

Main Article

Indirect Incitement to Violence: An Analysis of Stories of Nigerian Ethnic Conflicts

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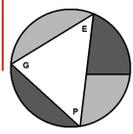
Abstract *This paper demonstrates the constitutive effects of ethnic narratives. It explores the discursive conditions in which ethnic stories—myths, folktales, proverbs and anecdotes—reproduce violence in modern Nigeria. It offers an analysis of the discursive strategies of the stories and how they generate political structures that have a constitutive effect on violence. I argue that the discursive practices of the stories seek to revive past conflicts and reproduce violence, through the ways groups use them to constitute ethnic claims and reconstruct adverse historical events. The manners in which the stories represent ethnic causes and reconstruct past conflicts constitute and reconstitute ethnic meanings, thus recreating the conditions for reproductive violence.*

Introduction

This study focuses mainly on the 1967-1970 Nigerian civil war stories. Effects of the stories need to be investigated if we are to understand the problem of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. The everyday constructions of ethnic conflict in the stories evoke an image of a society still at war (Oriaku 2002: 41-50). Descriptions of ethnic selfhood and otherness, genocide and starvation, political survival and superiority, and hatred, continually reinvest the groups with patterned use of linguistic and rhetorical resources with which they reconstitute the war in the present. Thus, each group narrates particular experiences of the war and attributes hostile intensions to others.

Ethnicity does not only relate to the politicisation of socio-culturally distinct groups as the basis of political representation or legitimacy. It also means the framing of group cognitions and emotions in ways that dissenting views are not expressed publicly or even privately. Here, ethnic conflict means the escalatory responses to reaffirm or challenge a group's identity and achieve certain objectives. In this situation, otherwise harmless expressions become deliberate acts and take on intense emotional significance.

One group's ordinary acts become a direct assault on another group's position. This leads to reproductive violence, whereby actions of one group bring intense and aggressive responses from others, which in turn transmit hostilities that reinforce the use of violence to solve conflicts. It reflects a situation whereby a combination of mutual fear and revenge become part of the self-organising triggers of recyclical violence between ethnicities. This is often grounded in selectively remembered and interpreted experiences that invoke past threats in response to contemporary tensions.



To make my arguments, I will first outline how ethnic violence is studied and to clarify to what extent the phenomenon has to be looked afresh. The second section will briefly address the discursive effects of stories, which form the theoretical background of the study. My third task is to inquire into the ethnic circumstances and political issues which made civil war a feasible option in Nigeria. Following from this, I will present the political structures underlying narratives of the war in order to raise discourses that serve as determinants of self-sustaining conflicts in Nigeria. I will then proceed to connect the stories with certain recent events.

The Study of Ethnic Violence

Literatures that seek to define theoretical puzzles of ethnic conflicts are extremely diverse, but I am more interested in those that show how conflict is located in the continual interplay of the cultural world (Brubakar and Laitin 1998: 441).

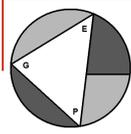
One approach sees conflicts as the resultant effects of ethnically conditioned individuals (Smith 2003; Armstrong 2004: 9-18), certain inherited traits or specific cultural ways (McGarry and O'Leary 1995), emotionally given identities (Deng 1995, Kapferer 1998) or ancient hatred (Kaplan 1993), which predispose people to violence against ethnic others. These perspectives see ethnic violence as a result of the incompatibility and revival of cultural and identity categories. For example, activation of historic contestations can lead conflicts to become "irresolvable and non-influenceable events", and "atavistic and endemic in nature" (Gallagher 1997; Richards 1996).

This approach is commendable in the sense that conflict has a natural border with unhappy social interrelationship and calls attention to underlying structural causes of violence. But it runs into the problem of primordial essentialism i.e. for seeing causes of ethnic violence as unchanging essences of culture (Brubakar and Cooper 2000: 1-47).

A second strand in the literature looks at ethnic conflict as an outcome of discursive formation (Brass 1997; Pandey 1992: 27-55; Zulaika 1988). It argues that ethnic conflict makes sense because it is constitutive of meanings and ideas.

This approach makes conflict to be seen as an infinite chain of constructions in conversation, and dependent on interpretive systems and complex meanings and ideas. It rejects the transcendental cultural truths and "totalising" perspectives of primordialism. It also opposes rational choice theory and argues that human political behaviour and motivational actions are not predetermined or instrumentally rational.

There is also an approach to ethnic conflict as an outcome of elite influences on the masses (Nzemiro 1984; Nnoli 1995; Brass 1997). In this perspective, elites act as ethnic representatives and make authoritative ethnic claims and decisions, which constitute an important factor in



the way ethnic interests are brought into effect. Ethnic elites speak for their groups and struggle among themselves for patronages. Where they feel excluded from power, they mobilise ethnic members into believing that the exclusion has come about by the actions of a whole community against another.

This approach makes conflict an infinite chain of complex interests and goals. It, however, has difficulties by imbuing elites with agency only and characterising the masses as passive subjects only. It also easily merges with rationalist, strategic accounts (Fearon and Laitin 2000: 846).

A fourth stand in the literature sees ethnic conflicts as the ultimate residues of colonialism (Mamdani 2001; Lemarchand 1996; Prunier 1995; and Malkki 1995). This view holds that the political, economic and social changes attendant to colonialism redefined ethnic identities, as people began to develop perceptions of political superior/inferior complexes. Colonialism re-ordered political authority and left behind hierarchical forms of identity.

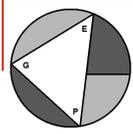
In the interplay of identity politicisations, the key to explaining violence, then, lies in the point at which people were racially redefined into biologically and culturally inferior and superior groups. This approach is a novel cosmological and historicist account. But it can only explain conflicts in postcolonial societies.

These approaches have helped in explaining ethnic conflicts. However, the self-perpetuating nature and processes of modern conflict continue to offer challenges in understanding the phenomenon. Thus, the ways in which events of conflicts are narrated and displayed in remarkable discourse structures, which rely on political-cultural meanings, need to be investigated if we are to better understand the logics of violence. First, let me examine how discourses matter in order to gain fresh insights into phenomena, dynamics and problems of political violence.

Stories of Conflicts and the Constitutive Effects of Discursive Practices

The effects of cultural differences, elite politics and colonialism from where social beliefs, meanings of identity and ethnic interests leading to violence arise, are constituted because of the ideas that make them up (Wendt 1999: 114; Adler 1997: 319-363). The notion that ideas play a strong role in violence means that the discursive effects are generated by the constitution and construction of subjects/objects and agent/structure, and power relations (Weldes and Saco 1996: 371).

Precisely because thoughts and beliefs are socially constituted, discourse is indispensable to the ways social meanings and beliefs are legitimated or delegitimised. The social construction of stories means that they are constitutive discursive practices that form at once a network of actions, descriptions, interpretations and imaginations, which encode and



constitute subjects and objects, and (re)construct particular ‘truths’ and identity whether communal or individual.

Discourses, as Michael Foucault (1972) argues, are socially constituted acts that circulate in ordinary contexts. Stories constitute an “integrated framework that comprehends narrated event and narrative event within a unified frame of reference” (Bauman 1986: 6) but in their everyday form conceal people’s capacities for action while serving to index social experience. Everyday stories are social acts of giving matter-of-fact voices to events. They are as Jameson (1981) describes something of a “political unconscious” process. They inform group folkways and subconscious deeds, which constitute discourses that do not just narrate events in unproblematic ways but also actively reproduce or undermine power and identity relations (Wetherell and Potter 1992).

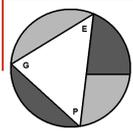
Stories are not merely an important component of social life but also are constructed to specify political direction, organise social vision and socialize group members (McIntyre 1982: 190-209; Ricoeur 1984, 1988; Taylor 1989). As Achebe (1990), Okpewho (1985: 7) and Obiechina (1993) argue, stories are bound to a shared living experience “continuously sustained by social and moral props” (Hoskins 2002: 16; Edgerton and Rollins 2001: 8). Narrative crafts collective imaginaries by producing living memories whose primal purposes are to convey the irrefutable condensed experience from generation to generation (Solzhenitsym 1973).

As such, stories provide an informative picture of living social realities of recurrent violence—which is quite noticeable since the 1990s Balkan and Rwandan violence. In Nigeria, violence has demonstrated the constitutive effects of resurgent historical stories. Effects of ‘living’ stories of the past have encouraged Nigerian groups to look back to days of a perceptible strong ethnic group. A perceptible past generates not only thoughts about ethnic others, but also of beliefs of ethnic superiority, inferiority and greatness, and memories of hatred, brutalities and dehumanisation through which historical stories have their constitutive effects on violence.

A Perceptible Past: History of a War

The history of Nigerian-Biafran War, 2nd July 1967—15th January 1970, though short, has sufficiently been told. Its memory still lingers in the minds of many of the groups involved. This is why it is important to briefly rehash the immediate and remote causes of the war. The war was between the then Eastern Region of Nigeria dominated by the Igbo group and the rest of the country.

The Eastern Region claimed that the war was fought to protect its members being killed in very large numbers in northern Nigeria. It regarded the killings as genocide and thus declared itself an independent state in order to protect its own people. The Federal Military Government of Nigeria, on the other side, claimed the war was fought to reunify the country. It regarded the independent state declaration of the Eastern Region as an act of secession. These are competing narratives in which each side is worried that claims of the other side



serve will deny their own claims. At the same time, each side also re-appropriates key narrative elements of the other side to justify its own claims.

The emotional intensity surrounding the war can only be understood in terms of the 15th January 1966 coup. Symbolising the wider conflict between the Hausa-Fulani and the Igbo groups, the coup d'état recreated the long history of animosity between these groups. The coup provided experiences in which ethnic fears of destruction by the other side converge.

Acutely felt existential threats were regularly invoked. Led by Major Nzeogwu, the coup aimed at establishing a strong, unified and prosperous nation, free from corruption and internal strife. Instead, the coup increased political distrusts and polarisation, and changed the political balance in the country. For instance, the coup planners were composed mostly of officers from the Eastern Region.

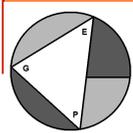
The victims of the coup were mainly political and military leaders from the Northern Region. This was perceived in the north as highly threatening and raised their fears. In particular, the style and result of the coup were interpreted in the north as a deliberate plan to eliminate its political leaders and subjugate the region to outside control. The situation calmed down a bit when Gen. Aguiyi-Ironsi—an Easterner—defeated the coup and took over governance of the country.

However, Ironsi failed to douse the inflamed ethnic situation through his inability to quickly court-martial the coup plotters. He exhibited political naivety by enacting Decree 34 which created a unitary government. The Decree was resented in the north because it was perceived as making the northern region subservient to the southern regions. In other words, the north was afraid of its future.

The North's fear of assimilation into a rapidly progressing and educated South underlies much of its regional politics to this day. There was already an acute social uncertainty, which the coup only helped to aggravate. As such, there was a high passion and incentive for revenge in the region. This culminated in the May 1966 riots throughout the North that witnessed the massive killing of Easterners. This was followed by a counter coup by the Northern military officers on 29 July 1966, which brought in Col. Gowon as Head of State. Gen. Ironsi and many officers of Eastern origin were killed.

The counter coup was solely planned to take revenge on the East and many Easterners were killed. The scale of killing on 29 September 1966 alone horrified Easterners. During such ethnic tensions and bouts of violence, acceptance of narratives increases rapidly with fears of attacks on one's identity and very survival by the other. This includes fear of physical security and fear of extermination. Easterners felt they had become victims of genocide. This fear culminated in the declaration of the independent Republic of Biafra on 30 May 1967 by the administrator of the region, Col. Ojukwu.

In trying to understand the political dynamics at work in the intensely felt immediate causes of the war, it is obvious that the political contradictions of the country are significant remote



causes. The country's composition of about 250 ethnic groups (Otitte 1990) is powerful because it speaks to intensely felt concerns in the present. The diverse ethnic composition makes the country not only highly vulnerable to political contestations but also bolsters the narratives that emphasise the ethnic groups' political struggles.

There are feelings of high insecurity and vulnerability among the groups, which force them into intense economic and political competitions. The three largest groups—Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo—followed different development paths within which they have maintained different beliefs that attribute hostile intentions to each other.

For instance, the North believes the South's domination of the social, educational and economic spheres are intended to 're-colonise' them, while the South believes that the North wants exclusive and perpetual control of the central government. These beliefs set off spirals of ethnic fears and distrusts. In this situation, ethnicity and regionalism continued to weaken the centre as the competing social and religious identities of the groups remained strong.

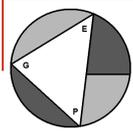
One of the pre-independence incidents that underlined ethnic polarisation, was the 1956 target year for independence. The Northern region strenuously rejected this date and its leaders were seriously booed in Lagos, which culminated in the Kano riot. The North wanted to secede because of the humiliation. Similarly, the western region threatened to secede if Lagos was not included as part of the region in the new Constitution. These contrasting demands marked the first time the country faced threats of secession.

Political events after independence, such as the 1962 census and the 1964 general election (both of which were dogged by allegations of malpractices), further destabilised the country. The Northern region accused the Eastern region of seriously inflating its figures. A second census was conducted in 1963 and the East received figures it refused to accept.

Similarly, the 1964 election was characterised by violence and irregularities. The President (Dr Azikiwe) refused to appoint a Prime Minister and rescinded his decision after four days of political tensions amidst fears of a military coup. Again, in 1965 the Western-region election engulfed the nation in another political crisis. The Northern People's Congress (NPC), which formed the national government, was accused by the region's hitherto dominant party Action Group (AG) of massively rigging the election in favour of its partner in the region—the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP).

This election was so characterised by arson, violence and indiscriminate killings and other kinds of violence, that there was complete breakdown of law and order. The region descended into anarchy and people lived in constant fear for their lives.

This was the state Nigeria was in when the January 1966 coup occurred. What are crucial in the narratives of the civil war, are the subjective interpretations and general understandings offered to the groups. Thus, arising from the war are narrative dynamics that I now analyse in order to understand contexts of violence in the country.



Stories and the Reproduction of Violence

Images of the ethnic 'Other': Fantasies, fabrications and appellations

One striking narrative feature of the 1967—1970 civil war was the way ethnic identities were disfigured and invested with emotional significance. Identities were reconstructed through images of the war and became characterised by perceived threats to ethnic self-esteem. Important images of the war, which did evoke rich adversarial constructions of identity threats, include '*inyamiri*', '*awusa*', '*kobokobo*', '*berebe*', '*sabo*', or '*kulekule*'.

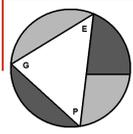
Since the end of the war, these labels have become widely shared, borrowed, repeated and reinforced, and constitute ethnic ingredients of interpretative frames. The labels illustrate emotional and political power and provide evidence of ethnic creations of reality. As creative sources of identity images, the labels are powerful influences on people's impressions and attitudes. More so, these express and wield power as these are spread further through popular discourse that establishes these as part of everyday ethnic knowledge.

Inyamiri refers to the Igbo experiences of severe hunger and thirst during the war. In Igbo local language (*nye m mmiri*—"give me some water"), they begged for water while they fled from violence. Their suffering provided the basis for the Hausa-Fulani name for the Igbo *inyamiri*, which is a corrupt, simplified expression of *nye m mmiri*. Thus, the term refers to the manner Igbos suffered during the war and symbolises specific experiences of helplessness and victimisation. For the Igbo, it often provides grist for the mill of conspiratorial theories of Igbo starvation, destitution and death. For the Hausa-Fulani, it reduces the Igbo as a defeated group, typically leaving the impression that the Igbo are servants and the Hausa-Fulani are masters who respectively should beg for and dispense the necessary things of life.

The altercation in 2008 between Nigeria's former Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Ojo Maduekwe, an Igbo and former Ambassador to the United States, and Retired Brig-Gen. Oluwole Rotimi, a Yoruba, demonstrates this impression. On the altercation Rotimi wrote: "I have dealt with people like you in the past. I was the Adjutant General of the Nigerian army that thoroughly defeated your ragtag Biafran army" (*This Day* 2009). This altercation posits a continuous historical antagonism. It also indicates how ethnic perceptions of the war are applied both minimally and more expansively.

It is true that in times of conflict many fantasies and fabrications emerge; but the prevailing Nigerian ethnic stories project the war as a struggle against communal adversaries. This demonstrates the war stories as being part of Nigerian ethnic identity politics, which is not only the collective self-definition of ethnic-others as victims (or perpetrators) but also the collective self-presentation of ethnic-self as victors.

Nigerian groups are all faced with the challenge of defining the out-groups as well as redefining the in-group within the context of constructed labels. One effect of this is that ethnic identity becomes defined in advance and prone to violence. During the war, the Igbo



distinguished themselves from the Hausa-Fulani in terms of 'we are educated and civilised while they are not'.

The war highlighted self-serving selective ethnic perceptions. This was very much evident in the Igbo reconstruction of Hausa-Fulani into *awusa*, which in colloquial Igbo means stupidity. The Igbo expectation during the war was that the Hausa-Fulani would be subdued because they are a stupid, docile and intellectually inferior people. This speculation was supported by the Igbo perception and development of a greater sense of Hausa-Fulani identity through the Hausa-Fulani occupation as herdsmen. This is implicated in the Igbo term for the Hausa-Fulani—*awusa*.

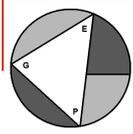
Hausa-Fulani are great herdsmen and the Igbo find an identity relationship between the Hausa-Fulani and the animals they rear. This is exemplified in the meaning of Igbo descriptions like *onye awusa* (Hausa person), which has a cognitive meaning with foolishness, ignorance and intellectually inferiority.

The fact is that in escalated conflicts, groups incorporate the emotional significance of their humiliation and anger both as a rallying point and as a way to evoke deep threats to their identity existence and very survival. Hence, it is plausible to argue that at one point in the war, the Hausa-Fulani activities contained culturally rooted aspirations to challenge their descriptions as a stupid, backward people. This can help to explain the senseless massacre of the Igbos in northern Nigeria by the Hausa-Fulani group that partly contributed to the war.

Another ethnic term during the war was *kobokobo* that the Yoruba called the Igbo. Yorubas who narrated and still do narrate the war by using the term to seek to confine the Igbo within their ethnic homeland. The term *Kobokobo* describes the Igbo as innately domineering, aggressive, rude and overbearing. Utilised within the war stories, the term gives out the Yoruba perception of using the war to 'roll back' the resurging Igbo development quest. It symbolises the Yoruba idea of the Igbo as belonging to a deeply opposed cultural value system.

In the self/other perceptions of Yoruba, *Kobokobo* projects an Igbo world of incompatible culture defined by strange and unfamiliar practices. The violence-prone character of the term explains many of the tensions between the two groups. The Igbo constitute a sizeable ethnic minority in most urban and rural areas outside their ethnic homeland and this is seen as a proof of hostile intent. As a result of their high mobility, the Yoruba regard the Igbo as 'interlopers', 'irritating foreigners,' as 'impostors,' and as 'pretenders.' *Kobokobo* is, therefore, a term the Yoruba use to define the Igbo in relation to what Yoruba presumably are not.

The Igbo widely blame the Yoruba for their defeat in the war. This perception is compelling in the stories about an agreement between Awolowo and Ojukwu. This is reflected in the Igbo label for the Yoruba *sabo* (saboteur), which is deployed as a concept of deceit and



distrust. The term was a reference to Awolowo's renegeing on his promise to secede along with Biafra and declare the Yoruba Oduduwa Republic.

At the time the war started, Awolowo was in prison in the Calabar province of the Biafran Republic. It was said that an agreement was made between him and Ojukwu to declare Yoruba secession after his release. To underscore this agreement, Awolowo's speech in 1967 that "if the East is allowed to secede either by an act of commission or omission, then the West and Lagos will opt out of the Union", is usually highlighted.

The eventual refusal of Awolowo to secede Yoruba is still remembered as a political and ethnic sabotage against the Igbo. Ironically, this perception is also adopted by the Hausa-Fulani who call the Yoruba *berebe*. The term connotes untrustworthiness. The Hausa-Fulani believe that Awolowo failed to declare a Yoruba republic when he was made the Nigerian Federal Commissioner for Finance during the war. While the Hausa-Fulani considered Awolowo's appointment as an epic victory against the Igbo, it however fostered a widespread Hausa-Fulani attitude of distrust for the Yoruba.

Though the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba fought on the same side, it is evident that the narratives of each group characterise differently what is clearly the same conflict. For this reason, each group constructs key terms and selects the metaphors that have a central meaning for its support base. While they fought together, they harboured mutual suspicions.

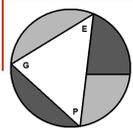
As the Hausa-Fulani nowadays still believe the Yorubas are untrustworthy, the Yorubas on the other hand often float references to the Hausa-Fulani as being inherently backward. The Yoruba label for the Hausa-Fulani is *kulekule* which is associated with inarticulate and fanatic people.

The assumption behind the label is that the Hausa-Fulani lack the prerequisite intelligence to lead Nigeria. The group must therefore be enlightened, first through education and second by emulating the Yoruba. Although the term refers to the Hausa-Fulani religious practice of *purdah* it evokes the image of Hausa-Fulani as a repressive group. *Kulekule* refers to veiled women but for the Yoruba it literally means "locking up". Thus the label is applied to create the image of the Hausa-Fulani as a people unwilling to modernise. The implied assumption is that the Hausa-Fulani are uncivilised and putatively inferior.

Constructions of difference: Superior/inferior complexes and opposed values

The war continues to be constructed within an Igbo versus Hausa-Fulani framework. The discursive tactic, however, is the conflation of personalities and individual actions with the rest of the group. The two main protagonists, Gowon and Ojukwu, have been defined in purely ethnic terms and became at one with 'these people' to the remainder of their groups.

The connection illustrates how 'ethnic' identities and stereotypes get constructed in Nigeria. The connection also shows how the traditional practice of story-telling mold individuals into



a “homogenised, collectivised “they” ” (Pratt 1985: 121), within which the civil war stories continue the tradition of ethnic othering. Ojukwu was the military administrator of the Eastern region. For the Hausa-Fulani, he epitomises Igbo rebellion and his actions shape the identity of the Igbo. Gowon is a Northerner and a wartime military head of the State. For the Igbo, he stands for the identity of the Northern region and the Hausa-Fulani that is seen as carrying the war banner for all the other Nigerian groups.

Typical of every southern group, the general impression of many Igbo is that the Hausa-Fulani are illiterates. On this belief, it was picked up that Gowon was not intelligent enough to argue with Ojukwu, which by extension means that the North was no match to the East. The implicit message was that Gowon who was trained at Sandhurst was no match for Eton College educated and Oxford trained Ojukwu. This yielded many tales such as the one that tells how Ojukwu used his brilliance against Gowon by asking questions Gowon was not able to answer, which forced Gowon to accept the Aburi (Ghana) accord on Ojukwu’s terms.

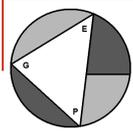
The Aburi meeting refers to the accord reached to grant Biafra a confederal status in Nigeria, which was signified and celebrated as a triumph of Igbo superiority over Hausa-Fulani inferiority. The message was that Gowon did not understand the meaning and implications of confederacy, and it was only after it was explained to him in local Hausa language that he understood and then later rejected the accord.

This is another way of saying that ethnic self-perception plays a strong role in the way the war has been and is being perceived and constructed. Quite regularly, the civil war is constructed as either a “war for national unity” or “war of survival.” Each has different constitutive effects and supports a different political “moral” for each of the groups and actors.

The “war of unity” highlights the instability in the country and the need for the Federal Government to protect the national interest and the country’s sovereignty. As a war to preserve the territorial integrity of the country, a popular federal slogan of the war was “To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done.” At the same time, the name ‘Gowon’ became an anagram of “Go On With One Nigeria.” With the control over the organs of governance, the Hausa-Fulani reconstructed the personality of Ojukwu as a justification to mount violence against the Igbo.

Ojukwu was portrayed an illegitimate rebel through which the Igbo were perceived as “the ethnic group that plunged the federation into the recent civil war” (Ogunlade 1976: 63). Ojukwu was blamed for refusing to be placated during the Aburi reconciliation meetings. This was seen as typical Igbo obstinacy. Through these constructions, “Ibo”, an anglicised colonial form of Igbo, became in general terms an anagram of “I Before Others”—the supreme form of rebellion, individualism, clannishness and ethnicity.

In contrast, the “war of survival” highlights the self-sustaining Igbo ethnic reaction against annihilation. For the Igbo, the Hausa-Fulani have been the main aggressors in the war. The Igbo continue to define all the other ethnic groups as guilty of committing aggression, or



sullied by their association and complicity with the Hausa-Fulani aggressors. It is for this reason that Awolowo, a Yoruba and wartime Commissioner for Finance, implicates all the Yorubas as supporters of the Hausa-Fulani. Because the Igbo faced great hostilities, they introduced the notion that all parts of the country were their enemies.

The teaching of pupils at Oriemaenyi Community School, Umuahia, Abia, from March 1967 onwards to acknowledge and identify forces working against their ethnic group (Uchendu 2007: 396) present early instances of constructions of the war as a tale of ethnic survival.

Like in all ethnic constructions, narratives of the war have varied in accordance with cultural and political circumstances of the group telling the story. The narratives lead them to cast each other in adversarial roles. This has also led them to habits of selective perception in which only negative interactions are remembered.

Articulations of genocide: Ethnic brutalities and dehumanisation

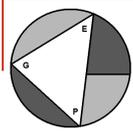
To this day, the death of ethnic members remains the overarching framework within which many stories of the war are reconstructed. A widely shared impression among Hausa-Fulani and Igbo groups is that they are struggling to recover from the killings of their kith and kin during the war. The two groups recall and narrate deaths of their members so as to construct and confirm the image of a people facing subjugation or genocide.

For the Hausa-Fulani, the killing of a number of their political leaders, including the Premier of the Northern region and the Prime Minister of the country in the 1966 coup, came to represent a tremendous sign of Igbo intentions to 're-colonise' the North. While the coup directly and indirectly led to the ensuing war, the Northern region looks at it from the perspective of an array of ethnic meanings.

The pattern of ethnic killings read into the event was a major narrative motif for the Northern region's perception of their emergence as a periphery vis-à-vis an increasingly dominant Eastern region. Narrated particularly as an Igbo conspiracy to subordinate the Hausa-Fulani controlled Northern region, the Igbo became targets of indiscriminate killings in the region.

The massacre of Igbo in the Northern region left them insecure. On the basis of this, it was plausible for them to accentuate the killings as an act of genocide against them. As rail was the major means of transport during the war, trains were stopped at stations in the North, and fleeing Igbo dragged out and killed.

The Igbo also recall the 7th October 1967 mass murder at Asaba, which reinforces the general story of Igbo slaughter in other Nigerian places even after the war. To a considerable extent, the Asaba massacre, also known as "the killing fields of Ogbeosowa", has come to represent the threats of genocide the Igbo faced and may still potentially face according to this narrative.



The story is that the Hausa-Fulani dominated federal troops rounded up the people at Isheagu and Okpanam villages. The troops claimed that they were “liberating Asaba” from the Biafran occupation. The large crowd were kept until evening and then asked to go back to their homes but as they moved, the troops opened fire and killed all of them, including children (Okocha 1994).

The dominant message of these stories draws parallels with the modern contexts and concepts of premeditated murder (and extrajudicial killing)—and to recognise and condemn the ethnic brutalities and dehumanisations that have escaped justice. These stories depict deep ethnic sufferings, and tend to build a climate of moral outrage as they circulate. Both groups recoil from the killings by the other (but downplay or deny any killing of the other by themselves) and portray each other through the lens of oppression, victimisation and injustice.

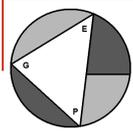
Each group still narrates its loss of ethnic members with attitudes of revenge that is coupled with a residual sense of political and cultural antagonisms. Stories of each group are conjoined with messages of anger, which cause them to retreat into defensiveness of their own ethnic actions and inactions. The view of each group ultimately boils down to ignoring the view of the other group and the voices each group hear of the other are exclusively those who despise and reject them.

Cultural triumphalism: Ideas of ethnic greatness and collective self-valorisation

In times of violence, ethnic stories are often coloured by visions of successes. Ethnic technological achievements are appealing and military, economic and political achievements create a sense of contentment and superiority. The stories each group tell are deeply intertwined with a politics of cultural triumphalism. The Igbo describe themselves as ‘Jews’, which has been used to articulate them as bearers of “highest scientific and entrepreneurial wisdom.”

For instance, ‘Biafra’ in all Igbo imaginations is a source of glorious preservation and sustenance through statehood. Biafra is visualised as a beacon of development and true African independence. Technological improvisations such as the use of coconut milk as brake-fluids, the local manufacturing of guns and bombs—and *Ogbunigwe* (killer in groups), production of engine oil from a mixture of grease and diesel, and the building of airport towers, radio and television transmitters, and motor engines from scraps, which helped Biafra to sustain the war, and so on—turned Biafra into a land of technological and economic opportunities.

It does not require much argument to show the necessity for technological improvisations during a war of secession accompanied with economic scarcity. Igbo technological success during the war depicts Biafra as a great power that must be admired as an example to emulate. In effect, the memory of Biafra becomes indestructible in the Igbo mind, which



causes other groups into defensiveness. In other words, while these accomplishments were admired in time of relative peace, they constitute sources of indignation from the standpoint of other groups during times of political crisis.

The Hausa-Fulani believe that the war presented an opportunity to resume their 'continued conquest to the sea', which colonialism interrupted. For them, the conflict was a rare opportunity to bring all Nigerian groups under a more comprehensive political system and morally civilisational force. The Hausa-Fulani pride themselves as possessing the "most developed political mind", which they justify by invoking the successes of the Sokoto caliphate, *jihad* conquests and successive military governments.

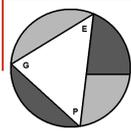
The 19th century *jihad* of northern Nigeria is often played up as an example the civil war should have copied. The period was such an esteemed ethnic past that the war relished the prospect of continuing the Hausa-Fulani conquest. In particular, that period in the more distant past conveys the dominant image among the other groups of the Hausa-Fulani as a group that can overrun the entire country.

For this reason, the challenge of the Nigerian civil war was seen as the missed opportunity to extend the frontiers of Islam across the nation. The failure to use the war to bring all the Nigerian peoples under Islamic rule is, if anything, a minor setback that can be rectified with time. This perception provides a major narrative motif for understanding the significance of Muslim and Christian conflicts in northern Nigeria.

While the Igbo look to commercial exploits and the Biafran wartime ingenuities and the Hausa-Fulani see the caliphate and jihad as glorious pasts, the Yoruba accentuate their ethnic values of the war in their acquisition of Western education. The Yoruba believe that they did not support any of the two main groups in the war—the Hausa-Fulani and Igbo. They claim to have maintained a middle ground throughout the war, which they attribute to their natural wisdom acquired through education. They are the first group to receive Western education and this gave them the commanding heights of Nigeria's bureaucratic services. This is often invoked to construct a group endowed with the "highest administrative intellect."

A great number of the Yoruba remember the war not for the destruction of lives and property but rather for the greater opportunities offered for Yoruba nationalism. The fall of the Igbo group from the pecking order of positions and privileges following their defeat, shaped an enhanced Yoruba selfhood and self-consciousness within a context of acute ethno-political dynamism and assertive cultural self-confidence.

With the impression that the Hausa-Fulani are uneducated, the Yoruba came to envisage themselves as endowed with the single task of shaping post-war Nigeria. As they see it to this day, their education and bureaucratic skills have provided good fortunes for their own ethnic group, offering them prosperity and comfort.



It is interesting to note that these ethnic ideas and (self-)perceptions are endowed with rich meanings and provide a mythic political space to describe, characterise and thereby construct political conflicts in post-war Nigeria. The nature of the ideas is such that they constitute fertile soils for the reception and regeneration of old heroic ethnic tales as well as the generation of new stories.

For the in-group, ethnic valorisations are awakened to mobilise members. But for the out-groups, the valorisations lose much of their appeal as they are turned into myths directed against them that fester conflicts. For instance, there are myths that argue that what underlies the Igbo claims to be 'Jews' is their nature as unscrupulous traders. In this view, the greatest desire of the Igbo is to re-found Biafra in order to take absolute control of all economic and bureaucratic positions in the country.

A myth about the Yoruba is that they will impose Yoruba language as Nigeria's *lingua franca* and to ban Islam in the North, just as the mirroring myth about the Hausa-Fulani plan to impose Islam on the whole country (Diamond 1983 (1988): 43). These myths are circulated to rigidify ethnic perceptions of each other. On the basis of these superficial myths, it becomes possible for even chance political events to be projected as deliberate ethnic acts.

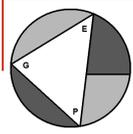
Memories of hatred: Amnesty, abandoned properties and post-war fiscal policies

In conflict, groups often ask why they are hated so much. This question, for the Igbo, is explicable in terms of a skewed amnesty of Gowon's post-war government. Tagged, "no victor, no vanquished in a war of brothers", the amnesty also included a policy known as 3R's—Reintegration, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation.

But in spite of the amnesty rhetoric, there was mass dismissal, forced discharge and/or retirement without benefits of middle and high ranking Igbo officers in the military and police (Madiebo 1980). Some other Igbo officers were re-absorbed with loss of service seniority (i.e. demoted to a lower rank).

There was also a mass purge of Igbo civilian technocrats and bureaucrats from the federal public service in August 1970. In response to these actions, the Igbo reconstituted the amnesty as "no victor, no vanquished but losers" as it became a guided affirmation of vengeance against them (Ihunna 2002: 236-243; Ojukwu 2002: 245-356). In effect, the amnesty was a pretext for the political subjugation and social marginalisation of the Igbo.

While the dominant attitude of the Igbo to the 1970 amnesty conveys the idea that it was increasingly a policy of political relegation, the Hausa-Fulani interprets the policy as a sign of political magnanimity. Indeed, many Hausa-Fulani regard the Igbo as ingrates for refusing to believe that the policy arrested truly violent recriminations that would have followed in the aftermath of the war. On the basis that such recriminations were avoided, many Hausa-Fulani interpret the treatment of the Igbo as a confirmation of the 'winner takes the spoils' thesis. The thesis is often played up to reinforce a spectre of fear of Igbo resurgence of self-



determination against which the Igbo must acquit i.e. refrain, distance and disavow themselves in order to be reintegrated.

In effect, the Igbo is portrayed through the lens of deep distrust, to such an extent that many end up constructing the idea that that the Igbo 'should remain defeated for at least a hundred years.' Many who hold this view frequently express the idea to keep the Igbo at bay from sensitive administrative and national security posts. This has led to misguided domestic policies and unwritten rules that the Presidency of the country, for instance, should be 'off limits' to the Igbo.

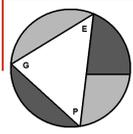
All these ideas indicate that the domination of the amnesty discourse in popular thinking sees the groups as falling back on metaphors of the last major outbreak of violence. This discourse channels respective Igbo feelings of despair and injustice and Hausa-Fulani perceptions of Igbo ingratitude and latent secessionism into acts of militancy and destructive behaviours of one against the other.

Like the story of amnesty, the issue of lands, oil jetties, houses and other properties left behind by the displaced Igbo during the war in several parts of the country, reveals strong psychological and cultural dynamics in the narratives about ethnic conflicts in the country. The properties were declared as "abandoned and then repossessed by federal and state governments and some were sold to indigenes of the states where they are located" (Aka 2005: 41-68). This gave the properties the ethnic character of dispossession and repossession, which has led to historical images of victimisation.

For the dispossessed Igbo, these dispossessions signified political injustices, economic suffering and provided the most basic material for traumatic memories and storytelling. For repossessed groups, the redistributed goods and properties were considered as spoils of war.

Five years after the war, the government of Gen. Mohammed (1975-1976) granted state governments fourteen million *naira* to pay five years of rent arrears to certified owners in an effort to sidestep the political and moral hazards of the issue (Njoku 2004: 79-101). However, this gesture did not resolve the pains that have been inscribed in the mind and feelings of the dispossessed victims because "the continued possession by the government of buildings belonging to those on the other side in that war has ensured that memories of the 30-month war perpetually linger like pains of an open, festering sore" (*Daily Sun* 2009).

In addition to the stories of amnesty and abandoned properties, there is also the story of post-war federal fiscal measures, monetary and nationalisation policies that act to shape past and present conflicts in the country. Narrators of this story are attuned to the pretentious rehabilitation of the Igbo through payments of twenty Nigerian Pounds to every Igbo person. This policy included the banking and monetary regulation, which had two critical components that did stoke ethnic tensions in the country.



One, it froze accounts held by the Igbo in Nigerian banks, and second, it converted twenty Nigerian Pounds as equivalent to whatever amount held in Biafran Pounds. The two components of this measure further increased Igbo poverty and destitution and forced many Igbo-owned businesses to close. While this left the Igbo defensive and insecure, non-Igbo groups felt arrogant and insensitive or rather behaved arrogantly and insensitively.

Elements of unequal political and economic relationships in post-war Nigeria are also evoked and represented by the inherently oppressive Nigerian Enterprise Promotion (Indigenisation) Decree. The decree nationalised foreign-owned companies and sold to Nigerian ones. It was implemented in April 1974, when the Igbo were rendered virtually destitute and so could not compete in the tendering for these companies.

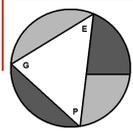
These policies are seen as bureaucratic and administratively enforced violence against the Igbo. But these are policies for which Awolowo and his Yoruba group are blamed for. As I have mentioned earlier, some stories depict the Yoruba responsible as conspirators in the Hausa-Fulani plan for Igbo extermination during and even after the war.

It is narrated that Awolowo provided the Hausa-Fulani led-government with a set of manipulative policies with profound implications for the further victimising and dehumanising of the Igbo. These include stories of his alleged sabotage I mentioned earlier and his post-war monetary and fiscal policies.

One other story is that Awolowo implemented a project of starvation as a weapon of war. It is said that he declared that “hunger is an instrument of war” and advised the government to block relief materials to the desperate Igbo during the war. His conspiracy entered the consciousness of a great many Igbo as irrefutable proof of innate Yoruba hostilities against the Igbo. This has provided the materials for sensationalistic, polarised and highly antagonistic Igbo/Yoruba politics and the structure of relations between them. It was also one of the reasons for the hostilities to Awolowo during his 1979 presidential campaign in Aba, when his aircraft was pelted with stones and refused permission to land.

While the economic and political disempowerment often manifests a sense of learned i.e. internalised sense of powerlessness among the Igbo group, it constituted a pattern of political opportunism for other groups. Memories of amnesty, abandoned properties and fiscal policies unfold as instances of symbolic ethnic confrontation, which reveal a mutually antagonistic repository of meanings. The stories do not just form images, but images of such profound significance that they represent the dominant narrative frames for conflict.

The critical nature of ethnic politics was unprecedented during the civil war, as stories continue to give active or passive ethnic supports (Obafemi 1992). Nigeria continues to grapple with the effects of the war as the events have fossilised into everyday stories, which generate vernacular ethnic knowledge about the other and sustain stereotypical beliefs about the latter.



Recent Events in the Frames of the Nigerian War

Recent events in the country bring stories that exhibit stereotypical frames of the civil war. The violence that followed the 2011 presidential elections has been trumpeted as a strangely ominous reminder of the last war. There can be seen many parallels between the events that led to the 1967-1970 war and the 2011 electoral violence that people can draw to shape various parameters of the present ethnic tensions.

Several incidents like the 1964 general electoral violence and allegations of rigging that led to the civil war have been likened to comparable incidents during the 2011 election. The killing of members of other ethnic groups in the 2011 elections has been presented as capable of triggering retaliatory responses that can escalate into a civil war, just as the 1964 killings contributed to the civil war in 1967.

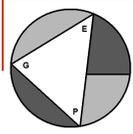
Due to the parallel interpretations of these events, President Goodluck Jonathan in his response to the violence harked back to the bloody events that set off the civil war: "if anything at all, these acts of mayhem are sad reminders of the events which plunged our country into 30 months of an unfortunate civil war" (*The Guardian*, 21 April 2011). The comparable message potential inherent in these parallels, implicates that the civil war stories are a central aspect of the social construction and categorisation of current conflicts in the country.

As another illustration, people have routinely narrated the course of communal violence raging in the politically volatile Muslim northern region through the civil war lens. The legacies of the war, which cultivated and exploited the stabbings and hackings of ethnic members; the burning of churches, mosques and homes; and even the imagery of poorly clad mothers crying beside the dead bodies of their children killed while in compulsory national youth service in the North, all indicate that the present violence and the civil war has much in common.

For example, in the ethno-religious violence of 2000 to 2001 induced by introduction of *Shari'a* (Islamic law) and the perennial feuds in Jos, people elect to portray the sheer number of the dead and the displacement of tens of thousands of people in striking scenes reminiscent of the events that began in May 1966. As it was then, ethnic members fled back to their ethnic homelands. Thus, people analyse current violence by resorting to simplistic and primitive imageries of the war.

The images of the civil war reproduced or compared to those in current conflicts derive from *a priori* assumptions than form stereotypical connections with events on the ground. More often, the diversity of interpretations of violence and political events in the present are contrasting interpretations abstracted from civil war discourses.

For instance, the civil war stories hugely resurged during the political struggles against the repressive military regimes of General Babangida following the annulment of the June 12



1993 Presidential elections and the more brutal government of General Abacha that succeeded it.

One interesting perspective of the annulment is its parallel ethnic meaning regarding the 1966 killings of Northern political leaders. Northern leaders were killed on orders of the coup plotters dominated by Igbo officers, and the election was won by a Yoruba and cancelled by the Hausa-Fulani oligarchy through its dominant control of the army. It is quite easy to read kindred ethnic meanings into the two events.

The weight of the two events cannot be the same, since one involved a number of deaths, though, the winner of the election, Chief Abiola died in prison. However, the annulment of the 1993 election and the imprisonment, harassment and forceful exile of Yoruba political leaders was adjudged in ethnic terms as resembling the killings of Northern political leaders in 1966.

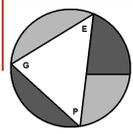
Interpretations of Hausa-Fulani subjugation were given for the killings of Northern leaders, and the same perspective of Yoruba ethno-regional marginalisation was given to the 1993 annulment. The phraseology in the stories of the two events has a kindred and simplifying interpretation of complex ethnic agendas, while the meanings hark back to avowed ethno-regional intents by other groups to rule the country at the expense of one's own group.

One other interesting reference of those interpreting the annulment to the civil war events, was that the Yoruba's angry response to the annulment was extrapolated to the Western regional crisis of 1964 in the Western region. Particular narrative elements were reconstructed and elevated to the status of catch-phrases for the Yoruba response. For instance, "wild, wild west", that oft-repeated characterisation of the Yoruba, was deployed to serve as a reminder of the state of anomie in the Western region during 1964.

There are other factors like the exploration of mineral resources, which also reinforce the resurgence of popular civil war stories in Nigeria's current ethnic conflicts. The perception of the war by people living in the Niger Delta has been based on the imagined, presumed causes and dynamics of oil politics. In the 1990s, when ethnic rivalries were resurging, many groups and individuals recalled how the civil war was fought as a struggle for oil rents under the mask of ideology (Tell 1994).

At the time, Niger Delta communities re-articulated the war as a fight among the three major ethnic groups for control of the oil rather than a fight for territorial sovereignty or ethnic survival (Giwa 1985: 10). This re-articulation of the war in the context of present ethnic competition has acquired particular importance in the Niger Delta, as the local communities mobilise against "re-colonisation" by the three largest groups on one front and by oil companies and the Nigerian government on the other.

This has provided Niger Delta communities constructions of foundational myths and dramatic images of "communities at risk." The Ijaw community, for instance, has compared the lack of concerns from the centre to the hazardous effects of oil exploration to reconstruct



existing identity cleavages so as to elevate the warrior aspect of Ijaw culture. The self-designation of Mujahid Dokubo, a leader of one of the many Ijaw militia groups, as “Amakri” incarnate—an Ijaw historical figure and liberator—is one example.

Resurgent civil war stories are partly connected to the radical formation of ethno-political cultural organisations and militias in the late 1990s. Each ethnic group has formed a cultural organisation: Igbo—*Ohaneze*; Yoruba—*Afenifere*; Hausa-Fulani—*Arewa* Consultative Forum (ACF); and Niger Delta—South-South People’s Assembly (SSPA). Formations of these organisations rely on residual frames of reference originating from the civil war, and are actively reformulating discursive practices to describe new modes of ethnic politics.

For instance, the *Ohaneze* celebrates an annual Remembrance Day on the 29th of September. The day is an essential cultural and political moment to reflect on the Igbo ethnic heroes of the war. It should also be pointed that out these ethnic organisations also receive overt or covert ethnic-militia supports—thus Yoruba’s *Afenifere* has Oodua People’s Congress (OPC); the *Ohaneze* has the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB); the Hausa-Fulani’s ACF has the *Arewa* People’s Congress (APC); and the Niger Delta’s SSPA has amongst others the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND).

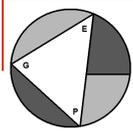
The militias manifest the militarisation of ethnic politics and culture. With the militias, each group can retreat to aggressive models of ethnic competition and violent release of pent-up social tensions. The politicisation of ethnicity through these ethnic organisations and militias is marked by the use of ethnic stories, images, aggressive chants and armed displays.

Conclusion: Changing Language of Ethnic Politics

This study has examined how Nigerian groups use their stories to compete for dominance or lament their supposed or actual victimisation. Dominant stories emerge from the competing ethnic representations, which are characterised by the discursive redefinition of past conflicts.

The stories do not only generate particular ‘truths’ and interests, but also continue to inform the kinds of social knowledge circulating within each of the groups. In the stories, social information stereotyping is pushed to the point where they become so lodged in political perceptions that they psychologically provide the impetus for hostilities.

However, I do not argue that stories automatically, unavoidably lead to ethnic conflicts but that they generate an environment that radically reconstruct and reconstitute the frameworks of violence—and potentially justify a future recourse to violence. It is through the circulatory social meanings and symbolisms that the stories generate affective ethnic politics and a normative environment for mobilising ethnic members in which it has become possible for hatreds to fester and intergenerational conflicts to be instituted.



Each of the groups generated a discursive reconstitution of the conflicts they are or have been involved in. The discourses reconstructed structures of polarised ethnic politics, identities and interests in the country. They also created legitimised and authoritative political claims that should be undermined through moderating counter-narratives if we are to disrupt the potency of an antagonistic and (self-)destructive discourse in reproducing violence.

The question, then, is whether the stories of violence can be changed. There have been some discursive tactics aimed at changing the language of violence. For instance, Malkki (1989) and Lemarchand (1994) have discussed the complex layers of myths and histories that enable ethnic intellectuals to construct worldviews that would countenance, indeed justify mass killings. Ethnic stories as they are circulated in the country are especially dangerous for their regular and widespread appearance as a normal practice.

In their deployment in social contexts, people begin to live in fear again and the country becomes a repository of wanton violence. The stories have broader implications. As Fair (1994: 38) argues, through the process of signification in stories, utterances, events, places, actions and inactions take on particular meanings and so creates spaces and opportunities for renewed confrontation and violence.

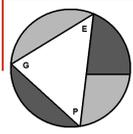
The patterns of political portrayal of conflicts in stories create spaces of ethnic fear about the distant other. This propagates a constellation of knowledge and ethno-political consciousness that damages efforts to promote multi-ethnic understanding. It is true that people are active in constructing meanings in the face of ethnic inundation, but political events including simple explanations of threats are largely a function of the language used to described them (Edelman 1971: 65).

By narrating current violence and making it subscribe to a ready-made discourses of the civil war, people construct a social reality in a manner that plays on ethno-political and religious differences and misunderstandings. What this calls for is the disruption of the discourse of violence and zero-sum politics conveyed through ethnic terms and images.

This alternative discourse is an act of multiplying the stories, so that they do not have any qualified attachment to just a single group or solely construct counter myths that undermine hegemonic ethnic tendencies and dominant political effects—though that must be done as well.

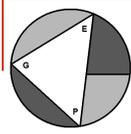
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The author retains the right to submit a renewed, modified and improved version of the article —also in light of the published and unpublished comments of the critical response—to this or another journal in the foreseeable future.

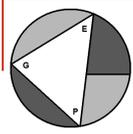


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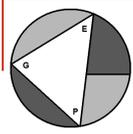
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