on the Igbo, singling them out for attacks. As a people that has been scattered into the remotest villages of Nigeria they fear and resent being pulled into a war by proxy. Nevertheless, many Igbo are inclined to adopt alien identities that set them apart from their African neighbours. As a member of Ohanaeze explained, the Igbo seem to have a natural affinity for modern Western culture: "We are rabidly republican. When a Yoruba is greeting a superior he is kneeling down. And among the Hausa, they are crawling on the ground. Not we. We don't even respect seniority and old age. We fit well into America and Europe, because you are also republican".²¹⁸

<78>

A study of religious violence by Freedom House, which sought to generate sympathy for the Christian minorities, pointed out that in their protest marches in north Nigerian cities, Muslims carried posters of Osama bin Laden, while Christian demonstrators waved American flags.²¹⁹ A few weeks after 9/11, when American forces conquered Afghanistan, members of an Igbo youth organisation took to the streets with placards proclaiming: "We are in total solidarity with USA", "Ohanaeze Youth Council celebrates the fall of the Taliban Government", "Religious fanatics must stop".²²⁰ This demonstration of solidarity was, of course, not staged in a Northern city but in the safety of their home area in the Igbo capital Enugu. Moreover, it has not been typical for Igbo activists to profess such unconditional support for American or European foreign policy. The Igbo may feel some affinity for 'Western' attitudes such as individualism and achievement orientation, but they have learnt to distrust Western powers. The civil war was crucial in this respect, though the relationship to Westerners, and especially to their former colonial masters, has been ambivalent from the start. Ojukwu summed up the love/hate relationship that has bound his people to the British: "We thought that the best way is to be as English as we could. We aped them, forgetting that the closer we look to them, the more they despised us".²²¹

<79>

Some Igbo claim in retrospect that the Biafra conflict "was seen as a war between the majority Muslims of the North and the Christians of the Eastern Region".²²² There is indeed evidence that religious sentiments, amplified by Biafran propaganda, played a major role: "Christianity was brought into the centre as the rallying point for war. The defence of her votaries became synonymous with the survival of Biafra. The Biafran national anthem was set to the moanful tune of [...] 'Be still my soul, the Lord is on thy side.' [...] The radio propaganda maintained a high level of religious consciousness as if Biafrans were the Israelites and others Gentiles".²²³ While there was a strong "identification of Biafra with Biblical Israel", Britain

²¹⁸ Personal communication, Abuja, 6 April 2002.

²¹⁹ Freedom House 2002: 4, 16, 32.

²²⁰ BBC, 28. 11. 2001, reprinted in *The Guardian* [Lagos], 28. 11. 2001, "Nigeria: Police disrupt pro-USA rally in Enugu State".

²²¹ Odumegwu Ojukwu, in *Tell*, 18 Sept. 2000, "Inside Ojukwu's Biafra", p. 30. – Towards the end of the war, Biafran propaganda blamed Western 'indifference' and lack of support on white racism: "If Biafra was white, we would be the hero of every western school-boy" (Odumegwu Ojukwu, October 1968, in Anthony 2010: 57).

²²² Aguwa 1997: 337.

²²³ Kalu 1996: 267, 268.

was perceived as a godless nation, sunk into "spiritually bankruptcy".²²⁴ "Thus a Biafran leader could confidently speak, as early as 1968, of post-war Biafra sending missionaries for the re-evangelisation of Britain. To the Igbo, a Christianity which does not take seriously the matter of social justice is false. Britain's refusal to take sides with justice – with Biafra – was evidence of her failure as a Christian nation".²²⁵

<80>

While the Europeans have 'betrayed' their Christian heritage, many Igbo nationalists speak with pride about the religious enthusiasm of the Biafrans who were "butchered for Christ by hordes of fanatical Northern Nigerian Moslem Fundamentalists".²²⁶ Such admiration for religious martyrdom sounds strange to secular Christians in Europe. Western politicians try to avoid taking sides in political conflicts on the basis of religious preferences. US support for Israel looks like a notable exception that has attracted much attention in Muslim media. In principle, however, Western governments agree that in international politics, as well as in domestic affairs, deeply divisive sentiments such as religious loyalties should not matter. In Nigeria, attitudes are different, though most Igbo would agree that a secular arrangement would be the best option. Yet the problem is that their opponents do not accept secular restrictions but use their control over state institutions to promote their own religion and reduce Christian influence.²²⁷ During my research on Nigeria's Sharia conflicts, Igbo often asked me why Westerners do not care when Christians, who are defending religious liberty, are killed by the thousands.²²⁸

<81>

However, the idea that the Igbo have been involved in a struggle between Islam and Christianity ignores much of their historical experience. It is true that most attacks on them in the cities of the North were committed by Muslim youth who sometimes pounced on their victims, shouting 'kill the infidels'. But during the civil war the Biafrans fought an alliance of Muslims and Christians, since the rest of the country had "banded together"²²⁹ against them. They could never count on Christian solidarity, neither in relation to the West nor among their fellow Christians in Nigeria. The experience of having been deprived of aid in their time of greatest need explains the strong interest in and affinity with Jewish history. Drawing from Biblical stories, television news and history books, they construct a Jewish people whose experience has been much like theirs: Nigerian "people hate Igbo [...] just like the way the Jews are hated".²³⁰ However, the idea of being African Jews expresses much more than just the experience of ostracism and suffering. Identifying with a far-away, almost mythical people is appealing because it allows Igbo to integrate conflicting experiences and self-perceptions. Their unique suffering can be understood as a sign of being chosen. It indicates that they are closer to God than other Christians in Nigeria who sided with the 'jihadists' and participated in the genocide. In this context the identification with ancient and modern Jews is a means of dissociating themselves from other Christians in Nigeria and the West. At the same time, it is also an appeal to be adopted and put under the protection of America and its Western allies, just as the Israeli enjoy a special relationship with the West.

²²⁴ Walls 1978: 211, 213.

²²⁵ Okorochoa 1987: 117.

²²⁶ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2006: 7.

²²⁷ The government of Kano State, for instance, has not allowed the construction of church buildings. Even in the Christian quarter of Kano City, no building permits have been issued since the early 1980s (Ibrahim 2002: 18).

²²⁸ Among Christian Middle Belters I noticed a similar bewilderment about Western indifference: "It is the weakness of Christianity all over the world that they treat Muslims with charity. We know, Muslims run to England and Germany and get help. Why don't the Europeans help us to survive in Nigeria?" (a pastor in Zonkwa, Kaduna State, 5 March 2001).

²²⁹ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2006: 4.

²³⁰ M. C. K. Ajuluchukwu, in *Orient News*, Vol. 2, No. 6, 2001: 5.

<82>

Identifying with a distant people that has played a prominent role in world history is a means of reflecting their place in the jumble of global forces. It helps them to understand themselves, but it may also lead them astray. Images which people internalise as part of their identity develop a life of their own and acquire power over them. As long as Nigerians fight each other as Jews and Palestinians, Americans and Arabs, they will find it hard to settle their differences. They disempower themselves by becoming actors in a global drama whose course they cannot influence. In the case of the Igbo, their vision of themselves as a people like the Jews – "living in the midst of enemies"²³¹ – reinforces the tendency to renounce their Nigerian citizenship and to fight, once again, for secession. MASSOB's nationalist agitation has deepened the sense of alienation and mistrust, but it has not enabled the Igbo to break away from what they resent. They are trapped in a "country characterized [...] by mutual antagonism and antipathy between its various peoples".²³² Nigeria's political establishment will not allow them to secede. The Igbo would only have a chance of self-determination if they could convince the American government to back a referendum, as it did on behalf of the non-Muslim minorities in southern Sudan. In recent years, however, the West has not cared about the Igbo and their suffering. President Obama may not even realise that the fate of 25 million Igbo is in his hands.

<83>

The future of the Igbo is largely determined by people with whom they cannot communicate directly. This may be one of the reasons why they have taken such passionate interest in the West's reaction to the threat of Muslim terrorism. While citizens in Jos were moved by the scenes in New York, Westerners did not care about the massacres in Nigeria. What can the Igbo do to get the attention of policy makers in the US and draw them to their side? The crucial problem is access to the media, and here the Israeli experience is again a source of inspiration: "At the end of the Second World War in 1945, the [J]ews found themselves surrounded by a very hostile world. The Jewish caucus met and agreed to do something to change world perception of their race. Part of that resolution was to seek to own and use ownership of the media to mould world opinion in their favour. Today, Jews own the world's major media outfits including the famous CNN".²³³

5. Nationalist Organisations

5.1 Igbo Presidency or Secession

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Ralph Uwazuruike, the founder of MASSOB, was a member of the ruling People's Democratic Party. He supported Olusegun Obasanjo during his election campaign in 1999, but was soon disappointed with his policy. When making federal appointments, the Yoruba president did not give the Igbo their "due", though 70 percent had voted for him.²³⁴ And when Obasanjo had to step down in 2007 after two terms in office, he did not hand over power to an Igbo president but made sure that power returned to the North. Uwazuruike had predicted that the Igbo can wait for another 40 years and participate in 'democratic' elections, without ever ruling Nigeria:²³⁵ "it will be quite easier to 'elect' Osama Bin Laden as Nigeria president than an [I]gbo man".²³⁶ Why should they be part of a country when they were excluded from governing it? At first, Uwazuruike's campaign for secession was not taken seriously. It looked like a one-man-show, but when hundreds of Igbo died in Sharia clashes in February and May 2000,

²³¹ Ralph Uwazuruike, in *The News*, 7 Jan. 2002, "Nobody Can Stop Biafra", p. 42.

²³² Prof. Ben Nwabueze, Secretary-General of Ohanaeze, in *Tell*, 15 Jan. 2001, "Igbo Kwenu!", p. 25.

²³³ Achike Udenwa, governor of Imo State, in *Vanguard*, 7 April 2002, "Ndigbo 2003 and political empowerment", p. 42.

²³⁴ *The News*, 17 April 2000, "I Will Bury Nigeria", pp. 16, 13.

²³⁵ *Insider Weekly*, 20 Dec. 2004, "Nothing Works in Nigeria", p. 28.

²³⁶ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 10.

the agitation for Biafra fell on fertile ground.²³⁷ At the height of MASSOB's popularity, a Lagos-based journal wrote: "In just six years, Biafra nationalism has assumed a religious ecstasy. Throughout the Southeast today, the red, black and green flags of Biafra, with the nostalgic logo of the rising sun in gold, are flying in all the towns and villages, and any policeman who dares to challenge it risks being burned to death".²³⁸

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Uwazuruike has burned his Nigerian passport, but how serious is he about Biafra? When asked about his personal experiences during the war, he said: "I have a very ugly memory of the Biafran war, because my kid sister, Mary, died in my arms – she suffered from kwashiorkor [protein deficiency, J.H.]".²³⁹ However, he assured the Igbo that they will not have to relive these horrors. They can win Biafra without a war: "No soul will be lost, not a single one. It will just be like waking up from a dream".²⁴⁰ Uwazuruike, who lived in India for ten years, claims to rely on Mahatma Gandhi's strategy of non-violence and passive resistance. The Igbo shall gradually opt out of Nigeria and establish their own political structures in a long 25-stage process. MASSOB has already introduced a new currency, the Biafra Pound, it has opened a Biafra House in Washington D.C., and it is broadcasting news through its radio station Voice of Biafra. Its activists are hoisting the old separatist flag and patrolling the streets in the blue uniforms of the former Biafra police. Yet they do not carry arms, as they are not meant to chase robbers or to intimidate members of other ethnic groups. Unlike the Yoruba in Lagos or the Hausa in Kano who operate armed militias to defend their territory, the Igbo are not afraid that 'non-indigenes' may take over parts of their land and their economy. Since the five Igbo states are densely populated, with little industry to offer employment, they have attracted only a few Nigerians from other areas.

<86>

Separatists posing as Biafra police are a bizarre masquerade, meant to impress politicians from other parts of Nigeria. By displaying more and more symbols of national sovereignty, they are trying to give the impression that Igboland is in fact drifting towards secession. For Igbo nationalists, this is the only way to force Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba politicians to pay attention to the plight of the Igbo. Ralph Uwazuruike would probably stop the countdown to independence, if his people were permitted access to the machinery of government. Before the elections in 2003, MASSOB activists demonstrated under the slogan: "Igbo Presidency 2003 or Biafra".²⁴¹ With one of their politicians on top, Igbo could have their slice of the 'national cake', yet their campaign for an Igbo president is not just about money. Their most pressing problem is that successive governments have failed to give them security. If those living outside Igboland were no longer discriminated against and threatened by massacres, agitation for Biafra would probably end. For millions of traders and artisans in the diaspora, secession is not a desirable option as they would have to abandon their investments and return to the East where economic prospects are bleak.²⁴² Despite their resentment of the Nigerian state, most Igbo does not have a genuine interest in secession, not even in a looser (con)federation. Since they have established substantial 'settler' communities all over Nigeria, their interests would best be protected by a strong central government which guaranteed equal treatment for citizens in all parts of the federation. In principle, the present constitution would suit them well, if only they could force their way into the mainstream of Nigerian politics. Other

²³⁷ Anthony 2002: 241.

²³⁸ *Tell*, 26 Sept. 2005, "The Challenge of Biafra", p. 27. – That the Nigerian police were afraid of confiscating Biafran flags is an exaggeration. Although MASSOB enjoyed wide support, many of its members were arrested, among them Ralph Uwazuruike, who was tortured in police custody (*News Mirror*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 2001: 6).

²³⁹ *The News*, 17 April 2000, "I Will Bury Nigeria", p. 16.

²⁴⁰ Ralph Uwazuruike, in *The News*, 17 April 2000, "I Will Bury Nigeria", p. 14.

²⁴¹ *The News*, 7 February 2005, "Crushing Biafra", p. 18 (photo).

²⁴² Daniel Jordan Smith 2007: 195, 205. – Yoruba nationalists with whom I talked in January 2007 predicted that a dissolution of Nigeria would entail massive population shifts. One of them said: An independent Yoruba republic will not give visas to the Igbo living in Lagos; they can return to Igboland and do agriculture.

Nigerians are, of course, aware that the Igbo would lose on a massive scale if Nigeria broke apart, so the campaign for Biafra is often dismissed as an empty threat. Igbo have little bargaining power. They are the first to be attacked and driven away, when communal clashes erupt in the North, but they have always returned. As a Northern magazine put it: "You can kill them easier than send them home. [...] they are essentially parasites. They only serve as middle men, buying from A to sell to B. 'So if they all go home who will buy from whom?'"²⁴³

<87>

MASSOB's strategy of non-violence has led to a dead end. The federal government made no concessions; instead it banned the organisation and deployed anti-riot police and army units which killed many MASSOB members.²⁴⁴ Ralph Uwazuruike assured his followers that help will come from abroad, since he is in close contact with Western governments and some friendly African countries. Representatives of Biafra will be granted observer status at the United Nations, and UN officials will come to hold a referendum. Nationalist periodicals that are mostly sympathetic to MASSOB picked up the idea that separatist leaders are working behind the scenes to secure international recognition. The *Eastern Sunset* reported that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan visited Uwazuruike;²⁴⁵ other papers informed their readers that the UN had endorsed a referendum on Biafra.²⁴⁶ When British Prime Minister Tony Blair made a state visit to Nigeria, an Igbo publication disclosed that Blair "briefed President Obasanjo on the resolution of the United Nations (UN), regarding the observer status granted the Biafran State", though the paper added that the "details of the UN resolution" which "brought shock to President Obasanjo" were "not made open to newsmen".²⁴⁷ Comrade Uchenna Madu, MASSOB's Director of Information, described the relationship with the international community as "very cordial": "they know about MASSOB and they are helping us tremendously, assisting us in the struggle because they sympathize with our cause and [...] respect MASSOB because we are maintaining our non-violent posture".²⁴⁸ The most influential patron of Igbo interests, according to one paper, was US President George W. Bush. In a secret letter to Uwazuruike, Bush had sent a "solidarity message", asking the secessionist leader "to forward to the white house detail[ed] materials on the aims, objectives and the type of assistance he would need to champion[] his cause". Praising Uwazuruike "for his uncompromising stand on Biafra", Bush assured him in this personal letter that "my heart goes to you and I think of you always, people like you definitely make the world a better place, devoid of injustice, hatred and racial discrimination".²⁴⁹

<88>

Critics told the MASSOB leaders that by talking about international recognition, UN peace keeping forces and a forthcoming referendum, they are fooling the people, especially those who are ready to lay down their lives for Biafra. While the movement has produced numerous 'martyrs', the Igbo have not come any closer to independence: "Whatever makes the chief architects of such a movement believe that what the Igbo could not obtain in three years of war could be handed over in peace, beats the imagination".²⁵⁰ For Igbo critics who dismiss the campaign for secession, Uwazuruike is playing a cynical game, using the killings of his fol-

²⁴³ *Hotline*, 3 April 2000: 20.

²⁴⁴ Ralph Uwazuruike claimed that "[t]housands of our members have been brutally murdered" (*Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 10), though this seems to be grossly exaggerated.

²⁴⁵ *Eastern Sunset*, Vol. 3, No. 13, 2001: 1.

²⁴⁶ *Freedom News*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2002: 4; *New Republic*, Issue 4, No. 4, 2006: 1. – The UN was also considering sending 20,000 soldiers to Igboland: "A sort of peace keeping force, the UN troops will be expected to protect MASSOB members [...] from incessant harassment and brutality by the Nigerian security apparatus" (*News Mirror*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 2001: 2).

²⁴⁷ *Pilot*, Vol. 1, No. 14, 2002: 2.

²⁴⁸ *National Star*, Vol. 2, No. 29, [no year]: 6.

²⁴⁹ *News Round*, Vol. 3, No. 30, 2001: 2.

²⁵⁰ Ohanaeze 2006: 8.

lowers as a "publicity stunt".²⁵¹ The secessionists cannot risk an open confrontation because the Nigerian police and army would retaliate fiercely against Igbo civilians, so it has been a sensible decision not to fight back. But given these unpropitious conditions for a confrontation, why does the MASSOB chief allow so many young men to perish in a struggle which they cannot win? His answer: "The attack on MASSOB is the beauty of non-violence. If they do not attack us, the world would not hear about us".²⁵² The deaths of his followers are meant to impress people thousands of kilometres away, so they only make sense if the corpses are seen on CNN and BBC. For Igbo separatists, all depends on their ability to internationalise the conflict. They cannot expect much support from their fellow citizens in other parts of Nigeria: "It does not matter how loudly or silently they cry or complain marginalisation against the Igbo nation [...] most Yorubas and the Hausa-Fulani do not care".²⁵³ When the police and army committed large-scale massacres in the city of Onitsha in order to dislodge MASSOB and other gangs, the press in Lagos paid little attention.

<89>

The outcome of the conflict over Biafra will be determined by 'soft power', disseminated through global media. Yet the international community does not bother about Igbo marginalisation; its main concern is keeping Nigeria intact. Many MASSOB supporters are, of course, aware that a referendum under international supervision is not in sight. Pamphlets and newspapers that put pictures of Bush and Blair on their front pages, with stories about secret letters and undisclosed UN resolutions, are just describing a virtual alliance that has not yet been forged. Though largely fictitious, this promising 'news' is not simply a deception or a red herring intended to dupe gullible members; they anticipate in a playful, sometimes ironic manner how a solution might look.²⁵⁴ Creating all sorts of scenarios and preparing for them is quite reasonable, given the fragility of the Nigerian federation and the unpredictability of reactions in the West where attitudes may be changing. Many Igbo assume that Nigeria is a failed state, incapable of finding solutions for its ethno-religious conflicts, so it is heading towards disintegration: "not even the military can keep humpty dumpty together. [...] has it not become quite clear to the British and American governments that the Nigerian government cannot provide security for [...] investments?"²⁵⁵ If the 'giant of Africa' with its 500 ethno-linguistic groups imploded, the West would have to cooperate with local political actors, such as the Biafran authorities, which might be the only ones to fill the vacuum and (re)introduce stability.

<90>

News about a deteriorating security situation would compel the world public to pay attention to the plight of the people, but it is far from sure that official reactions from Western governments would favour Igbo secessionists. In Somalia, the state has virtually disappeared, yet the international community is not ready to recognise a relatively stable successor state like Somaliland in the north of the country. There are indeed good reasons not to give official encouragement to secessionism.²⁵⁶ The African Union has enshrined in its charter the sanctity of the old colonial boundaries in order to forestall a wave of secessionist uprisings. In Nigeria, Igbo secession would probably lead to prolonged conflicts over boundaries and access to oil revenues. Though the freedom fighters say that they want to go in peace, without firing a shot, it is not clear on which basis they could settle controversial issues with their neighbours: How would the oil wealth be shared? How would ethnic diasporas and religious minorities be protected? Without the framework of common federal institutions, the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani might find it even more difficult to settle their differences.

²⁵¹ "Ndigbo Strategist, USA", in *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 6, 2006: 6.

²⁵² *The News*, 21 Nov. 2005, "Obasanjo Wants Me Dead", p. 23.

²⁵³ *Global News*, Vol. 4, 2000: 5.

²⁵⁴ An example of this jocular form of creating world news is the headline in the *Weekly News* (No. 4): "Israel trains 1 million Bakassi Boys". The Bakassi Boys were the fiercest militia in Igboland, seen by many as the nucleus of a future Igbo army.

²⁵⁵ Radio Biafra, 18 March 2006, reproduced in *National Star*, Vol. 2, No. 32 [no year]: 7.

²⁵⁶ Horowitz 2003; Young 2007: 244–245, 262.

<91>

Igbo nationalists are aware that an orderly, consensual break-up of the federation is unlikely.²⁵⁷ Among Nigeria's ethnic groups, there is no consensus by which criteria new borders should be drawn, so a dissolution of the federation would probably trigger a wave of ethnic cleansing. It seems that MASSOB has anticipated a violent confrontation and would not shy away from one, for it claims most of the Nigerdelta with its oil fields as an integral part of Biafra. Maps showing the future republic encompass not only Igboland but five more states populated by ethnic minorities. Thus the "promised land"²⁵⁸ where the Igbo seek freedom from tyranny looks like a replica of the Nigerian federation and its internal colonialism, with a numerically dominant group that may rule over others. Uwaruzuike admitted that the preponderance of Igbo in the first Biafra Republic had created problems for the people in the Nigerdelta, yet he assured the minorities that in future they would have nothing to fear: A born-again Biafra "will have no majority and minority tribes. We [...] embrace ourselves as brothers and sisters [...]. We are committed in this new Biafra project to carry everybody along, be he Ibibio, Ogoni, Ijaw, Igbo, Efik".²⁵⁹ However, the minorities have no reason to trust such assurances. In 1967, when they were forced into the Biafra project, they did not risk an open revolt. This time, minority leaders have warned MASSOB that they will take up arms against an Igbo occupation force.²⁶⁰

<92>

While Western experts take pride in taking a principled stand and not yielding to secessionist demands, Igbo nationalists interpret such an attitude as proof of Western indifference, if not hostility.²⁶¹ It looks as if the American and European governments are denying them their rights, preventing them from living in safety and dignity. When 620.000 Montenegrins demanded their own state, Western politicians allowed them a referendum; at the same time they have forced 25 million Igbo to live in a multi-ethnic federation where they are resented nearly everywhere. To some extent, the Igbo see themselves as a beleaguered outpost of Western civilisation, defending religious freedom in the face of rising Islamism, but – as a MASSOB functionary explained – the West does not appreciate that: "When some Palestinians are killed, it makes headlines in the Western media, but when 700 Igbo are executed, as happened in Onitsha last September and October [2006], the West looks the other way. The Whites do not help, when you are friendly to them. You have to attack them, like the Arabs do, before they send aid and seek to solve your conflicts".²⁶²

5.2 Internal Divisions

<93>

The crack-down on MASSOB has demoralised many of its members. They have been brutalised by the police, but are not allowed to strike back. Moreover, their sacrifices for the Igbo cause seem to be in vain, since they are no closer to any of their aims, be it Igbo presidency or Biafra. Some have given up nationalist politics, while others are demanding a revision of the strategy of non-violence. Leaders of the Eastern Peoples' Congress, who have split from MASSOB, insist that their members should have the right to defend themselves when hunted down by the police. Uwaruzuike himself has never ruled out the option of taking up arms: "If the Yoruba start burning the houses of Igbo in Lagos, we shall raze the whole of Lagos and

²⁵⁷ Onu 2001: 16.

²⁵⁸ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2006: 6.

²⁵⁹ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 10; *The News*, 17 April 2000, "I Will Bury Nigeria", p. 14.

²⁶⁰ *Newswatch*, 29 May 2000, "Biafra not The Answer", p. 13; *The Source*, 30 Aug. 2004, "MASSOB: A Sit-at-Home Order", p. 33.

²⁶¹ Western support for a referendum in southern Sudan that will probably lead to the creation of a new state may indicate a paradigm shift. With regard to Nigeria, Herbst (1996) has hinted at a similar solution: As Nigeria is not a viable state it should be split into smaller, more workable units.

²⁶² Personal communication, Awka, 2 Dec. 2006.

teach them that nobody has the monopoly of violence".²⁶³ When his idol, ex-General Ojukwu, was about to be arrested by the State Security Service, a MASSOB speaker threatened to make Nigeria ungovernable.²⁶⁴ However, nationalists in Igboland do not have the means to blackmail the federal government. A few kilometres to the south, in the Nigerdelta, ethnic militias can put pressure on the president in Abuja by blowing up pipelines and other installations belonging to oil companies. The Igbo, in contrast, could only destroy their own infrastructure: government buildings and schools, power lines and bridges. They could also stage demonstrations and go on strike. But who in Abuja would care? When people in Southwest Nigeria protested the annulment of the 1993 elections and declared a general strike which paralysed much of Yorubaland, the central government remained unimpressed: "killings and economic sabotage caused by the south-west [...] only succeeded in affecting them. Who was killed? Whose houses were destroyed? Whose economy was destroyed? [...] We are thankful to them for killing themselves and crippling their economy".²⁶⁵

<94>

Igbo separatists could attack targets outside Igboland, but this would jeopardise their kith and kin in Lagos, Abuja and Kano. The Eastern Peoples Congress suggested starting to evacuate the Igbo diaspora and then taking decisive steps for secession: "When you are challenging [...] the Nigerian nation, you don't allow your people to remain in the North and Western parts of the country, which we regard as enemy territories. [...] We don't want a situation where our people would be killed while trying to cross River Benue or River Niger, as was the case before the civil war [1966]".²⁶⁶ It is most likely that a dismemberment of Nigeria would lead to large-scale hostilities and ethnic cleansing. For the Igbo who are major actors in a commercial network that stretches across Nigeria, this would be a disaster, so they would be well advised not pursue their Biafra project in earnest. However, their future will not be determined by a rational calculation of Igbo interests. MASSOB's call for secession has mobilised many young men who feel they have nothing to lose. The transition to democracy has not bettered the living conditions of ordinary Nigerians. Though government budgets are larger than ever, thanks to the high prices for crude oil, an estimated 70 percent of Nigerians are living on less than one dollar a day.²⁶⁷ Something drastic has to happen, and the most radical break with the past would be the dissolution of Nigeria. The agitation for Biafra draws much support from Igbo émigrés in America and Europe who would not bear the costs of civil war. Within Igboland, the most enthusiastic MASSOB supporters are the urban poor, mostly young men who have not experienced the horrors of the war.²⁶⁸ Nationalist politics is attractive to them because it can be used, among others, to bring popular pressure to bear on the Igbo elite. Fighting for a common national interest presupposes "unity of mind, thoughts and aspiration for the entire Igbo race".²⁶⁹ Igbo leaders should close ranks, set their personal interests aside and devote their political activities to the welfare of their people. Without such a commitment to a common cause, they will always use their political positions and business contracts with the Nigerian state to enrich themselves. In their home villages, where they have redistributed parts of their ill-gotten wealth, they may be honoured for their generosity, but from a nationalist perspective they are sell-outs who profit from their collaboration with Igbo enemies. Patriotism requires a culture of sacrifice; it sets standards of morality which can be

²⁶³ *The News*, 22 May 2000, "We Must Have Biafra", p. 18.

²⁶⁴ *The Week*, 27 September 2004, "A Gathering Storm", p. 13. – A couple of times, MASSOB members were involved in armed clashes with the police, the army and with militant groups like the Bakassi Boys. Moreover, there are reports that they kidnapped wealthy Igbo, whom they accused of collaboration with the Nigerian state, though the leaders of the organisation have denied these charges (Obianyo 2007: 8).

²⁶⁵ Abubakar Buba Galadima, a minister of the Abacha regime, in *TSM. The Sunday Magazine*, 4 December 1994, "The North: "Our fear and worries"", p. 17.

²⁶⁶ Longinus Orjiakor, in *Insider Weekly*, 19 January 2004, "We Will Shake the Foundations of Nigeria", p. 32; Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 138.

²⁶⁷ *The Economist*, 12 Nov. 2009, "Hints of a new chapter".

²⁶⁸ Obianyo 2007: 9.

²⁶⁹ Obinna Uzoh, a politician from Anambra, in *Newswatch*, 1 April 2002, "It Is Our Turn", p. 31.

invoked against politicians who betray Igbo interests. Serving one's nation means, first and foremost, joining a common front against outside enemies, but once accountability is established, popular pressure can be used to demand social justice within: to bridge the divide between rich and poor, and to domesticate the local elites. Thus nationalism may be seen as a force of self-transformation, meant to restore social responsibility and bring peace to the land. Igbo towns and villages are torn by strife so that people waste much of their resources fighting each other. In order to overcome infighting they have to redirect their talents and ambitions towards a common goal: achieving economic and political strength in order to develop Igboland.

<95>

The tension between elders and their radical critics came to the fore during the 2007 elections, when Ohanaeze, with the World Igbo Congress, endorsed the presidential campaign of Orji Kalu, the governor of Abia. Kalu was a sworn enemy of MASSOB, and notoriously corrupt. According to a report by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission which was leaked to the press, he embezzled one-third of all the money that flowed from the federation account into the state coffers of Abia State.²⁷⁰

<96>

MASSOB's rejection of the Nigerian federation has deepened the rift between the young radicals and the political establishment. All Igbo in public offices have sworn loyalty to the state; they cannot declare openly for secession. Ralph Uwazuruike claimed that the Igbo elite "condemn MASSOB in the open and come in the midnight to tell me to pardon them".²⁷¹ However, he is not in close contact with the political establishment. Most elders feel threatened by radical separatism: "Those of us who profess one Nigeria are in danger. The youths may eliminate us".²⁷² Separatist leaders have framed the struggle for Igbo interests in a way that casts the political elite, who must participate in Nigerian politics, in the role of traitors. If MASSOB were just campaigning for a confederation, the elders could cooperate with them, make use of their militancy and try to protect them from state repression. But as long as the youth insist on secession they make it easy for the central government to play them off against their elders. As a means of deepening the divisions between them, President Obsanjo ordered the security forces to arrest any Igbo chief whose area flew a Biafra flag.²⁷³

<97>

Critics suggested that MASSOB leaders should give up their confrontational strategy. As a first step towards autonomy, they should foster Igbo unity by reviving the cultural heritage. However, as we shall see in Chapter 6.3, the Igbo never had a strong common tradition. Moreover, the past is divisive because many activists see the future Biafra as a "Christian State".²⁷⁴ Today's nationalists have revived the idea that the Igbo are God's chosen people, and some argue that the Igbo are one of the lost tribes of Israel. Having their roots outside Africa, it seems to be their destiny to attract the enmity of their neighbours: "The Igbos were branded as thieves, being greedy and clannish by their Nigeria brothers. In the same way in Europe, Hitler gave the Jews a bad name in order that he may exterminate them. The Igbos and the Jews have the same ancestral lineage and that is why they have similar experience".²⁷⁵

²⁷⁰ *Tell*, 15 May 2006, "Rape of Abia", p. 20.

²⁷¹ *Tell*, 15 Nov. 2004, "SSS Boss is Biafra at Heart", p. 34.

²⁷² Dr. Ezeife, in *Tell*, 11 October 2004: 21.

²⁷³ *The News*, 7 Feb. 2005, "Crushing Biafra", p. 18.

²⁷⁴ *Pilot*, Vol. 7, No. 14, 2004: 5.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3; Daniel Jordan Smith 2007: 206–207.

6. Defining Igboness

6.1 Reaching for the Stars

<98>

Among the many peoples that have strived to draw Western attention to their plight, the Jews have been remarkably successful. Backed by governments in America and Europe, the citizens of Israel have managed to preserve their national independence though they live "in the midst of enemies".²⁷⁶ Their state is not even half the size of Igboland and it is more densely populated, yet its seven million inhabitants have built one of the world's most impressive high-tech economies. Igbo nationalists argue that they could achieve the same. Though their land is impoverished, and dependent to a large extent on remittances from the Igbo diaspora, it could prosper if it were freed from the stranglehold of the Nigerian 'occupation forces': "Who stops us from building technological centres of excellency at home and diaspora? Who stops you from bringing in diaspora investors to set up industrial clusters and technology parks?"²⁷⁷ Before the civil war, Igbo had "the fastest growing economy in the world, eyed and envied even by big American investors".²⁷⁸ Thus the argument – often made by critics in Igboland and abroad – that Biafra would not be a viable state does not hold. The Igbo just need a chance; they have to convince people in the West, as did the Jews: "We are everywhere in Nigeria, Africa, Europe and the Americas. [...] There are only about one million Jews in the US. Yet, by sticking together, they exert an influence far larger than their number".²⁷⁹

<99>

Identifying with the Jews articulates the desire to win the patronage of America and its Western allies. However, references to the experiences of the Jews also express the opposite: bitterness and desperation about having been abandoned in the face of extreme violence. The trauma of having been rejected has haunted Igbo life since the civil war. Nationalists emphasise the singularity of the Igbo's experience, in particular of their suffering: "No other African people have suffered such an extensive holocaust and impoverishment in 100 years".²⁸⁰ This unique experience sets them apart from other Nigerians and attaches them to a remote nation which most of them only know through the mass media. It seems that God's chosen people have been destined to attract hostility, be it in ancient or modern Israel, in Nazi Germany or in medieval times: "the Jews in the Middle Ages were accused of sorcery, murder, cannibalism [...] and even using human beings for ritual sacrifices. The Igbo [...] were also charged with most of these crimes".²⁸¹ How can one explain such intense hostility? The reason most often cited for the aggression directed against Jews and Igbo is envy. Both nations are more gifted than others and have often been blessed by success: "the World Jewry has produced for this planet earth, the greatest scientists and artists, greatest religious leaders, wisest men, greatest political leaders and richest people. As one of the seeds of Jacob or 'a branch of the Hebrews', the Ibos [have provided] the most prominent parts of the Nigeria's greatest scientists, greatest artists, greatest religious rulers, greatest rulers and richest people".²⁸² Nationalists argue that these achievements ought to have earned them respect. Since the Igbo possess the skills and business acumen to develop the country, one might have expected other citizens to be glad to live alongside them. However, "[i]n Nigeria these special attributes of the Igbo man have only attracted to them hatred [...] born out of the fear of the higher ingenuity, higher industry, higher wisdom and higher intellectual power of Ndigbo".²⁸³ Thus, the 'Igbophobia' of non-Igbo is rooted in an inferiority complex, in a *mélange* of

²⁷⁶ Ralph Uwazuruike, in *The News*, 7 Jan. 2002, "Nobody Can Stop Biafra", p. 42.

²⁷⁷ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2006: 6.

²⁷⁸ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 9, 2006: 12; Igbokwe 1995: 79.

²⁷⁹ Orji Kalu, Governor of Abia State, in *Tell*, 5 Feb. 2001, "It's a New Day", p. 24.

²⁸⁰ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 15, 58, 121, 124.

²⁸¹ Ogbukagu 2001: 75.

²⁸² Alaezi 1999: 47–48.

²⁸³ *News Service*, February 2002: 13; cf. The Voice of Igbo Israel: What are responsible for Igbo and Jewish higher intelligence?, 30 August 2009, <http://igboisrael.blogspot.com>, 7 June 2010.

resentment, fear, and admiration: "They are envious because they can't match our God-given talent. In fact, if they are given an opportunity for reincarnation, they will hastily reincarnate as Biafrans".²⁸⁴

<100>

Other Nigerians would admit that Igbo are talented people, and thanks to their talents they are sometimes compared to Jews: "The Igbo have the Jewish blood. [...] They are enterprising and intelligent".²⁸⁵ More often, however, their success is associated with sharp practices and ruthless competition.²⁸⁶ The Igbo are, of course, aware of their bad reputation: "To a Yoruba and a Hausa man, an Igbo man is a fraudster", "a thief", "a gambler".²⁸⁷ In a title story on Biafra, the magazine *Tell* summed up the usual stereotypes: "The general perception of the Igbo by other people is that they are arrogant, aggressive, greedy and ungrateful [...]. It is believed that the Igbo will do everything and anything to make money".²⁸⁸ Such sweeping statements are, of course, rejected by Igbo representatives, yet in internal debates it is acknowledged as a problem that Igbo are prone to pursuing their personal interests at all costs. From a nationalist point of view, reckless individualism is counter-productive when striving for common goals. It undermines Igbo solidarity and makes it easier for the Nigerian government to buy off Igbo leaders, split the political elite and marginalise the entire populace. Igbo patriots have deplored that "money is the ultima ratio in everything", leading to "the near total absence of the virtues of integrity, selfless service".²⁸⁹ Even official representatives of Ohanaeze appealed to their compatriots to "de-emphasise money",²⁹⁰ warning that "our value system has gone down considerably. Now we have gone crazy about money irrespective of how it is got".²⁹¹ Many would argue, however, that the Igbo are not to be blamed for this failing sense of social responsibility; it was forced upon them: "the mainstream of Igbo identity and personality was destroyed by the Biafran war".²⁹² Moreover, in the decades following their defeat, discrimination prevented them from redeveloping the whole range of their talents. Excluded from networks of political patronage, with little access to government jobs and contracts, they had to seek "short cuts to wealth".²⁹³ Thus they were "forced into unconventional business like drug pushing and advance fee fraud because Nigeria 'boxed us to a corner!' after the civil war".²⁹⁴

<101>

The present state of insecurity and humiliation is sometimes contrasted with the position of dominance and honour which they had allegedly occupied half a century ago: "before the war, the Igbo was the most organized and most respected race in Nigeria".²⁹⁵ Competing with other ethnic nationalities they had clearly shown their superiority, for their home area, the East, "was a booming economy, much more advanced than any other part of Nigeria, and was on course to developing into a leading economic and industrial power in another decade".²⁹⁶ Igbo ascendancy seemed unstoppable in other parts of the country as well, especially in the civil

²⁸⁴ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2006: 6.

²⁸⁵ Sarah Jibril, in *Tell*, 15 Jan. 2001, "Igbo Leaders Are Vote Contractors", p. 23.

²⁸⁶ A state-owned newspaper in Kano warned Igbo to "remove the mafia-type exclusivism surrounding their businesses" (quoted in *Tell*, 10 July 1995, "A Kano of Trouble", p. 23). For a more nuanced assessment of Igbo business mentality, see Daniel Jordan Smith (2007).

²⁸⁷ Ralph Uwazuruike, in *The News*, 20 Nov. 2000, "Biafra Still Alive", p. 29.

²⁸⁸ *Tell*, 15 Jan. 2001, "Echoes Of Biafra", p. 28.

²⁸⁹ Douglas Anele, in *Vanguard*, 24 March 2002, "Aspects of phantom Igbo consciousness", p. 11.

²⁹⁰ Prof. Ben Nwabueze, Secretary-General of Ohanaeze, in *Tell*, 11 Oct. 2004: 21.

²⁹¹ Prof. Joe Irukwu, President of Ohanaeze, in *Tell*, 23 Aug. 2004, "Ohanaeze Won't Restrain Police", p. 18.

²⁹² Douglas Anele, in *Vanguard*, 24 March 2002, "Aspects of phantom Igbo consciousness", p. 11. – "After the war, it was everybody to himself" (C. C. Onoh, in *Tell*, 15 Jan. 2001, "Why Igbos Are Feared", p. 31; Aha-zuem 1997: 204–205).

²⁹³ Odumegwu Ojukwu, in *Conscience International*, Vol. 3, No. 7, 2001, "Ojukwu again! Call Igbos to war", p. 17.

²⁹⁴ An Igbo businessman, in *Tell*, 6 Sept. 2004, "Laundering their Filthy Lucre", p. 24.

²⁹⁵ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 9, 2006: 12.

²⁹⁶ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 72.

service and other modern sectors of society: "80% of Army Officers in the Nigerian Army were Ndigbo. [...] Ndigbo also called the shots in the public service [...]. By the 60s, Ndigbo had the highest graduating number each year [and they held] their positions as captains of industry".²⁹⁷ Their determination to succeed was still visible during the war. Although they stood almost alone, Igbo did not despair but made use of their ingenuity. Some of today's nationalists are full of praise of their people's achievements in the face of extreme adversity: "We survived three years of blockade [...]. We were able to build our own rockets hitting their targets with precision. We had our means of getting things done. We refined petrol and brake fluids from coconut".²⁹⁸ "Since then, no other Black race has done it. [...] During the time, our own airport was the busiest night airport on the continent of Africa. We did it. [...] The range of our broadcast was fabulous. Practically, the whole continent of Africa was hearing the Voice of Biafra. And it came from the back of a lorry. [...] the great thing about Biafra was that everybody was working for everybody else. That was a great thing. There was no stealing".²⁹⁹

<102>

Many nationalists do not share this glorious vision of the war.³⁰⁰ And many would doubt that the defeat in 1970 fundamentally altered the character of the Igbo. They would rather assume that the penchant for material gain has not been acquired recently. It is something they share with their Jewish counterparts: Both nations have a "strong flair for business", and their "thinking and aspirations are centred on money".³⁰¹ But no matter how nationalists explain Igbo acquisitiveness: as part of their identity which they share with their (Jewish) ancestors, or as an alien trait that has taken hold of their psyche like a curse – nationalism holds the promise to reinvent themselves. The Igbo can break away from the "pariah"³⁰² status imposed on them, and they can redirect their creativity and "indomitable will-power"³⁰³ towards common goals: developing their own state, as did the Jewish survivors of the holocaust when they took possession of their Holy Land. In Israel, the Jews turned an arid stretch of land into an intensely cultivated, prosperous country. The Igbo have the ability to initiate a similar development: "like Israel, Biafra will be a pride of the world".³⁰⁴ They only need a chance to manage their own affairs without outside intervention. They have to quit a federation which has been imposed on them by the colonial power and which is structured in a way that it cannot advance their well-being:³⁰⁵ "Nothing good can ever come out of Nigeria. What you hear are power outages, shortage of water, armed robbery and other evils. We don't want to be part of that evil. [...] Biafra has all the resources – our scientists are scattered all over the world, they will come back. I tell you, in the first two years of Biafra, we shall be manufacturing nuclear weapons".³⁰⁶ Nigeria has come to symbolise what is holding the Igbo back, while Biafra signifies the very opposite: all the achievements the Igbo could have made, if they had been allowed to develop on their own. Nationalist rhetoric gives an explanation for the failures of the past; it provides an answer to the disturbing question why millions of talented and industrious people cannot get out of their misery: "Left alone, the Igbo would soar to the

²⁹⁷ Odumegwu Ojukwu, in *Conscience International*, Vol. 3, No. 7, 2001, "Ojukwu again! Call Igbos to war", p. 16–17. – According to Cronje (1972: 15), about half the officers in the Nigerian army were Igbo.

²⁹⁸ Joe Igbokwe, in *The News*, 27 March 2000, "We Are Battle Ready", p. 16.

²⁹⁹ Odumegwu Ojukwu, in *Tell*, 18 Sept. 2000, "Inside Ojukwu's Biafra", p. 30 (reprinted in *News Mirror*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 2001: 8).

³⁰⁰ Ojukwu himself, when interviewed a few years after the war, gave a more sober assessment of the moral economy of the war: "Ojukwu maintains that corruption so threatened the effectiveness of his government that midway through the war he brought in a former British officer to assess the extent of corruption, but when he received the report he concluded that malpractices were so pervasive that to pursue the wrongdoers would cause the collapse of his administration" (Stremlau 1977: 360; cf. Nwankwo 1980: 32–34, 47–57).

³⁰¹ Ogbukagu 2001: 81, 82.

³⁰² *News Mirror*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 2001: 5.

³⁰³ Ogbukagu 2001: 97.

³⁰⁴ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 7 [or 8], 2006: 5.

³⁰⁵ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 16.

³⁰⁶ Ralph Uwazuruike, in *The News*, 17 April 2000, "I Will Bury Nigeria", p. 16.

stars. Nigeria has almost destroyed the Igbo dream".³⁰⁷ This dream has no specifically African features. An independent Biafra, freed from the retarding influence of Nigeria and its Muslim oligarchy, would look like a "developed" European state: "very rich", with social welfare for the unemployed, pensions which are paid promptly, and retirement homes for the elderly.³⁰⁸

<103>

Secessionists tend to present the "exodus"³⁰⁹ from Nigeria as something inevitable. They argue that the Igbo have no choice since the decision has already been taken –by their opponents. No matter how much the Igbo demonstrate their willingness to cooperate with others, the rest of Nigeria has shown consistently that "Ndigbo are not wanted in Nigeria".³¹⁰ No amount of concession can overcome this hostile attitude because the "hatred for Ndigbo in Nigeria is natural and cannot be changed".³¹¹ It would be futile to hope that the Hausa or Yoruba elites would allow the Igbo to grow politically stronger and get a real share in power. The Igbo have often tried to cooperate, extending "gestures of true friendship" in order to build up trust, but these gestures "received rebuffs".³¹² In a way, the Igbo are "the most nationalist and patriotic of Nigerian citizens";³¹³ they have a strong interest in cooperation, because they have made the whole country their home: "There is no ethnic group that is more committed to the 'Nigerian Project'".³¹⁴ But instead of appreciating Igbo loyalty and "patriotism",³¹⁵ other Nigerians have turned against them. Thus they are not just rivals or opponents; they are traitors who have torn apart what was binding Nigerians together. The accusation of betrayal, which is frequently raised against fellow-Nigerians, shifts the blame for future conflicts away from Igbo nationalists. They have tried their best but were pushed into an antagonistic position.

<104>

Despite this apparently irreconcilable antagonism, other Nigerians are not just enemies; they are the people whom the Igbo want to impress. As objects of contempt, hatred and jealousy, the Igbo are engaged in a struggle for recognition. The very people despising them shall be forced to acknowledge that the Igbo are superior to them. Members of other ethnic groups are thus cast in an ambivalent role. They are rivals whom the Igbo want to surpass, and they are the ones to judge over Igbo achievements. This ambivalence is reflected in the Igbo's attitude towards Nigeria: It is an "evil monster",³¹⁶ a "cursed"³¹⁷ country like "Sodom and Gomorrah", while Biafra is the "land that flows with milk and honey".³¹⁸ Yet Nigeria could also be an economic giant, provided its citizens entrusted the Igbo with the leadership of the country. From a nationalist perspective, it does not really matter, in which way the Igbo put their opponents to shame. They may rise over others by turning Biafra into an African Taiwan or Korea,³¹⁹ or they may prove their abilities by transforming Nigeria into a leading industrial nation. It seems that their mission, wherever they go, is to spearhead progress: "We are the Nigerian developers: [...] give us the wilderness, we turn it into a thriving market [...]. We move from place to place developing it. In the North, we set up the Sabon Garis, bring school[s] to them, bring in amenities, civilise the place".³²⁰ What prevents other Nigerians from making proper use of the Igbo's talents is envy. Instead of imitating them, they vilify the Igbo – a self-

³⁰⁷ Obi Nwakanma, in Daniel Jordan Smith 2007: 194.

³⁰⁸ *Weekly Hammer*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2000: 4.

³⁰⁹ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2006: 6.

³¹⁰ Arthur Nwankwo, in *Post Express*, 18 July 2000, "The Igbo Nation and Logic of Confederation", p. 24.

³¹¹ *Freedom News*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2002: 2.

³¹² Onuora 1995: 14.

³¹³ *Eastern Sunset*, Vol. 3, No. 10, 2001: 7.

³¹⁴ *Eastern Pilot*, Vol. 8, No. 8, 2004: 3.

³¹⁵ *Freedom News*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2002: 2.

³¹⁶ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2006: 6.

³¹⁷ *National Star*, Vol. 2, No. 31 [no year]: 7.

³¹⁸ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2006: 6.

³¹⁹ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 139.

³²⁰ Odumegwu Ojukwu, in *Freedom News*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2002: 12.

destructive attitude that condemns them to perpetual stagnation. They only had to accept that others can be more successful, and they would prosper as well: "If Igbo people were in control of the government of this country, Nigeria would [be] among the richest countries in the world".³²¹ However, it is not yet too late; the others could change their attitudes: "Free Ndigbo and the sky will be the limit for Nigeria".³²² By their technical skills and inventiveness, they are destined to break the development blockade that has paralysed Nigeria for decades. And thanks to their fierce egalitarianism and republican spirit, they could make democracy work: "Igbo democracy is the oldest, purest, and ultimate".³²³ "The salvation of Nigeria will only come when Nigerians would look up to the Igbo, the Israelites of Africa, and tell them come and lead us politically".³²⁴

<105>

What unites the Igbo nation is not just a unique experience of suffering, but also a unique mission. Their role as saviours demands that those around them recognise their leadership. In the end, the whole African continent would benefit if the Igbo were given a chance to rise: "Biafra is the last hope of Blackman's industrialisation and technological advancement".³²⁵ Thus the fight for Biafra or for Igbo dominance in Nigeria assumes a messianic dimension: "Biafra is fighting not in order to conquer, subjugate, or exploit other people. It is not interested in territorial acquisitions; not even in revenge. In a sense it is fighting for the cause of black m[e]n every-where. [...] It is fighting for the true Independence of Africa. It is fighting to show the world that the African can have a will of his own which cannot be destroyed by even the awful might of imperialism and neo-colonialism".³²⁶

6.2 Secular and Religious Nationalism

<106>

The extreme tensions in Igbo self-perception: their feeling of being rejected and despised on the one hand and being called to greatness on the other, can best be articulated in a religious language. As Jews, they are set apart and destined to suffer, yet they have a chance to liberate themselves if they remember the covenant with God. The Old Testament provides an archive of narratives that help to imagine how God intervenes in the life of a nation and changes the course of history. These narratives gain additional attraction through the rise of contemporary Israel, which may be interpreted as the fulfilment of a divine promise given to the ancient Hebrews. World events seem to corroborate Biblical prophecies, making them credible and real. The Igbo can indeed reinvent themselves, if they tread the path of Israel.

<107>

The claim that an independent Biafra could achieve the same as modern Israel is given further weight by asserting that the Igbo are of Jewish descent. For European observers, such a claim looks like a matter of faith: some Igbo seem to *believe* that Abraham was their ancestor, while others do not. However, an Igbo-Jewish identity can be construed in various ways, and the

³²¹ Elliot Uko, leader of the Igbo Youth Movement, in *P.M. News*, 31 Jan. 2001, "Only Igbo Can Save Nigeria".

³²² Odumegwu Ojukwu, in *Tell*, 18 Sept. 2000, "Inside Ojukwu's Biafra", p. 30 (reprinted in *News Mirror*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 2001: 8).

³²³ Onuora 1995: 11. – "We are republicans; we have been playing democracy before the Greeks" (Dr. Chukwuemeka Ezeife, in *The Eastern Voice*, June 10–16, 1996: 14).

³²⁴ Elliot Uko, leader of the Igbo Youth Movement, in *P.M. News*, 31 Jan. 2001, "Only Igbo Can Save Nigeria". – The vision of the Igbo as Nigeria's developers is popular, above all, among moderate nationalists, centred upon Ohanaeze, who are reluctant to call for secession: "Ndigbo indeed have the tradition for open discussions, inclusiveness, transparent democracy and a hunger for private business and rapid modernization. [...] Ndigbo [could] lead the nation in the search for democracy and industrial development. [...] What should Ndigbo do to place themselves in the vacant position of progressive leadership in our greatly troubled nation?" (Ohanaeze 2006: 7–8).

³²⁵ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2006: 8. This statement is marked as a quote by Odumegwu Ojukwu.

³²⁶ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 14. – The Igbo's messianic role in Africa as the vanguard of modernisation was already a major topic in Biafra's war propaganda (Anthony 2010: 45, 51–60). Today's nationalists have "drawn liberally on rhetoric and symbols from the 1967–70 period" (ibid., pp. 60–61).

talk of a genealogical link is not necessarily meant in a literal sense. Moreover, it is of little practical importance whether the Igbo actually believe in such links. A small number of Igbo have converted to Judaism and are looking for recognition by Jewish communities in Israel and USA.³²⁷ The vast majority, however, practise Christianity, no matter whether they assume a bond of kinship with ancient Israel or not.³²⁸ A few authors (whose texts will be discussed in Chapter 8) have bothered to collect detailed evidence in order to prove their Judaic origin. But it is difficult to assess the degree of their conviction. Many, if not most Igbo would assume that links of kinship with the Hebrew patriarchs are fictitious, yet it makes sense establishing such links. It was common in precolonial times to construct genealogies in order to define social relationships. When villages moved together and formed federations to defend their land, they often claimed a common ancestor whose sons were supposed to have founded the villages. Positing kinship ties was not a matter of belief. Genealogies were directed towards the future, not the past.³²⁹ They formulated a kind of social contract that bound independent groups together, creating a social reality that guided people's behaviour. They acted as if they were brothers. Some participants of the 12th World Igbo Congress in Boston aptly explained this creation of permanent bonds. They approached representatives of the Jewish community in Boston and suggested "to forge a unique friendship" since they felt "a spiritual bond with the Jewish population": "We want to join and walk together with the Jews. Whenever Israel suffers in any possible way, the Igbos feel it".³³⁰

<108>

In precolonial times, it was part of such alliances that their partners submitted to a common deity that would watch over the agreement they had entered. All sorts of associations: towns and villages, secret societies and guilds, constituted themselves as religious communities whose representatives met at common shrines. Social and political authority was always linked to spiritual forces, and these links had a contractual basis. People were free to choose their deities. They entered into a pact with a god by erecting a shrine and inviting the god to reside with them, protecting them and sanctioning the social order. This contractual relationship, which was at the heart of Igbo religion,³³¹ is also prominent in the Bible. At the time of Moses, the twelve tribes forming Israel constituted themselves as a nation by swearing allegiance to an alien God. This historic event could be replicated, as is demonstrated in the New Testament where God made a pact with a different group of people. Today such an exclusive relationship might be forged again, if the Igbo sincerely showed that they are more committed to God than others who call themselves Christians.

<109>

The ancient deities of precolonial times used to be abstract forces, with little personal features. This may be one of the reasons why today's Igbo take a special interest in the most abstract element of the Christian Trinity, the Holy Spirit. It manifests itself in all sorts of activities, in healing rituals, prophetic dreams and states of trance. Those who bind themselves to this spiritual force and feel inspired by it are empowered to break with their past and transform their lives. The idea of acting and thinking like the Jews may be conceived in a similar way, as a kind of spirit possession. What binds the Igbo to a distant people may not be a blood relationship but a spiritual force working in both of them.

³²⁷ Bruder (2008: 143) estimates that several thousand Igbo practice some form of Judaism. However, those among them who claim to be of Hebrew descent have not been recognised as such by the chief rabbi and the state authorities of Israel. Thus they are not entitled to automatic Israeli citizenship, as it was granted to the Falasha, the so-called Ethiopian Jews, who were officially recognised as descendants of the tribe of Dan (Bruder 2008: 4, 12; Lis 2009).

³²⁸ A Jewish identity may also be adopted by 'traditionalists'. A priest of the Agwu deity "links the discovery of *agwu* to the Red Sea episode, when Moses parted the sea so that the Israelites might walk across on dry ground. The Igbo people are Jews he affirms. As they crossed the red sea, they found two stones on the sea bed. One stone was *agwuisi* and the other was *kamalu* (god of thunder and lightning)" (Aguwa 1995: 128).

³²⁹ Harneit-Sievers 2006: 20–21, 30–31; Bersselaar 1998: 39.

³³⁰ *The Jewish Advocate*, 13 Sept. 2006, "Igbos Seek Jewish Link".

³³¹ Kalu 1996: 29–52.

<110>

The Igbo are used to thinking with spirits when reflecting social and political events. Secular principles which the colonial administration brought to Nigeria have not taken roots. For the Igbo, as for their Christian and Muslims neighbours, the separation of politics and religion seems odd because "it is largely through religious ideas that Africans think about the world. [...] all power has its *ultimate* origin in the spirit world".³³² The spiritual realm is not a transcendent world but immediately present because religion "permeates every facet of society" (Njaka 1974: 28). Given this interconnection, why should the Igbo leave out religion when discussing their future as a nation? The Old Testament encourages a political reading of the gospel because its main concern is the fate of God's chosen people not the fate of individual worshippers.

<111>

When discussing religious aspects of Igbo nationalism, it is important to bear in mind that their interest in Jewish history emerged long before the genocidal experiences of the Biafran war. When Olaudah Equiano, a liberated slave living in late eighteenth-century England, wrote an autobiography with descriptions of his 'Eboe' childhood, he already described parallels between his African home and ancient Israel:

<112>

We practiced circumcision like the Jews and made offerings and feasts on that occasion in the same manner as they did. Like them also, our children were named from some event, some circumstance, or fancied foreboding at the time of their birth. [...] we had many purifications and washings; indeed almost as many and used on the same occasion, if my recollection does not fail me, as the Jews. Those that touched the dead at any time were obliged to wash and purify themselves before they could enter a dwelling-house. Every woman too, at certain times, was forbidden to come into a dwelling-house or touch any person or anything we ate.³³³

<113>

More than a hundred years later, an Anglican missionary who became one of the first Igbo ethnographers also reflected on Igbo-Jewish similarities.³³⁴ In the early decades of colonial rule it was common to speculate about Semitic or Hamitic influences on African peoples. Government anthropologists assumed that the royal lineage of the Jukun kingdom, north of Igboland, had immigrated from Pharaonic Egypt,³³⁵ and that the Aro, a prominent Igbo 'clan' that had established an extensive trade network, were "an offshoot of Jews expelled from Spain in 1492, or were of Portuguese extraction or were some of the lost tribes of Israel".³³⁶ However, these speculations about historical connections with the cultures of the Near or Middle East did not prompt closer studies because the Judaic or Egyptian features of the Igbo did not exceed what had been observed among other African people

<114>

As keen readers of the Bible who have compared Jewish history with their own, Igbo Christians have found it fascinating to detect "striking similarities in cultural practices [and] in character traits".³³⁷ In 1951 the first locally produced book appeared which traced the origins of the Igbo to the patriarchs of the Old Testament. During the civil war, "the identification of Biafra with Biblical Israel [became] commonplace",³³⁸ although the details of how

³³² Ellis & ter Haar 2004: 2, 4. – The Igbo philosopher Okere (1996: 121) argues that religion "encompasses the whole of man's life – private and public, individual and communal. To exclude religion from any major area of life would amount to a major disabling amputation".

³³³ Equiano 1969 [1789]: 12. – After Equiano, another famous author of Igbo parentage identified Igbo-Jewish similarities: James Africanus Horton in his book *West African Countries and Peoples*, 1868. The contributions of Horton, and many other authors, to the discourse on Igbo Judaism are discussed in Lis (forthc.).

³³⁴ Basden 1912: 246; Basden 1982 [1921]: 11; Basden 1966 [1938]: 411–423.

³³⁵ Meek 1931.

³³⁶ Dike and Ekejiuba 1990: 4.

³³⁷ Ogum 2001: IX.

³³⁸ Walls 1978: 213.

both nations were historically connected have not attracted much scholarly interest. After the war a few books about the relationship between Igbos and Jews were published locally, two of them written by university professors.³³⁹ These publications, although they arrived at different results, did not open an extensive debate. Nevertheless Igbo nationalists have occasionally referred to the paradigm of Igbo Judaism and used it to explain past and present events. An Igbo journal claimed that there is a "widely held view of common ancestry of the Israelites and Ndigbo",³⁴⁰ and the historian Harneit-Sievers observed that today "the idea of a Middle Eastern origin of the Igbo pervades oral historical accounts".³⁴¹ However, it is difficult to assess the extent to which these ideas have influenced people's self-perceptions and their political decisions. MASSOB leader Uwazuruike was quoted with the statement: "I believe Igbos are Jews [...]. I have a lot of Israeli friends who believe in the same concept. So we are brothers. And we have [a] very solid cordial relationship".³⁴² But in his public pronouncements he has not explicated these historic links.³⁴³

<115>

The assumption that the Igbo are God's chosen people is not at the centre of nationalist discourses, yet I will discuss the idea of a divine mission in more detail (in Chapter 8), trying to understand what makes religious ideas attractive for Igbo nation building. With this research interest in mind, it is helpful to look first at secular forms of nationalism and to analyse their limitations. Nationalist authors that leave aside Christianity and Judaism as ethnic identity markers have to find a different basis for defining Igboness. As a rule, they stress the African roots of their identity, although most of them have little interest in reviving precolonial religious and political institutions. The ancestral heritage, as far as it is remembered in local histories, is not of much help for constructing a future Biafra. I will illustrate this problem by looking at the book *Biafra Revisited* by Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, a secular nationalist who tries to define Igboness without reference to outside forces such as Christianity or Judaism. *Biafra Revisited* was released in 2007 in Senegal and Great Britain, published by African Renaissance. Addressing readers in other African countries and in the Black diaspora, it tries to mobilise support for Biafra's liberation struggle by placing it in the context of pan-Africanism and anti-colonial resistance. Like other nationalist texts it stresses the suffering of the Igbo people, but it does not talk about ancient or modern Israel and it touches only briefly on the Jewish holocaust. Instead it refers to the genocide in Darfur and Rwanda, or to the genocide of the Herero by German troops. Embedded in this Afrocentric context, it is easier to win support for Igbo self-determination. Readers in Senegal or South Africa may find claims to Jewish ancestry offensive. After all, the African National Congress, as a leading advocate of pan-Africanism, has often expressed its solidarity with Israel's main adversary, the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and the South African government has enjoyed cordial relations with Iran.

³³⁹ "The Igbo and the Riddles of their Jewish Origins" by Prof. Ik N. T. Ogbukagu, a Geologist; "Ibos: Hebrew Exiles from Israel. Amazing Facts and Revelations" by Prof. O. Alaezi, who taught education. Large parts of Alaezi's book were reprinted in *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 18–22, 9.

³⁴⁰ *News Service*, February 2002: 19.

³⁴¹ Harneit-Sievers 2006: 22.

³⁴² *Pilot*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2004: 3. – MASSOB's Director of Information, Uchenna Madu, "organized a programme that was patterned like a religious crusade. [...] During the programme, the Igbo were made to know that they are chiefs from the descendants of Abraham in Hebrew" (*The Week*, 27 Dec. 2004, "Nothing Can Stop Biafra", p.11).

³⁴³ In an interview with *The News*, Uwazuruike said: "I am not a historian. I am not excited when some people said the Igbo have historical links with the Jews. I have not seen a Jew saying he is an Igbo man. The day a Jew says he is an Igboman, then I will believe the link" (*The News*, 7 Jan. 2002, "Nobody Can Stop Biafra", p. 42).

7. A Secular, Afrocentric Vision

7.1 A Community of Suffering

<116>

Ekwe-Ekwe's *Biafra Revisited* makes fascinating reading for Igbo nationalists, as it depicts in great detail how the Igbo have been maligned and persecuted since colonial times. However, his book is not primarily written for an Igbo audience in Nigeria but for Africans all over the world. As a political scientist and historian who has taught at universities in England and Senegal, Prof. Ekwe-Ekwe is acutely aware that Igbo secessionism can only succeed with international backing. He wants to convince Africans outside Nigeria that the Igbo in 1967 had no other option than to secede and that their fight for survival still continues. Thus he highlights the discrimination and pogroms against the Igbo – an experience which they share with many other Africans. Solidarity with people who have suffered injustices is highly valued in Pan-Africanist circles. However, Ekwe-Ekwe does not only talk about the victims of the Nigerian "holocaust",³⁴⁴ he also names the perpetrators. His book deals extensively with the brutality of Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba leaders, who are accused of harbouring plans to wipe out the whole Igbo population. Nationalism in the diaspora can be as militant as at home. Igbo patriots in London, Toronto or Dakar have provided precious moral, intellectual and material support for MASSOB activists in Nigeria. An Igbo paper praised their contribution to the struggle, stating that "the flame of a new Biafra is burning with a greater passion abroad".³⁴⁵ However, for the African diaspora in Europe and North America, ethnic nationalism has a disturbing effect as it polarises political debates. Ekwe-Ekwe places the fight for Igbo self-determination in the context of African liberation, but his selective reading of Nigerian history undermines African solidarity.

<117>

Pan-African ideas play a minor role in the nationalist literature which I collected in Nigeria. They gain importance for Igbo living abroad in the diaspora of New York or Johannesburg. When arguing the case for Biafra in conferences, seminars and private discussions, they have to reach out to fellow-Africans who are not involved in Nigerian politics and who may not know much about it. Presenting one's case persuasively in this context is only possible by appealing to common Pan-African ideals and standards of justice. Yet it is difficult for Igbo nationalists gaining acceptance because their views are challenged by other Nigerians who tend to blame the descent into civil war on Igbo intransigence. Yoruba intellectuals can adduce much evidence in order to show that their kinsmen have been victimised for decades at the hands of Igbo and Hausa-Fulani politicians: "the northern ruling elite and the Igbo [...] had consistently allied to isolate and punish the Yorùbá".³⁴⁶

<118>

How can Ekwe-Ekwe convince sceptical readers outside Nigeria that they should support the Biafrans against their Nigerian opponents? His book plays on anticolonial sentiments by identifying the British government as "a key orchestrator of the Igbo genocide",³⁴⁷ a neo-colonial power that took revenge for the Igbo's leading role in the anti-colonial struggle of the 1940s and 1950s. Moreover he tries to discredit Britain's allies, the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba elites, by accusing them of racism. Finally, he stresses the enormity of the war crimes and points out that "Nigeria still has a policy to exterminate the Igbo".³⁴⁸ This message, however, will not convince many of his non-Igbo readers because his line of reasoning appears contradictory: He emphasises African solidarity but portrays other Africans in Nigeria in an extremely negative light. His efforts to expose a long-standing anti-Igbo conspiracy fit better into separatist discourses with their focus on Igbo suffering and oppression. Recalling the many wrongs done to the Igbo enhances the feeling of belonging together. It may strengthen the

³⁴⁴ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 92, 97.

³⁴⁵ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 9.

³⁴⁶ Afolayan 2006: 301.

³⁴⁷ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 14, 58, 76, 79.

³⁴⁸ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 4.

resolve to form a common front and resist their enemies. However, a nation-building that is based mainly on the fear of others creates just a fragile sense of unity. *Biafra Revisited* has little to say about other things binding the Igbo. It praises their many talents, particularly their ability to cope with modern institutions, which will enable them to develop an industrialised state. However, the modernist vision of a Biafra that looks like another Taiwan or Korea has little emotional appeal. It provides no spiritual roots, no sense of a unique identity (Chapter 7.2).

<119>

Let us take a closer look at Ekwe-Ekwe's endeavour to define Igbo identity in secular terms. He stresses, as we already noted, his people's anticolonial attitude which provoked Britain to assume a leading role in Igbo persecution. The government of Harold Wilson sought to protect British economic interests by targeting Nigeria's most independent-minded nation which had "spearheaded the termination of British rule" in 1960.³⁴⁹ As co-organiser of the genocide, Britain should be forced to acknowledge its responsibility. The country should pay reparations to the survivors and surrender to the International Criminal Court those "surviving British officials (military, civil servants, politicians, academics, etc., etc) who were involved in the planning and/or the execution of the Igbo genocide. At The Hague court, these Britons must be joined by their surviving genocidist counterparts in Nigeria who include Generals Obasanjo, Rotimi, Akinrinade, Adebayo, Abubakar, Babangida, Buhari, Gowon, Haruna and Danjuma".³⁵⁰ Ekwe-Ekwe highlights the neo-colonial complicity between British and Nigerian leaders by stating that Gowon was an operative of the British intelligence, recruited while undergoing military training at Sandhurst.³⁵¹ Moreover, the affinity between the British imperialists and their Hausa-Fulani-Yoruba allies is demonstrated by exposing the racist attitudes they shared. The Northern People's Congress, with its Northernisation campaign, had created in the 1950s a system of segregation whose "racial and religiocultural exclusiveness [...] bordered on *apartheid*".³⁵² In order to defend this system against its critics from southern Nigeria, the Hausa-Fulani leaders were "not averse to indefinite British occupation" and "worked feverishly between 1951–1957 to oppose the politics of the liberation of Nigeria".³⁵³ In western Nigeria, the Igbo were faced with a "rabid Yoruba exclusivist", Obafemi Awolowo, whose party pursued, right from its start, "racist", "chauvinist" and "reactionary politics".³⁵⁴ Awolowo's views were widely shared by his people, so they joined in the slaughter of the Igbo: "it was in the *national* interest of the Yoruba to lend its support to the north in the latter's expanded attack on the Igbo. [...] Yoruba began to fill the plum positions in academia, the bureaucracy, business, industry, military, police, etc., etc., across Nigeria 'vacated' by the ubiquitous Igbo [...]. They also seized, as had been the case in the north, 'abandoned' Igbo businesses and property in Lagos and the west".³⁵⁵ When organising the genocide, the elites could count on popular support, not just among the Yoruba but among the general populace: "the Nigerians had wished at the height of the genocide" "to 'seal the fate' of the Igbo permanently".³⁵⁶

³⁴⁹ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 7, 76–77. – In the view of Ekwe-Ekwe (2007: 16), Britain is still hostile to Igbo secessionism, mainly for economic reasons, because of "the incredible level of financial returns that its Nigeria project annually accrues to its treasury in London".

³⁵⁰ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 16.

³⁵¹ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 71, 77–79, 86–87.

³⁵² Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 31, 32.

³⁵³ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 7, 19, 31, 32.

³⁵⁴ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 90, 31, 33–34, 64. – Defining the parties to the civil war in terms of racism/anti-racism is only possible by leaving aside that Biafra accepted aid from Portugal, Rhodesia and South Africa. The white regime in South Africa had probably an interest in "the breakup of black Africa's richest and most populous country" (Stremlau 1977: 233–235, 223; St. Jorre 1972: 218–219, 302, 306; Schwarz 1968: 121).

³⁵⁵ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 91.

³⁵⁶ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 93.

<120>

Seeking a rapprochement with such people appears futile because the persecution of the Igbo has been unrelenting and systematic. Confronted with a broad coalition of ruthless enemies, the Igbo suffered – according to Ekwe-Ekwe – "the most gruesome genocide that Africa had witnessed in a century".³⁵⁷ Ekwe-Ekwe puts the figure of Igbo who died between May 1966 and January 1970 at 3.1 million;³⁵⁸ this is more than in any other African conflict: "King Leopold II of Belgium's troops had in the 19th century killed three million. [...] the Igbo genocide [...] match[es] or outstrip[s] the grisly records of the Congo".³⁵⁹ The "first phase of the genocide"³⁶⁰ was designed "to annihilate the entire Igbo population" in the North.³⁶¹ It led to the killings of 100,000 Igbo, but more than a million managed to "escape".³⁶² Since their plan had failed, those in power decided to invade Biafra and "destroy the entire Igbo population in Nigeria".³⁶³ But again, the "Nigeria state and its allies failed to accomplish their goal".³⁶⁴ While three million lost their lives, the majority survived: "the Igbo were indeed the victor in this encounter. They survived. This was an extraordinary triumph of human will and tenacity. The Igbo overcame an amalgam of desperately brutish forces [...]: Hausa-Fulani, Britain, Yoruba/Ododuduwa, Soviet Union, Tiv, Egypt, [...] Syria, Idoma, German Democratic Republic, Iraq, Chad".³⁶⁵ It would be naïve, however, to assume that hostile attitudes towards the Igbo have abated. As "the 1966–1970 genocide campaign had not achieved its 'final solution'", Nigeria has drawn up a new "plan of annihilation" in order to "complete its 1966 envisaged task".³⁶⁶ "Nigeria has not yet abandoned its endemic mission to murder the Igbo [...]. Of the 20,000 people murdered by the state and its varied agencies in Nigeria between 1999 and 2006 [...] approximately 18,000 are Igbo".³⁶⁷ The third phase of Nigeria's "extermination strategy"³⁶⁸ has begun. It is not clear whether Ekwe-Ekwe actually believes that Nigerian politicians are planning the "liquidation of a people".³⁶⁹ His warning of an impending genocide may just be a rhetorical means to whip up nationalist sentiments. In any event it confirms, through the authority of an academic historian, the accusations against Nigeria's rulers made by MASSOB (see page 14), and it may lend credence to rumours that speak of secret arrangements to eliminate the Igbo:

The attention of MASSOB [...] has been drawn to [...] plans to annihilate and eliminate Igbos and other Southerners, this time through a well-planned chemical/biological warfare through food poisoning. MASSOB has been reliably informed of incidents in various parts of occupied Biafra and surrounding areas in which people from the North have been

³⁵⁷ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 58.

³⁵⁸ The figure of 3.1 million is repeatedly given (Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 15, 16, 20, 117, 120, 124, 132, 135, 142), though without a source. The author may have based his estimate on the book of Suzanne Cronje, a British correspondent who sympathised with Biafra and who reckoned that the conflict cost "two million lives – give or take a million" (Cronje 1972: 41). The difference however is that Cronje, when talking of up to three million deaths, refers not only to the Igbo victims but to the total number of casualties.

³⁵⁹ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 15.

³⁶⁰ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 7, 66, 70, 90, 94, 120; see the chapter "Three phases of genocide" in Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 59–114.

³⁶¹ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 77.

³⁶² Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 97.

³⁶³ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 81.

³⁶⁴ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 125.

³⁶⁵ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 125.

³⁶⁶ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 92, 125. – Arthur Nwankwo, an Igbo intellectual with a more critical attitude towards Ojukwu and the Biafra leadership took a similar view on the possibility of premeditated genocide: "There have been sustained attempts to alienate, excise or even exterminate certain ethnic groups in Nigeria. Instances of this abound. The wave of hate on *Ndigbo*, a deliberate policy of physical and economic annihilation against them is a glaring example. The near attempt to wipe out the entire Yoruba race is another example" (Nwankwo's article "Ethnic Nationality and Nigeria" was published in *Vanguard*, 25 Dec. 2001: 34).

³⁶⁷ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 14–15. – The author does not tell how he arrived at these figures.

³⁶⁸ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 5, 4, 92, 119–120.

³⁶⁹ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 9. – On page 133 of his book he hints at a different scenario, a "post-genocide plan to degrade and retard Igbo national reconstruction".

caught with deliberately poisoned food items meant for consumption and eventual liquidation of Biafrans in Biafraland. In Onitsha, 11 trailer load of dried fish, popularly called *Managala* (a local delicacy of Ndigbo) was apprehended [...]. A search and tests conducted on the fish showed they were deliberately poisoned. This became obvious when one of the Hausa-Fulanis who accompanied the consignment was overheard instructing that fish from that consignment was deliberately poisoned and so, should not be circulated among the Hausa-Fulani population in Onitsha. The principal suspect was promptly arrested and forced to eat the fish. After eating the fish, the suspect died instantly. This incident happened on 3rd March, 2006 and was reported to Nigerian Security agents. On 5th March, 2006, another incident of similar nature happened in Benin. Sugar-cane consignment in a trailer, headed for Igbo/Biafran areas through Benin, was intercepted when the person who consumed it fell down and died instantly. Also in Port Harcourt, in Biafra's South, beans and tomatoes consumed by some people resulted in their death. This happened on 4th March, 2006. Again, reports say that carrot in Benin City, on the same day, 4th March, 2006 resulted in the death of some people.³⁷⁰

7.2 Roots

<121>

Biblical stories can give sense to collective suffering and make it bearable. Embedded in a history of salvation, suffering is just a transitional phase on the way to redemption. The contrast between the agonies of the past and future greatness, between near annihilation and the rise to fame is also a central theme in Ekwe-Ekwe's book. However, secular versions of nationalism find it more difficult to link these extremes. They stress the injustices that have been done to the Igbo, but have little to say about promises for the future. Why are the Igbo destined to soar above their persecutors? There is no golden age of Igbo history that could be revived. Nationalists find little solace in precolonial history because it does not exhibit a national history but only a multitude of local histories. Talking about them is divisive in many respects. I will not discuss local and regional divisions in Igboland; instead I will illustrate the difficulty of dealing with the past by looking at one of the social antagonisms which has left a legacy of bitterness and internal discrimination. When talking about the suffering of the Igbo, Ekwe-Ekwe mentions an experience which his people share with many other Africans: the horrors of slavery. The Bight of Biafra was one of the main destinations for European traders who brought slaves into the New World. A British captain who made ten slaving voyages to Africa between 1786 and 1810 estimated that at the main slave port in the Nigerdelta 20,000 slaves were sold each year, 16,000 of them 'Heebo' meaning people of the hinterland. Most of these Heebo were living in communities that are today called Igbo, but some of them were Ibibio- and Urhobo-speakers.³⁷¹ In 1807 Britain's parliament prohibited the slave trade, and the following year a British navy squadron began to patrol Africa's west coast to stop French, Brazilian and Portuguese ships from transporting slaves, with the result that around the middle of the nineteenth century the transatlantic slave trade ended. However, a domestic slave trade continued in Igboland and other parts of today's Nigeria, until the area was conquered by British forces in the early twentieth century.³⁷² In the 1960s and 1970s, when Elisabeth Isichei and other historians recorded oral histories, many elders clearly remembered the slave raids and kidnappings when people lived in terror: "one could not go to another town's sector of the market without being led by an armed elder. Any lapse in this protection

³⁷⁰ Pastor Daniel Dikeocha, Chairman, News Agency of Biafra (NAB), in *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 6, 2006: 10. As in many other articles and press releases it is not clear whether the author, in this case Pastor Dikeocha, is authorised to make pronouncements on behalf of MASSOB.

³⁷¹ Isichei 1973: 46.

³⁷² The conquest of Igboland was completed by the end of World War I, though incidents of enslavement occurred into the late 1930s (Afigbo 1971: 16).

might lead to a person's enslavement. [...] movement during the slave trade period was limited to the survival of the fittest".³⁷³

<122>

The "trade in slaves overshadowed every aspect of Igbo life",³⁷⁴ yet the experiences of people who suffered from it and who left numerous stories are not recalled in Ekwe-Ekwe's book and other nationalist literature.³⁷⁵ When precolonial slavery is mentioned, then its severe consequences are expressed in more general terms, for instance by pointing out that "the Ibos far more than any other group in Nigeria were carried away into slavery" and that perhaps "one quarter of all black Americans and all African ex-slaves in North and South America are all of Ibo descent".³⁷⁶ Some commentators have placed this suffering in a religious context. It was interpreted, for instance, as the fulfilment of a Biblical curse that seemed to anticipate the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The verse (in Deuteronomy 28:68) is quoted thus: "The LORD will send you back in ships to Egypt (this time, Hebrews (Ibos) in Nigeria, to America) on a journey I said you should never make again. There you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves".³⁷⁷ The Old Testament tells many stories about the misery of slavery, remembering the time when the Jews were captives in Egypt and Babylon. However, when picking up these stories, Igbo nationalists would not normally use them to reflect their own period of slavery and slave trade. They rather interpret Biblical passages that speak of slavery in a metaphorical sense, applying them to Igbo captivity in present-day Nigeria. A local MASSOB group, for instance, distributed handbills and posters that called upon the Igbo to pray "as the Israelites did in the time of Moses" when they were living in bondage: "Pray that the *Pharaoh* in Nigeria will allow the people of God (Biafrans) to go".³⁷⁸ In this setting, Ojukwu is cast in the role of Moses who started the exodus towards independence. Like Moses he may not live to see the land God promised him, but he has already handed over the baton to MASSOB leader Uwaruziuke, the new "Joshua who will lead the Biafran Jews to the promised land of the Rising Sun".³⁷⁹

<123>

It seems strange that Igbo nationalists, who stress their community of suffering, largely eschew talking about the encounter with slavery, although it affected all Igbo communities. I assume that slavery is such a divisive issue that intense debates about it might jeopardise Igbo solidarity. The demand for slaves had been fuelled by traders from abroad, but the white slavers had never become visible. Their trade relations had been restricted to the coastal people who had monopolised the overseas trade, so the Europeans had not ventured into the interior. The actual enslavement through kidnapping, raiding and warfare had been done by the ancestors of today's Igbo. The most notorious slavers among them until the beginning of the twentieth century were the Aro, a multi-lingual group at the southeast fringes of Igboland. A historian at my former university, Tony Nwaezeigwe, raised the topic of slavery at an Igbo conference and demanded that the Aro pay reparations for the crimes of the past: Their "ancestors ravaged the length and breadth of Igboland carting away millions of productive Igbo citizens into slavery. [...] is it justified for Black Africa to demand reparations from Europe for their engagement in slave trade without first holding their local Black African collabo-

³⁷³ Paul Nwanba, an elder, in Isichei 1977a: 77.

³⁷⁴ Isichei 1977b: 48.

³⁷⁵ Igbo historians have discussed the effects of slavery on Igbo life, but this is not reflected in those nationalist papers and pamphlets I collected. A more appropriate medium of reflecting the divisions that afflicted pre-colonial communities are works of poetry such as Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart'.

³⁷⁶ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 21. – At a conference on Igbo culture, held in Owerri, Igbo scholars from USA claimed that "most of the African Americans are of Igbo origin" (*Vanguard*, 24 Jan. 2009, "Igbo reject 3rd largest position, claim Ife ownership"). The *New Republican* (Vol. 4, No. 9, 2006: 9) assumed that the Igbo nation lost two million men and women to the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

³⁷⁷ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 21.

³⁷⁸ *The Source*, 30 Aug. 2004, "MASSOB: A Sit-at-Home Order", p. 33.

³⁷⁹ *Pilot*, Vol. 7, No. 14, 2004: 4. – An article in *The Third Eye* (Vol. 2, No. 3, [no year]: 6) called President Obasanjo the "counterpart" of the Pharaoh.

rators like the Aro responsible?"³⁸⁰ Such selective calls for redress, however, are not convincing because all Igbo communities participated in the slave trade. In rural areas people are still aware who stems from a family of slaves and who belongs to the freeborn.³⁸¹ The lowest type of slaves were the *osu*, a caste of untouchables who had been dedicated to shrine deities. In some places, the descendants of *osu* are still ostracised, living in separate quarters and being barred from marrying non-*osu*.³⁸² Discrimination against them affects a substantial part of the population, but the Igbo establishment as well as their opponents, the young radicals, have kept mute about this simmering conflict, with a few exceptions such as Ojukwu, who is famous for his bold statements and who supposedly approved a degree of discrimination against the *osu*: "Every Igbo man knows that some of them should have no claim to leadership because their forefathers were objects of rituals and do not qualify for public glare. I mean the *osu*".³⁸³

<124>

Ekwe-Ekwe's book glosses over these bitter divisions and appeals to an ill-defined common heritage which the Igbo have to recover in order to shake off discrimination and economic stagnation. Much of the present crisis in Nigeria is blamed on the European conquest which brought strife to the colonial subjects because it debased and "limited organically shared values linking [Africa's] peoples".³⁸⁴ Postcolonial rulers continued "the systematic marginalisation of Africa's traditional democratic legacy",³⁸⁵ so a culture of democracy never took root again. However, Ekwe-Ekwe's call for an "African renaissance"³⁸⁶ remains vague. He does not name ancient institutions he would wish to revive, nor does he present us with historic persons who would exemplify the virtues of traditional Igbo life. All the Igbo who are mentioned in his book are Western-educated men and women: distinguished poets like Chinua Achebe, Florence Nwapa and Christopher Okigbo, or politicians like Ojukwu and Azikiwe. There are only two exceptions, and both are ill-suited to embody traditional Igbo life. The first is Olaudah Equiano, the liberated slave who became an English gentleman and never returned to the country of his childhood.³⁸⁷ The second, who is just mentioned in a sentence, is King Jaja of Opobo, "an Igbo nationalist monarch opposed to British territorial expansionism".³⁸⁸ However, King Jaja had no nationalist ambitions. Though born in Igboland, he was kidnapped at the age of twelve and sold to the town of Bonny in the Nigerdelta where he was acculturated into a prominent Ijaw family. He rose to power in his new home and became a slave holder himself, but got into conflict with the British because he tried to monopolise the trade in palm oil.³⁸⁹

<125>

The lack of ancient national heroes points to the main handicap of nationalist historiography: the lack of a common precolonial history. There is little material to form a national mythology that goes beyond the bitter experiences the Igbo had in Nigeria. Insecurity about the original

³⁸⁰ Nwaezeigwe 2009; *Vanguard*, 24 Jan. 2009, "Igbo reject 3rd largest position, claim Ife ownership".

³⁸¹ See the case study by Harneit-Sievers 2006: 258–279. – The term *diala* (freeborn) is derived from *ala* (earth or earth-deity). *Di-ala* signified the master/owner of the land who tended to regard others as non-indigenes. Since land was scarce, Igbo vigorously defended access to it, and their socio-religious institutions reinforced the distinction between sons of the soil and late-comers. It is only in the context of Western constitutionalism that Igbo claim equal rights when living as 'migrants' in cities outside Igboland.

³⁸² Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke 1986; Onwubiko 1993; *Newswatch*, 10 Jan. 2000, "Slavery In Igboland", pp.23–26.

³⁸³ Odumegwu Ojukwu, in *Newswatch*, 18 September 1989, "The Gods Are to Blame", p. 18. – A law passed in 1956 has banned the *osu* institution and makes it a punishable offence to call a person *osu* and to discriminate against her. This law, however, has been enforced only half-heartedly (Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke 1986: 113–116; 123–124).

³⁸⁴ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 130.

³⁸⁵ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 130.

³⁸⁶ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 99.

³⁸⁷ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 95.

³⁸⁸ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 86. – On page 96, Jaja is listed together with Nelson Mandela and Malcolm X among "African World artists and intellectuals".

³⁸⁹ Anene 1966: 42–47, 52–60, 73–102; Isichei 1984: 229–233.

Igbo identity is exacerbated by the lack of 'traditional' authorities that might define Igboness. Although Igboland has hundreds of 'chiefs', 'kings' and other 'traditional rulers', most of these offices were created in colonial times, and the British administration often picked outsiders or marginal persons to fill these positions.³⁹⁰ A more authentic bond with the pre-colonial past could be established through religious institutions, such as oracle shrines which have existed for centuries. But again, there is no religious authority that would be accepted as a legitimate representative of the Igbo heritage. The most famous cult centre was the oracle of Arochukwu which attracted visitors from hundreds of kilometres away. Yet Igbo nationalists have not adopted it as a holy site or a place of commemoration. One reason is that the cult centre was situated at the periphery of Igboland where it dealt with callers from diverse communities. A second reason is that the owners of the shrine were slave traders who used the oracle to further their business interests. Today most Igbo would see Arochukwu as a "large-scale fraud".³⁹¹ Clients of the shrine were recruited by Aro traders, who had established a network of long-distance trade. They invited people who could not settle their local disputes to present their case to *chukwu*, the Aro deity, which would dispense instant justice and kill the guilty party on the spot. However, it is common knowledge today that the 'guilty' party was not killed by the deity but sold into slavery.³⁹²

<126>

It is common among Igbo politicians and intellectuals, when meeting at conferences, festivals and other occasions, to pay homage to Igbo tradition. Governors call upon their compatriots to rediscover their Igboness, yet they are aware that most Igbo are not enthusiastic about their precolonial past. Thus the public celebration of the ancestral heritage is often mixed with concern about its dissolution: "the rich and the poor are rapidly distancing themselves from their Igboness as if it were a leprous plague to strike at noon. Consequently, Igboland has been turned into a veritable battle ground between [...] foreign cultures".³⁹³ In a review of the 'Odenigbo Lecture' in Owerri and the World Igbo Congress in Tampa, Florida, a commentator remarked that "Igbo culture is moribund" and that Igbo language

may become extinct in the next fifty years [because] [m]any middle class Igbo children [...] can hardly comprehend much more speak Igbo [...]. Since the coming of the white-man, Ndigbo have sought to become more English than the queen. [...] Contemporary Igbo lifestyle can be described in two words: materialism and ostentation. Reports have it that the Centre for Igbo Studies at the London School of Oriental and African Studies was shut down not too long ago because of lack of students. About six months later, the Centre for Igbo Studies at Howard University in Washington DC was scrapped. In Imo State University, the Dept. of Igbo/Linguistics is virtually dead because of declining enrolment.³⁹⁴

<127>

The fear that Igbo are losing contact with the world of their ancestors is, of course, exaggerated. Many (still) consult native doctors, and even governors attend shrine rituals, though they normally do it secretly, because Igbo politicians are expected to be Christians.³⁹⁵ Nigeria's most successful religious movement, Pentecostal Christianity, is not interested in an African Renaissance but advocates a "complete break with the past".³⁹⁶ This hostility towards 'paganism' is also expressed by many Igbo nationalists. When thousands of MASSOB followers assembled in Kano to pray for the release of their detained leader Uwazuruike, they

³⁹⁰ Afigbo 1979.

³⁹¹ Kalu 1996: 40.

³⁹² Azuonye 1990: 16; Metuh 1981: 80; Njaka 1974: 44–45.

³⁹³ Governor Achike Udenwa of Imo State, in *Vanguard*, 31 March 2002, "Ndigbo 2003 and political empowerment", p. 30.

³⁹⁴ Uche Ohia: Odenigbo: The Challenge of Igbo Renaissance, October 4, 2008, www.nigerianmuse.com/2008/1004114919zg/nigeriawatch/Diaspora_Nigeria/odenigbo-the-challenge-of-igbo-renascence, (07/06/2010)

³⁹⁵ Ellis 2008.

³⁹⁶ Marshall 2009: 29.

allegedly had more than a hundred church ministers in attendance who confirmed the Igbo covenant with God and renounced the sins of 'heathenism': "We [...] have loved idols, worshipped money, shed blood, practised deception, maltreated widows, used sorcery, manifested pride, practised enchantment and pulled each other down".³⁹⁷ (Neo)traditional forms of magic and religion are often identified with occult forms of aggression which create mutual fear, weaken Igbo unity and undermine social development. In this context, slavery and human sacrifices are sometimes mentioned as the worst aberrations of their ancestors. For a people that seek a way out of violence, discrimination and dependency, the precolonial traditions look like a poor guide. In order to get rid of 'pagan' strongholds that tie them to the spirits of the past, a Biafran Council of Christian Pastors demanded "that the entire [I]gbo land should be cleansed of idols" by "physically destroying" them.³⁹⁸ In Anambra State, MASSOB allegedly compiled a list of 200 shrines "with a view to praying for their destruction".³⁹⁹ Ancient shrines have sometimes been attacked and demolished, but it is doubtful whether the MASSOB leadership has lent official support to acts of iconoclasm. For an organisation that seeks to unite all Igbo, it would be unwise to take sides in the controversy between Christians and 'traditionalists'. Although most Igbo nationalists see the future Biafra as a Christian state, there are others who defend the ancestral heritage: "the destruction of sacred groves must stop. 'Prayer warriors,' undercover *Igbo Taliban*, raid shrines and sell artefacts to Western art collectors. [...] The wholesale adoption of Eurocentric culture has devastated Igbo landscape".⁴⁰⁰

7.3 Modernism

<128>

The rejection of 'paganism' is not unique to the Igbo. In northern Nigeria, reformist Islam has propagated a renewal of society that amounts to a radical "de-Africanization".⁴⁰¹ All spheres of public and private life shall be transformed in accordance with the sacred laws of Islam which are the same for the faithful all over the world. Ekwe-Ekwe's book does not demonise the precolonial past; it ignores it. His vision of a new Biafra, described in the last three pages of his text, depicts a technologically advanced nation, inhabiting a zone of prosperity with smoothly running public facilities: subway systems in the cities, a tunnel service under the Niger and a hovercraft crossing the river. Igbo cities would be transformed "into advanced modern spaces for living, working, recreating", with "cultural institutions and recreational facilities such as parks, theatres, museums, galleries, concert halls, stadiums and the like". Linked by express railways would be a network of industrial conglomerates such as "the Onicha-Nnewi-Oka-Ihiala industrial conurbation for machine tools and heavy industry; the Enugwu-Emene-Nsukka information technology valley; the Aba-Umuahia-Abiriba-Ugwu-ocha/Port Harcourt precision equipment/light industry; the Uburu-Okposi-Egbema sodium carbonate deposits/other minerals for potential pharmaceutical manufacturing".⁴⁰² The Igbo have the potential "to construct the Taiwan or the China or the South Korea or the India of Africa".⁴⁰³ By breaking the development blockade that has bedevilled the continent, the Igbo would assume a leading role in the liberation of Africa. They would lead, not by articulating the common African heritage, but by adopting faster than others what has been developed in Europe and Asia.

<129>

The modernist vision of an African Taiwan or Korea has only limited appeal. Improving the infrastructure and facilitating industrial production is, of course, an important concern in poli-

³⁹⁷ *Eastern Sunset*, Vol. 3, No. 38 [2001]: 6.

³⁹⁸ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 5.

³⁹⁹ *Pilot*, Vol. 8, No. 5, 2004: 4.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ené* 2009: 4.

⁴⁰¹ *Miles* 2003: 63, 65.

⁴⁰² Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 140–141.

⁴⁰³ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 139.

tical debates. A functioning rail network or a hovercraft crossing the Niger has considerable attraction, however, the wish to achieve a life of affluence and technical sophistication cannot be in the centre of nationalist aspirations. Nationalism seeks to instil a culture of commitment and self-sacrifice. People must learn to forgo personal advantages for the sake of the nation. Thus MASSOB officials praise Igbo martyrs who are ready to lay down their lives. In this context of nation-building, a hovercraft on the Niger is nothing to die for. If the future Biafra is defined mainly in terms of material achievements, as "the next tiger"⁴⁰⁴ following Singapore or Korea, it cannot arouse much passion. It has no unique features, no exclusive mission.

<130>

One way for the Igbo to become unique is to identify with their Jewish alter ego. The Biblical paradigm of a chosen people makes it possible for them to relate directly to God and to distance themselves from other Christians. The God of Israel is not only talking to them individually, he is addressing them as a nation with a duty towards him. By engaging in a dialogue with him, the Igbo become a self-conscious entity, a group with a common will that can make promises and that can be held accountable for its failures and sins. In a community answerable to God, everybody is responsible for their collective fate. Therefore members have to watch over each other's behaviour and impose moral discipline lest all of them forfeit God's help and affection. God's anger can be seen as a force of correction. Stressing the moral content of his punishments, some Christians have argued that the Igbo should look inwards and accept that they bear part of the blame: "The biggest problem facing the Igbo people in Nigeria is idolatry. Our relationship with these gods was why we are decimated, scattered and divided among other Nigerians. [...] unless the Igbos repent of this sin and turn to God with a broken heart and contrite spirit, they will never rule Nigeria".⁴⁰⁵

<131>

Religious ideas link the past and the future in many different ways. They may construe the fight against idol-worship as a necessary precondition for reaching the promised land (Chapter 8.1), or they may affirm the African roots of Igbo identity (Chapter 8.2). Without a religious dimension it is hard for Igbo nationalists to imagine a past that contains the seeds of a better future. Ekwe-Ekwe finds little inspiration in the precolonial age. When looking for a past that promises future greatness, he does not venture far back into history. His hopes rest to a large extent on the diligence and achievement orientation of modern Igbo which enabled them to make rapid economic progress in the pre-war years.⁴⁰⁶ Other nationalists would add that these virtues were also manifest during the war. In a desperate situation, the Igbo proved their ingenuity. In a way, Biafra "brought out the best in her Biafran men".⁴⁰⁷ Scientists developed sophisticated weapons, and motor mechanics built engines from scraps.⁴⁰⁸ As Ojukwu remarked in 1994: "In three years of freedom we had broken the technological barrier. In three years we became the most civilized, the most technologically advanced black people on earth".⁴⁰⁹ Memories of Biafra are split. Some focus on the holocaust, others evoke days of glory. The same tension, if not inconsistency, is noticeable in descriptions of the pre-war years. They appear as a time of Northern ascendancy, when the Igbo and other Southerners were pushed aside. At the same time they are depicted as "glorious days" because the Igbo had outdone all others and "had the world at their feet".⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁴ *Vanguard*, 24 Jan. 2009, "Igbo reject 3rd largest position, claim Ife ownership".

⁴⁰⁵ Bishop Alexander Ekwuba of the Overcomer Christian Mission, in *Newswatch*, 6 Sept. 2004, "My Encounter With Okija Shrine Priests", p. 50.

⁴⁰⁶ Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 139.

⁴⁰⁷ Njoku 1990: 161. – One of the war heroes, Colonel Joe 'Air Raid' Achuzia, who served as general secretary of Ohanaeze from 2004 to 2007, stated that the Igboman's "Iboness is best articulated in his civil war spirit" (*Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 7).

⁴⁰⁸ Nwankwo 1980: 30.

⁴⁰⁹ Quoted in Igbokwe 1995: 18; Nwankwo 1980: 30.

⁴¹⁰ Odumegwu Ojukwu, in *Conscience International*, Vol. 3, No. 7, 2001, "Ojukwu again! Call Igbos to war", p. 17.

<132>

Secular discourses find it difficult to tell tales that link the agonies of the past to future redemption. Moreover, they find it difficult to make sense of the premodern history and integrate it into their narratives of social development. Biblical texts, by contrast, talk a lot about the 'traditional' world of patriarchal authority, when people were guided by purity taboos and paid respect to their elders. It is a world still close to many Igbo, not separated from their daily life but in constant interaction with it: changing, adapting and conflicting with 'modern' elements of their social environment. This experience fits well with Biblical accounts which depict the world of ancient Israel as anything but static. It is shown as an arena of conflicting political and religious forces that brought upheavals and profound change. Its inhabitants had to grapple with the power of intruding empires; they suffered defeats and dislocations but they always asserted themselves. This ability to adapt to dramatically changing circumstances, while remaining true to themselves, seems to be a characteristic which God's chosen people have preserved through the ages. Thus it looks as if the Jews in their long history have mastered a transformation to modernity which the Igbo, to a large extent, still have to accomplish: from 'idol worship' to monotheism, from life as peasants to a world of global competition. Igbo patriots marvel at the way Jewish settlers (or returnees) turned an arid piece of land into a lush and prosperous country. And they are fascinated by the military might of Israel, which is attractive because it gives its citizens security in a hostile environment:

The Jews who neglected political power and central leadership prior to 1945 have sworn that they will never be humiliated again. [...] if a hostile nation humiliates a Jew, the government of Israel does not go to sleep. In fact the title of their national anthem is NEVER AGAIN, and the idea behind this is that it is unacceptable for any Jew to be insulted any where in the world again. It is a doctrine no Jew plays with. Every Israelite is a soldier. He knows the attitude of his hostile neighbours. He is ever prepared to defend himself.⁴¹¹

Although Israel is surrounded by a Muslim population that is far superior in numbers, its citizens do not have to bow. The Igbo, by contrast, are forced to swallow insults, particularly in the diaspora of the North. When attacked, they cannot retaliate but have to beg to be left in peace: "Like a woman raped in public, the Igbo people have been reduced to nothing without dignity".⁴¹² Of course, many young men are ready to take up arms in defence of their community, but the Igbo cannot afford a confrontation. What keeps them from striking back is their exposed position. While millions of Igbo are living in cities of the North, just a few Hausa-Fulani are residing in Igboland. If mutual killings escalated, Igbo would be the losers, like in 1966, when they were driven away. It was only once, in February 2000, after the Sharia riots in the Northern city of Kaduna, that some Igbo hit back massively. When truckloads of corpses arrived in Igboland for burial, the main mosque in Aba went up in flames and hundreds of Hausa-Fulani were killed in Igbo towns. The massacres were not a spontaneous outburst of violence, but had been carefully planned.⁴¹³ Of course, no Igbo leader wanted to accept responsibility for the rage of the men in the street, but they advised their opponents in the North to take the 300 deaths as a "warning signal".⁴¹⁴ Their belligerence was captured by a statement of Ojukwu: "there is nothing actually wrong with vengeance. It is the national policy of Israel you know, ours cannot be different. [...] I am a Roman Catholic. Every time, you hear Muslims say we want *jihad*, we want *jihad*. When did *Jihad* start frightening Christians?"⁴¹⁵

⁴¹¹ Igbokwe 1995: 77–78.

⁴¹² *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 7 [or 8], 2006: 3.

⁴¹³ Meagher 2007: 102.

⁴¹⁴ *The News*, 27 March 2000, "We Are Battle Ready", p. 16.

⁴¹⁵ *Newswatch*, 20 March 2000, "Sharia Is a Sabotage", p. 11. – Orji Kalu, the Governor of Abia State, had announced shortly before the massacre: "If they kill an Igboman, we will retaliate immediately" (*The News*, 27 March 2000, "On The Brink", p. 11).

8. The Covenant with God

8.1 In Exile

<133>

Texts about the Biblical origin of the Igbo and their divine mission seem to reinforce the ideological, doctrinaire aspects of nationalist discourses, but even here we find a wide variety of opinion. Reconstructions of a Hebrew past can be used by the Igbo to reject their African heritage or to affirm an afrocentric identity. Let us start with the "popular"⁴¹⁶ view that the Igbo stem from one or several of the Lost Tribes of Israel. The Old Testament refers repeatedly to the ten tribes of the northern kingdom whose members were partly carried away into exile after the Assyrian conquests in 732 and 721 B.C. Since Biblical authors knew nothing about the fate of the deported, some speculated that these exiled Hebrews had been scattered to "the four corners of the earth".⁴¹⁷ This Jewish myth was later taken up by Christians, and since mediaeval times it has fascinated European imagination. Remnants of the Lost Tribes that had preserved much of their ancient Hebrew customs were allegedly discovered in such distant places as China, Japan and the Americas. Among the "myriad peoples identified as Israelites"⁴¹⁸ by European travellers, missionaries and later by colonial officers were also numerous Africans: the Ashanti in today's Ghana, the Songhay in Mali, the Maasai in Kenya, the Tutsis in Rwanda-Burundi, the Baluba in the Congo and many others.⁴¹⁹ In the case of the Zulu in South Africa, their culture seemed so close to that of the ancient Hebrews, that an Anglican Bishop of Natal, who lived among them in the nineteenth century, "suggested that anyone who wanted to really understand the Bible had best study Zulu customs".⁴²⁰

<134>

Although the idea that the Zulu and other Africans are scattered groups of Israelites was spread by colonial authors, it has often been internalised by members of the groups concerned. In almost all cases these common origins are fictitious,⁴²¹ yet "the myth of the Lost Tribes has penetrated every corner of the African continent".⁴²² Bible readers in Igboland had the impression of "a unique cultural sameness with the Jews".⁴²³ Prof. Ogbukagu listed 45 common features, from rules of land tenure and inheritance to burial rites and purity taboos. In addition he claimed that more than half of the Igbo vocabulary derives from Hebrew.⁴²⁴ A more direct piece of evidence allegedly came to light in 1997, when a "fact-finding team of Israelites" from the King Solomon Shepherd Federation, an African American Jewish association in New Jersey, visited Igboland and made a spectacular discovery.⁴²⁵ Near the town of Aguleri, which had once belonged to the famous kingdom of Nri, they unearthed an onyx stone with a message written in Hebrew. The inscription consists of a single syllable: Gad, the name of the seventh son of Jacob and progenitor of one of the ten tribes that got lost. In the Book of Exodus, 12 onyx stones are mentioned, "each stone bearing the name of one of the twelve tribes".⁴²⁶ The discovery of one of these stones was taken as proof of an ancient

⁴¹⁶ Alaezi 1999: 30.

⁴¹⁷ Isaiah 11: 12.

⁴¹⁸ Parfitt 2000: 20.

⁴¹⁹ Parfitt 2000: 20, 173–205; Bruder 2008: 97–185.

⁴²⁰ Parfitt 2000: 197; Bruder 2008: 69.

⁴²¹ The Lemba, a Bantu-speaking group in Zimbabwe and South Africa, seem to be an exception. Genetic tests suggest that some of their ancestors came from the Middle East, perhaps from ancient Israel (Parfitt and Egorova 2006: 57–58; Bruder 2008: 69–173). Another exceptional case has been studied in Mali, in the area of Timbuktu, among a few Islamic families that claim Jewish roots. Historical evidence indicates that some of their ancestors migrated hundreds of years ago with the trans-Saharan trade from Morocco, Algeria and Spain (Bruder 2008: 135–142).

⁴²² Parfitt 2000: 205; Bruder 2008: 66.

⁴²³ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 4.

⁴²⁴ Ogbukagu 2001: 39–89, 25.

⁴²⁵ Alaezi 1999: 27, 113–114; Ogbukagu 2001: 27; Bruder 2008: 145. – The only member of the King Solomon Shepherd Federation, mentioned in the context of the fact-finding mission, is Eze Chukwuemeka who bears an Igbo name.

⁴²⁶ Exodus 39: 14.

migration. Prof. Alaezi holds that an "estimated number of 400,000 Hebrews arrived the apparent[ly] safe territory of Nigeria in about 638 BC".⁴²⁷ Fleeing religious persecution by the Assyrians, they were looking for a home where they could practice their strict form of monotheism. After travelling for 80 years, they came to the area of today's Nigeria which looked like a hospitable place because it was not populated by "Arabs" yet, only by Kwas and Pygmies.⁴²⁸

<135>

An early account of "The Origin of the Ibos", published in 1951, depicts the arrival of the Jewish ancestors as an invasion. The "original inhabitants" were so weak that they were "beaten and chased away".⁴²⁹ This recalls the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites, as described in the Bible, or the subjugation of sub-Sahara Africa by 'superior races' from Egypt or the Middle East, as stated in the Hamitic Hypothesis that was popular among colonial officers. The "aggression"⁴³⁰ of the immigrants that is highlighted in Ike's account has been omitted in later migration histories. Narratives that were written after the Biafra War emphasise that the immigrants peacefully interacted with the indigenous population and adopted much of their way of life. By marrying Africans and by being exposed to the tropical climate, the children of Israel turned into blacks. Their assimilation to the new environment also changed their religious beliefs and practices. They preserved, of course, the idea of a creator god, but they also venerated "gods of wood and stone".⁴³¹ Although many of their customs remained unmistakably Hebrew, they forgot many details of the Mosaic laws and practiced Judaism only in an "adulterated form".⁴³²

<136>

God had warned them "to desist from marrying non-Jewish ethnic groups", but they did not "resist the temptation".⁴³³ They turned away from him and "degenerated into the Nigerian Gentile demigodism",⁴³⁴ reverting to witchcraft, sorcery, "fetishism", human sacrifices and other "abominations".⁴³⁵ Thus their (partial) transformation into Africans appears like a curse. By sharing in the "primitivism of the people of Africa",⁴³⁶ they "lost their Jewish knowledge and intelligence to some extent".⁴³⁷ Furthermore they lost God's favour and were punished for disobeying him. Their suffering in Nigeria, where they have been at the mercy of foreign people, has been imposed on them by God's wrath, as foretold in the Bible: "You have not served the LORD your God [...]; therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and extreme want, you will have to serve the enemies whom the LORD will send against you. He will put a yoke of iron on your neck until you are subdued".⁴³⁸ In a way, their whole existence in African exile is nothing but a "curse",⁴³⁹ brought upon them by their Biblical forebears who had digressed from God: "The Heebo (Ibo) nation in Nigeria exists because God made a promise of scattering the Jewish people to all corners of the earth to suffer for their sin of idolatry".⁴⁴⁰

⁴²⁷ Alaezi 1999: 36; Ogbukagu 2001: 67.

⁴²⁸ Alaezi 1999: 32. – There is a small group of Arabic-speakers living in northeast Nigeria, the Shuwa. However, when talking of Arabs in Nigeria, Alaezi (1999: 46) refers to "Hausas of Arab descent". This conforms to Hausa legends that the founder of their kingdoms came from Baghdad (Hallam 1966: 47). Moreover, the political leader and first premier of the North, Sir Ahmadu Bello, claimed a direct line of descent from the Prophet Mohammed (Paden 1986: 574–575).

⁴²⁹ Ike 1951: 12–13.

⁴³⁰ Ike 1951: 12.

⁴³¹ Deut. 28: 64, quoted in Alaezi 1999: 43, 70, 105.

⁴³² Ogbukagu 2001: 106, 39, 95.

⁴³³ Ogbukagu 2001: 94, 35.

⁴³⁴ Alaezi 1999: 43.

⁴³⁵ Alaezi 1999: 37, 44, 106.

⁴³⁶ Alaezi 1999: 18–19.

⁴³⁷ Ogbukagu 2001: 95.

⁴³⁸ Deut. 28: 47–48, quoted by Alaezi 1999: 91.

⁴³⁹ Alaezi 1999: 31, 32, 48, 91, 105, 134.

⁴⁴⁰ Alaezi 1999: 134.

<137>

God's favour has not been lost forever. His punishment is just a means to correct the people he has chosen and to lead them to future greatness: "I shall gather them from all the lands to which I banished them in my furious anger and great wrath; I shall bring them back to this place and let them dwell there undisturbed. [...] so shall I bring them all the prosperity which I now promise them".⁴⁴¹ In order to regain his favour they have to break with paganism by destroying the idols they have tolerated in their midst. Such "cleansing" of every town and village "releases whole communities from demonic stranglehold and unleashes Jehova's favours on the land [...] so that the blessing of the Messiah will come".⁴⁴² By shedding all the "heinous characteristics acquired in diaspora",⁴⁴³ they will be able to reintegrate "into the noble world Jewry".⁴⁴⁴ If God's promise is taken literally, redemption would mean that they will return to their ancestral home. But is it possible for 25 million Igbo (and other scattered Hebrews) to settle in the Near East? "Can small Israel contain all the Jews?"⁴⁴⁵ Alaezi gives an apocalyptic answer. Before the Igbo are redeemed, the world has to go through another war that will separate the "righteous" ones from those unworthy to enter the holy land: "Those Jewish people irrespective of where they reside who will survive the 3rd World War will be gathered back in Israel for good after the sinful ones amongst them shall have received their punishment".⁴⁴⁶

<138>

There are many ways of finding the Promised Land. A "Jewish cultural rebirth" of the Igbo does not depend on a physical reunion of all Jews; it may take place in Igboland, in a future Biafra whose mission would be to bring about a "Hebrew Renaissance".⁴⁴⁷ The Igbo paper *Body & Soul* presented a "vision" of Biafra as a state which is "committed to political as well as spiritual Zionism".⁴⁴⁸ Although an independent state, it would be firmly aligned to "the Commonwealth of Israel".⁴⁴⁹ The political and spiritual primacy of the ancestral homeland would be recognised in various ways: "The cities of Biafra will be named after Israeli cities, just as Australian cities are named after English cities". The currency will be the "Biafran Shekel", and the national flag will display the Star of David. Administratively, Biafra will be subdivided into 12 states, and "the legislature shall be a 120-member single chamber house to be known as the Biafran Knesset".⁴⁵⁰ This commitment to Zionism, however, does not rule out a commitment to Christianity.⁴⁵¹ The new Biafra, with its Knesset and Israeli flag, is at the same time a "Pure Christian state, [...] an evangelical republic. Therefore all systems and other instruments of worship will not be allowed".⁴⁵² We already encountered this paradoxical attitude when discussing the religious dimension of the Biafra war. The beleaguered Igbo saw themselves as the chosen people, closer to God than those alleged Christians who made common cause with the 'Islamists'. In a word: they were so intensely Christian that they were (like) Jews. Christian and Judaic traditions, which have been at odds in many parts of the world, easily coexist in Igbo political thought: "The president of Israel automatically becomes the president of the Christian Democratic Republic of Biafra".⁴⁵³ A common bond uniting the states of the Commonwealth of Israel would be their commitment to a strict form of monotheism. Eradicating idol-worship is a central theme in the Old Testament, whose God speaks

⁴⁴¹ Jeremiah 32: 37, 42, quoted by Alaezi 1999: 56, 136.

⁴⁴² *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 5.

⁴⁴³ Ogbukagu 2001: 103.

⁴⁴⁴ Alaezi 1999: 7.

⁴⁴⁵ Alaezi 1999: 136.

⁴⁴⁶ Alaezi 1999: 137, 14.

⁴⁴⁷ Alaezi 1999: 60.

⁴⁴⁸ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 6.

⁴⁴⁹ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 6.

⁴⁵⁰ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 6.

⁴⁵¹ Alaezi (1999: 58, 59) calls it an "erroneous assumption" that the "idea of Hebrews in Nigeria connotes automatic rejection of all other religions (e.g. Christianity, Islam, etc.) in favour of Judaism".

⁴⁵² *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 6.

⁴⁵³ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 6.

to both Jews and Christians: "I will get rid of every trace of idol worship throughout the land, so that even the names of the idols will be forgotten".⁴⁵⁴ In the case of the Igbo, the fight against gods of wood and stone would be carried far beyond Biafra because "10% of the nation[al] revenue will be devoted to zealous evangelization of the world".⁴⁵⁵

<139>

The internal structure and the geographical extension of a Jewish Biafra are of course disputed. Both depend on how one defines the identity and composition of the Hebrew migrants that came to settle in today's Nigeria. A study by Ezeala, published in 1992, suggests that the ancestors of the Igbo are descended from Shechenigbo, a clan of the tribe of Judah living in the province of Judea.⁴⁵⁶ Prof. Alaezi, however, considers this to be a legend.⁴⁵⁷ There must have been several waves of migration to West Africa involving various tribes. The first settlers may already have come with the Exodus from Egypt, when the Israelites fled Pharaonic oppression.⁴⁵⁸ Only a part of them probably followed Moses across the Red Sea into the Sinai desert; others headed southwards through Sudan and the Chad basin. The following waves of migration were triggered by the Assyrian persecution, the Babylonian captivity, and the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70 under Roman rule.⁴⁵⁹ Since the groups of refugees came independently, they must have settled in various places: in today's Igboland as in neighbouring areas. The names of some ethnic groups surrounding the Igbo still betray their Jewish origins. The Idoma, living to the north, derive from the Biblical Edomites, while the people of Calabar at the south coast stem from Caleb Arba, and the Igalala from Igal.⁴⁶⁰

<140>

The paradigm of a "multi-tribal origin"⁴⁶¹ of the Jewish immigrants makes it easier to embrace other Nigerians as fellow Jews. The Ijaw, Ibibio and Igbo, although distinct nations, share a common destiny as descendants of the 12 tribes that once formed Israel. From an Igbo perspective, this could be the basis for a political cooperation, as envisaged by MASSOB. Its Director for Information appealed to Igbo and Niger Deltans to overcome the enmity which Nigeria's "divide and rule" policy has created between them, and retrieve their former unity: "we've understood that we are the same, that it is the Hausa man and Yoruba man that are our enemies".⁴⁶² All groups in eastern Nigeria that had been marginalised for decades would gain if they set their petty jealousies aside and joined forces to fight for independence. The model of the scattered tribes that lost contact but have to recover their Jewish origins is well suited to express these common aspirations: "The new Biafra is supposed to comprise [the] lost but recovered Jews who settle on the coasts of the Niger Delta and in the hinterlands of Eastern Nigeria".⁴⁶³ The number of groups that would participate in this venture is wide open to speculation. An article in *Body & Soul* suggested that parts of the Jos Plateau and southern Cameroun may join the new republic and that its western boundary should extend westwards across the Niger: "The River Niger is not, and will never be the boundary of the Christian Democratic Republic of Biafra, lest as the River Jordan is not the boundary of Israel".⁴⁶⁴ "if all the people from Benin to Calabar to Nuskka come together and [...] if this state reached

⁴⁵⁴ Zechariah 13: 2, as quoted in *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 6. – The Holy Scriptures provide ample justification for attacking idolaters, among one's own people and others: "The Book of Joshua is a chronicle of massacre, exulting in the wiping out of one population after another [...] on the grounds that they were idolaters who would lead the children of Israel astray from the worship of the Lord" (Hastings 2003: 31).

⁴⁵⁵ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 6.

⁴⁵⁶ Ezeala: The Great Debate, quoted in *Body & Soul*, Vol.3, No.3, 2003:20 and in Alaezi 1999: 30.

⁴⁵⁷ Alaezi 1999:30.

⁴⁵⁸ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 4.

⁴⁵⁹ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 19; Alaezi 1999: 26, 31–32.

⁴⁶⁰ Alaezi 1999: 8, 22–24; Ogbukagu 2001: 24–26. – Ilona ([n.d.]: 28) suggests that the waves of migrants, crossing the Sahara, consisted not only of Jews but also of ancient Greeks and other Mediterranean peoples. At least one of them were Canaanites, as their name Yoruba indicates: 'Yerubbaal' – 'people of Baal'.

⁴⁶¹ Alaezi 1999: 31.

⁴⁶² Comrade Uchenna Madu, in *National Star*, Vol. 2, No. 29:6.

⁴⁶³ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 4.

⁴⁶⁴ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 6.

out to the Idoma, Tiv and Igala and incorporated them in the new state[, that] will be the most powerful and prosperous state in Black Africa".⁴⁶⁵ How would such a state be organised? Would it be a federation of autonomous Jewish nations, or would it be dominated by the Igbo, the most populous group in the region? The myth of the lost tribes can be told in a way that would justify Igbo empire building. According to Alaezi, the Igbo have preserved their "Jewish racial dignity"⁴⁶⁶ to a larger extent than some of their neighbours: "not all Igalas are of Hebrew (Ibo) descent. Many also come from the stock of Oduduwa [the ancestor of the Yoruba, J.H.]", while the "people of Onitsha are purely Hebrews or Heebos (Ibos) of Eri stock from the tribe of Gad".⁴⁶⁷

8.2 Black Jews

<141>

For the Igbo historian Afigbo, stories of an oriental origin are "worthless" because they contradict archaeological and linguistic evidence.⁴⁶⁸ The language of the Igbo is related to many others in the Niger-Congo region, and these relations are of great antiquity, since the languages closest to Igbo, such as Yoruba, Edo and Igala, took a separate development some five or six thousand years ago. Moreover, precolonial traditions contain no hint of a migration from Egypt, Palestine or any other distant land: "the Igbo have lost all memory of their migration into the area they now occupy".⁴⁶⁹ Some communities in the Igbo heartland have no histories of migration at all; according to legend, their ancestors fell from the sky or crawled out from holes in the ground.⁴⁷⁰ At the northern periphery of Igboland, some villages claim descent from the neighbouring kingdom of Igala, while the ruling dynasties of Onitsha and other western towns trace their origins to the kingdom of Benin. According to Afigbo, these claims are largely fictitious, made up to gain prestige through the association with a famous empire. The ruling lineages in Onitsha, for instance, may have copied some institutions that existed in Benin, but they developed the overall structure of their kingdom by themselves: "the political system was neither borrowed from nor imposed by Benin".⁴⁷¹ In the case of the Aro and their trading empire, Afigbo also suggested an autochthonous Igbo origin. Although the Aro used to be a multilingual people in the borderland between Igbo-, Ibibio- and Ekoi-speakers, he claimed that they "did not result from a merging of ethnically heterogeneous peoples but from solid Igbo stock".⁴⁷² Afigbo's version of history is not just Africa-centred, it is Igbo-centred.⁴⁷³ He reckoned that "the Igbo were established in their present habitat about

⁴⁶⁵ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 7 [or 8], 2006: 10–12.

⁴⁶⁶ Alaezi 1999: 7.

⁴⁶⁷ Alaezi 1999: 97. – The idea that Jewish migrants came in waves and founded quite different communities can also be used to define rank within Igbo society. In his 'Origin of the Ibos', written in an early period of Igbo nationalism, Ike argued that the Aro subgroup, to whom he belonged, had been "the first to come". They had been privileged to serve as priests of the supreme deity, and their hometown Arochukwu had functioned as "capital" for the whole of Igboland: "These black Caesars are a tribe of intelligent and enterprising people [...]. They are skilled slave dealers, diplomatists, warriors and colonists and during the era of their domination of Iboland carried their conquest to the confines of the River Niger and the mountains of the Cameroons" (Ike 1951: 14, 15, 42–43).

⁴⁶⁸ Afigbo 1983: 3.

⁴⁶⁹ Afigbo 1981: 4; Uchendu 1965: 2. – Stories about an alien, non-African origin, introduced by colonial authors and appropriated by Igbo intellectuals, had of course a feedback effect: "Today, the idea of a Middle Eastern origin of the Igbo pervades oral historical accounts" (Harneit-Sievers 2006: 22). Remy Ilona, an amateur historian, claims that Igbo elders told him stories about their Jewish ancestry and that these stories have preserved an ancient knowledge: "The Igbos have since immemorial times been pointing towards Israel as the place they originated from". They only started losing this knowledge "since the colonial era, because the educational institutions and programs of the colonialists replaced the Igbos' institutions, programs, and history with the colonialists'" (Ilona [n.d.]: 4, 2).

⁴⁷⁰ Afigbo 1983: 9.

⁴⁷¹ Afigbo 1983: 6; Afigbo 1987: 15, 23.

⁴⁷² Afigbo, 1971, quoted in Dike and Ekejiuba 1990: 4.

⁴⁷³ Harneit-Sievers 2006: 62.

two or three millennia before the Christian era",⁴⁷⁴ and that they developed largely on their own, unaffected by outside influence: "the communities of Igbo heartland, shielded as they were from direct influences from the Edo, Igala, and Ibibio originated in the course of a dialog between them and their god – as long as we understand that god to be their environment".⁴⁷⁵

<142>

A nationalist history, as Afigbo propagates it, should strengthen the Igbo for the political struggles that lie ahead of them: "every people must write their own history. Only the Igbo can build for themselves the ideology and image which will keep them afloat in the rough and turbulent sea of the contemporary world".⁴⁷⁶ However, Afigbo's model of an ancient people that has created its social and political institutions largely by itself has a major disadvantage. It opens up a time frame of five to six thousand years, although the historians have little to say about these millennia. Oral traditions reach back just a few generations; it is only in a few kingdoms such as Onitsha or Nri that kinglists can be constructed which cover some hundred years. Yet it is difficult to link the names of early kings to any historical events or to archaeological discoveries.⁴⁷⁷ Going even further back into the millennia, academic historiography can only make a few abstract statements, such as the thesis by Afigbo that the core of Igbo settlements was in the Awka-Orlu uplands and that population pressure prompted its inhabitants to penetrate adjacent regions in an endless series of small-scale migrations.⁴⁷⁸ Apart from such general remarks, there are only mythical stories to fill the *longue durée* of Igbo history. The most popular myth stems from Nri, a small town at the northwestern margin of Igboland and home to a once famous kingdom that has been described by some authors as the cradle of Igbo culture. The myth of Eri, the founder of the kingdom, who fell from the sky onto a primordial earth that was still barren and uncultivated, is – according to Isichei – the only myth recorded in Igbo communities that reflects cultural innovations such as the introduction of agriculture and iron working.⁴⁷⁹ This local myth that was recorded in early colonial days and has since become known all over Igboland can easily be connected with Biblical stories and thus with recognised world history: Eri, the founding father of the Igbo civilisation, was the fifth son of Gad, one of the leaders of the Lost Tribes.⁴⁸⁰

<143>

For many Igbo readers, the Bible is "the oldest history book".⁴⁸¹ Its information about Africa's black population is, of course, fragmentary, so it has to be complemented, re-interpreted and – perhaps – corrected. This can be done in ways that differ widely from European interpretations, which normally defend the idea that the Lost Tribes carried divine wisdom from Israel to Africa, America and the Far East. Some Igbo have rejected the premise of this assumption: that Jewish civilisation emerged in the Middle East. In consequence, they

⁴⁷⁴ Afigbo 1981: 5.

⁴⁷⁵ Afigbo 1983: 10. – The idea of a self-centred development has inspired amateur historians to view the Igbo as a "tribe" that has preserved essential physical and mental features of its members: "Although there are many migratory or hybrid tribes in the world, Igbos are one of original, ancient tribes. [...] Igbos of today are not innately more handsome, ugly, or intelligent than the earliest Igbos. Hence, Igbos have nothing to do with Charles Darwin's imperialistically inspired, agnostic and illogical Theory of Evolution [...]. The Darwinian nonsense should be immediately expunged from biology and geography text-books in Nigeria and all the civilised world. Science and agnosticism are best separated" (Onuora 1995: 7).

⁴⁷⁶ Afigbo 1981: X.

⁴⁷⁷ The famous excavations at Igbo Ukwu, nine miles from Nri, unearthed precious pieces of bronze work, large amounts of pottery and 165,000 beads. Most of it was found in a burial chamber that has sometimes been interpreted as the grave of a king. Onwuejeogwu (1981: 162–164), a social anthropologist who wrote a book on Nri history, claimed the Igbo Ukwu culture – about a thousand years old – to be part of the Nri kingdom, while the archaeologist who led the excavations was more cautious in associating both (Shaw 1979: 92, 94–102; Bersselaar 1998: 38).

⁴⁷⁸ Afigbo 1999: 76–77; Uchendu 1965: 3.

⁴⁷⁹ Isichei 1977a: 21; Harneit-Sievers 2006: 54.

⁴⁸⁰ Alaezi 1999: 94.

⁴⁸¹ *New Republic*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2006: 6.

also rejected the story, told by other Igbo, that the founder of the Nri kingdom was a son of Gad who brought Jewish culture into Igboland: "The reverse is the case".⁴⁸² When Moses fled Egypt, he went to Igboland where he encountered an advanced civilisation, centred in the holy city of Nri. The Mosaic laws that were later codified in Israel are based on the "original teachings [...] by the priests of the Eri system, who were charged" by Chukwu, the Creator God, "to go round the world, and spread the message of peace."⁴⁸³ Major innovations, such as the abolition of human sacrifice, were inspired by this "ancient Igbo enlightenment".⁴⁸⁴ Moses was not the only one to popularise the ideas of the Nri priests; another disciple was Pharaoh Akhenaten, who caused a revolution in Egypt when he introduced a strict form of monotheism.⁴⁸⁵

<144>

Stories about Nri, Moses and their encounters with Egypt are not meant to contradict academic historiography but to complement it. Narrating the origins of the Igbo may appear arbitrary, but it is popular because it helps to locate them in a world of conflicting powers. In many cases, an oriental origin is chosen, and this often indicates a rejection of African traditions. However, the oriental myth can be told in a way that affirms the African roots:

all of us migrated from the Sahara Desert and the Nile. [...] we (Igbos) and the Jews lived together and learnt our culture of circumcision and our traditions and they mixed. So when they [the Jews] went to Israel they continued with the culture they learnt from us and now because they are more developed, some people say, we came from the Jews. No way. Water does not flow uphill. The Jews were living in Africa. They were living with us. When they went back they continued with the tradition which they learnt from us.⁴⁸⁶

Although the Igbo were part of the early Near Eastern civilisations, they may have a truly African origin. African intellectuals have often claimed that Egypt was once inhabited by blacks. This idea developed in reaction to the Hamitic Hypothesis which informed much of Western debates on Africa.⁴⁸⁷ From the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, many academics and colonial officers assumed that all major achievements of civilisation in sub-Saharan Africa had been introduced by light-complexioned 'Hamitic' invaders from Egypt or the Middle East. Against such claims of white superiority, African authors asserted that the children of Ham, the supposed founders of ancient Egypt, had been blacks. Those 'Hamites' who migrated as far as South Africa did not come as alien invaders but as bearers of a black civilisation that had been flourishing in the Nile valley for thousands of years. This reinterpretation was sometimes combined with accusations that the Europeans, whose own civilisation derives from Egypt (via Greece and Rome), have concealed this black origin and destroyed evidence which indicated that the Pharaohs had been black. Among Igbo nationalists, the story of black Egypt has not played a prominent role, though I found a noteworthy variant that expresses the anti-Islamic sentiments fuelled by the Biafra War. When discussing the origins of the Igbo, a book published in 1974 mentions as one of three possible explanations that the Igbo "were the founders of ancient Egypt" but were "defeated and chased out".⁴⁸⁸ The victors, who took over from them, were "Arabs", and this is construed as a reason why the ancient empire declined: "those who occupied Egypt and now pride themselves as the 'founders' of the 'great civilization' lost the secrets that made ancient Egypt great when they plundered and evicted the Igbo".⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸² Obi Nwakanma, in *Vanguard*, 15 Aug. 2004, "Nigeria: The Orbit: Incidents at the Shrine".

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Dr. Chukwuemeka Ezeife, in *Eastern Voice*, June 10–16, 1996: 15.

⁴⁸⁷ Zachernuk 1994.

⁴⁸⁸ Njaka 1974: 18.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

<145>

The vision of black Egypt as the cradle of many black civilisations was created in the nineteenth century by Africans in America, England and Sierra Leone.⁴⁹⁰ It is still popular in the African diaspora, but for Igbo nationalists, who are looking for a more exclusive origin, Israel is more appealing. This does not stop them from taking up pan-Africanist ideas and subverting European discourses. Biblical Israel, like ancient Egypt, is sometimes presented as a black civilisation. Prof. Ogbukagu identified its original black inhabitants with the Essenes, a Jewish sect that was seen as heretic by members of the old priestly establishment. Biblical texts do not mention the Essenes, but some authors of the first century A.D. described their way of life and highlighted their religious zeal and asceticism. Ogbukagu calls them "the strictest and the most sincere religious practitioners ever known", and counts Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, King David, King Solomon, John the Baptist and Jesus Christ among them.⁴⁹¹ All of them were black, and this is the main reason why they were hated and eventually driven out of their home: "The Essenes were the black Jews who were the most despised, persecuted, rejected, humiliated and hated by other Jews of the Caucasian denomination. This fact is contained in Isaiah 53:1–12. As a result of the severe Jewish persecution, they were forced to migrate into the mainland of Africa and Asia for their own protection and survival".⁴⁹² Among the refugees was the "Igbo race", "called *Shechenigbo* in Israel".⁴⁹³ The white, Caucasian Jews, who chased them out, were the Sadducees and Pharisees, who managed to bring the temple in Jerusalem under their control and who repeatedly clashed with Jesus. They were "not the real Jews", but the offspring of Japhet and Esau, who had settled in Europe. When they migrated to Israel and were welcomed by its black inhabitants, they only became Jews by conversion.⁴⁹⁴

<146>

If the "original Jews"⁴⁹⁵ were expelled by the white Jews, then the present regime in Israel is illegitimate: "the present Caucasian race occupying Israel as it was constituted in 1945 [...] were really not the Jews at of the beginning".⁴⁹⁶ One might call them imposters with no divine right to the land they have defended so tenaciously. Ogbukagu's book does not make further comments on today's Israel and its occupation policy, but another author writing on black Jews did. Dr Abasika is an Ibibio, but his report on the Jewish origin of the Ibibio (and other West Africans) is in many respects similar to what we learned about the Igbo: "the Ibibio Tribe is one of the members of the Lost Tribes of Israel. [...] super intelligence, hard work, prosperity and blessedness, are the most prominent traits inherited from their ancestors".⁴⁹⁷ Their residence in ancient Israel ended, when they were expelled by whites who were not "original Jews" but Jews by conversion.⁴⁹⁸ Abasika deduced from this fact that Israel is "a black man's land" and that "Caucasians have no business in this region".⁴⁹⁹ The white Jews who occupied it half a century ago came to make it an outpost of US imperialism: "After the Second World War in 1945, the United States of America in conjunction with the United Nations forcefully created a territory out of Palestine and flew into that region millions of Caucasian Jews" with the aim "to maintain white supremacy".⁵⁰⁰ For this purpose they attacked the indigenous population who had lived there in peace: "Today, bombs and gunfires rain all over Lebanon; men, women, both born and unborn children are killed everywhere

⁴⁹⁰ Zachernuk 1994: 431, 433–437.

⁴⁹¹ Ogbukagu 2001: 22, 23.

⁴⁹² Ogbukagu 2001: 23.

⁴⁹³ Ogbukagu 2001: 24.

⁴⁹⁴ Ogbukagu 2001: 13, 10–11, 91–92.

⁴⁹⁵ Ogbukagu 2001: 13, 11, 91.

⁴⁹⁶ Ogbukagu 2001: 9.

⁴⁹⁷ Abasika 1993: 2.

⁴⁹⁸ Abasika 1993: 161, 162.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid. pp. 162, 171. – This corresponds with ideas circulating among Nigerian Muslims: The "European Jewry" that came to Palestine have no ancient claim to the land because they "descended from the Khazar tribe in Russia", not from Abraham (*Weekly Trust*, 2 Nov. 2001, "Anatomy of Terrorism").

⁵⁰⁰ Abasika 1993: 161, 167.

[...]. This act of genocide is sponsored by the United States of America".⁵⁰¹ What was done to the ancestors of the Ibibio 2000 years ago, when they were cast out from their home, is done to the Palestinians today. Both are Semites who (have) lived in the Holy Land since Abraham's times and thus have a claim to the land. Moreover, both are classified as blacks: "Palestine is a Black Arab Nation. The Arabs are known as the Nilotic Negroes, [...] direct descendants of Ishmael, the first son of Abraham, begotten from Hagar, an Egyptian Black woman. From this Biblical facts the Arabians, Iraqis and Iranians are Black/Coloured people belonging to a Black race".⁵⁰² Their adversaries, the white Jews who pose as the ancient owners of Israel, although they "know the facts of the matter",⁵⁰³ are cursed in the eyes of God, as is written in Revelation: "I know how you are slandered by those who claim to be Jews but are not; they are really a synagogue of Satan".⁵⁰⁴ Their ruthlessness in driving out non-Caucasians came to light, when they murdered Jesus: "all the accusing fingers point to the Jews", "the Jews killed Jesus Christ out of jealousy and hatred, not because of the offence he had committed but because of his black skin color".⁵⁰⁵

<147>

I did not come across such criticism of Jews and modern Israel in Igbo nationalist discourses. Ogbukagu borrowed much of his argument from Abasika, sometimes word for word, but he left out the condemnation of Israel's 'genocide'.⁵⁰⁶ Among Igbo nationalists, attitudes towards Israel and its government are normally friendly. When MASSOB invited foreign statesmen to attend the official proclamation of the Republic of Biafra on 27 May 2000, it sent an invitation letter to the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak.⁵⁰⁷ In Alaezi's account of Igbo-Jewish relations, both nations are tied by a genealogical bond that has persisted through the ages. Alaezi appreciates the "liberation of Jerusalem" by Israeli soldiers in June 1967 as fulfilment of a divine promise and integrates the event into a scheme of Christian salvation: "The restoration of Israel in 1948 after the World War II and the miraculous Jewish occupation of Jerusalem after the 1967 Six-Day Desert War are [...] a guarantee of [...] the return of Jesus Christ".⁵⁰⁸

<148>

In June 1967, when Israeli soldiers 'liberated' Jerusalem, Biafra and Israel were in a similar situation, confronted by armies far superior in numbers and equipment. Barely a week after the Igbo declared their independence, the Six-Day War broke out and Israel destroyed the hostile forces. This victory proved to the beleaguered Biafrans that David could win against Goliath. Israel's success as a modern, independent nation still fascinates Igbo nationalists because it shows that a people can reinvent themselves. Just a few decades after their flight and near annihilation, Jewish refugees metamorphosed into a proud, self-assured nation. However, comparing themselves to the survivors of the Holocaust conveys yet another, more problematic message. It perpetuates the idea, propagated during the war, that the Igbo are living in a hostile environment and that they must hold together, because they cannot trust their neighbours.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., p. 167.

⁵⁰² Ibid., p. 162.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., p. 163.

⁵⁰⁴ Revelation 2:9, quoted by Abasika 1993: 163.

⁵⁰⁵ Abasika 1993: 182, 183, 10.

⁵⁰⁶ Ogbukagu differs from Abasika in yet another respect. He shows a more ambivalent attitude towards blackness, pointing out that the black Jews, among them the Igbo, were lighter in complexion while still living in Israel: "they were dark skinned or moderately white skinned, very tall and good looking". Their present appearance is a result of changed climatic conditions and intermarriage with black Africans (Ogbukagu 2001:94).

⁵⁰⁷ *Weekly Hammer*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2000: 5. – Other recipients of invitation letters were, among others, Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro and Charles Taylor. Being in contact with these politicians is part of MASSOB's self-presentation. Whether they actually sent any letters is a different matter.

⁵⁰⁸ Alaezi 1999: 16, 141.

9. Conclusion

<149>

The killings of Igbo from 1966 to 1970 can be called a 'genocide', following the definition adopted by the United Nations in 1948: "genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part [...]"⁵⁰⁹ When Igbo nationalists use the term, they often assume that the Gowon regime, or Northern leaders in general, attempted to annihilate the whole Igbo population. Such an intent guided the Nazi regime in Germany when it organised in 1942 the systematic killing of all Jews. There is no evidence, however, that the pogroms of 1966 and the civil war served this aim. Thus it is not helpful to equate them with the Jewish Holocaust.

<150>

Today's Igbo are right in reminding other Nigerians that the massacres starting on 28 May 1966 were *not* a spontaneous outburst of hatred. Most journalists, diplomats and other observers at the time agreed that the attacks had been coordinated, although it is not known by whom.⁵¹⁰ The aim was obviously to drive all Igbo out of the Northern Region. When this was achieved, in mid-October 1966, violence ended. The refugees were safe, once they had reached Igboland. In the months that followed, the survival of the nine or ten million Igbo in the Eastern Region was not threatened. If their leader Ojukwu had accepted the constitutional arrangements which Nigeria's Supreme Military Council announced on March 17, 1967, the war would have been averted. To be sure, Gowon's offer was unfavourable to the Igbo. If they had accepted it, they would have been excluded from central government for a long time without having control, at least, over their own Eastern Region. However, this offer was far better than the terms they had to accept after their unconditional surrender in January 1970.

<150>

In March 1967, both sides were ready to go to war. After Gowon had his offer turned down, he no longer sought a compromise but was determined to subdue the 'rebels', "whatever the cost in [...] human lives",⁵¹¹ inflicting on Biafra conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of a large part of its population. Seen in retrospect, the war was fought in vain, yet many nationalists are not willing to acknowledge this. They insist that the Igbo had no option but to fight for their survival. The very fact that they survived is taken as proof that picking up the fight was right. Although General Ojukwu fled to Cote d'Ivoire on 11 January 1970 and the few remaining troops capitulated two days later, it is said that the war was not lost: "the Igbo, *as a people*, did not disappear ... They survived; they were, therefore, victorious".⁵¹² In a similar vein, Ojukwu argued that the Igbo survived by fighting tenaciously: "the Igbo were not defeated in the war".⁵¹³ "I went to war to save the Igbo nation. Whenever I go to Lagos and Kano, I see the fruit of my victory [...]. I was right 40 years ago".⁵¹⁴

<151>

The complete defeat of the Igbo facilitated their reintegration into Nigeria. The fear of Igbo domination had subsided; the 'migrants' had been shown their place. They had to accept in silence that none of the murderers around them was brought to book. Two decades later, Igbo in the North became more assertive in claiming civil rights: "When we went back into the Nigerian federation, we gained full citizenship. We did not come here as guests".⁵¹⁵ However,

⁵⁰⁹ Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Article 2.

⁵¹⁰ Douglas 2002: 96–97.

⁵¹¹ St. Jorre 1972: 236.

⁵¹² Ekwe-Ekwe 2007: 92, 125.

⁵¹³ *The Guardian*, 14 Nov. 2005, "Odumegwu-Ojukwu defends Biafra cause", p. 2.

⁵¹⁴ *The News*, 5 March 2001, "We Must Talk":20, 21; cf. Harneit-Sievers 1997: 164.

⁵¹⁵ A lecturer at the university of Jos, 22 Sept. 1995; cf. Anthony 2002: 236.

this is not the view of their 'hosts'. Few Hausa in Kano would concede that Igbo should have the same rights. Shehu Sani, leader of the Kaduna-based Civil Rights Congress, told me: "The Igbo are here to make business, not to meddle into politics".⁵¹⁶ The Sharia campaign was, among others, a brutal reminder to the Igbo and other Christians from the South that they have to accept the political conditions set by the 'indigenous' population. 'Infidels' have no business telling Muslims how to organise public affairs.

<152>

The humiliation in the diaspora is hard to bear. On 26 December 1994, demonstrators marched to a prison in Kano, dragged out an Igbo who had been accused of having desecrated the holy Qur'an by tearing out one of its pages and using it as toilet paper, chopped off his head, put it on a spike and paraded it for hours around town. A group of Shiites, who later published a photo of the incident in their journal, claimed responsibility for the attack, but none of them was brought to court.⁵¹⁷ The only way for the Igbo to gain security would be to draw the federal government to their side. However, there is little they can do to put pressure on the politicians in Abuja. The threat to secede is not taken very seriously because Igboland without the rest of the former Eastern Region would not be a viable state.

<153>

Campaigning for Biafra is more likely to weaken their position as it makes it more difficult for them to reach out to other Nigerians. Since the Igbo have no exit option, they have to gain influence within the arena of Nigerian politics. This is only possible by forging alliances, although their ability to win support among other ethnic groups will remain limited. The hand-over of power to an Igbo president is not sight, given mutual fears and suspicions. A Northern journal warned that the Igbo, still full of resentment, have "a long-standing grand plan [...] to avenge the first civil war".⁵¹⁸ Igbo politicians could nevertheless make some impact on the quality of government. As members of political parties they have some say in the nomination of presidential candidates and could reject aspirants who are notoriously corrupt. If they took a more principled stand in fighting for common, pan-Nigerian interests, they would become more reliable political allies. In this context of strengthening their position in Nigeria, it is not helpful to take upon themselves the role of outsiders, destined to attract hostilities like the Jews.

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⁵¹⁶ Kaduna, 8 March 2001.

⁵¹⁷ Mu'azzam and Ibrahim 2000: 70; Maier 2000: 169; *Newswatch*, 6 Feb. 1995, "A Ticking Bomb", p. 25.

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BBC. Focus on Africa, London, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/focusonafricamagazine/index.shtml> (15.5.2011)
Conscience International, Lagos
Daily Champion, Lagos, <http://www.champion.com.ng/default.asp> (15.05.2011)
The Economist, London, <http://www.economist.com/> (15.05.2011)
The Guardian, Lagos, <http://www.ngrguardiannews.com/> (09.06.2011)
Hotline, Kaduna
Insider Weekly, Lagos, <http://www.insiderweeklymagazine.com/index.html> (15.05.2011)
The News, Lagos
News Service, Enugu
Newswatch, Lagos, <http://www.newswatchngr.com/> (15.05.2011)
P.M. News, Lagos, <http://www.pmnewsnigeria.com/> (15.05.2011)
Post Express, Lagos
The Source, Lagos
Tell, Lagos, <http://www.tellng.com/> (15.05.2011)
TSM. The Sunday Magazine, Lagos
Vanguard, Lagos, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/> (15.05.2011)
The Week, Lagos
Weekly Trust, Kaduna, <http://weekly.dailytrust.com/> (15.05.2011)

10.3 Igbo Periodicals

Body & Soul	News Mirror
Eastern Pilot	News Round
Eastern Sunset	News Service
The Eastern Voice	Orient News
Freedom News	Pilot
Global News	The Third Eye
National Star	Weekly Hammer
New Republic	Weekly News
News Magnet	West African