

IMAGINING NATIONHOOD, FRAMING POSTCOLONIALITY: NARRATIVISING NIGERIA THROUGH THE KINESIS OF HI(HER)STORY

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Abstract

Since political independence in 1960, what has consistently framed and defined Nigeria's postcolonial existence is her capacity to distil narratives that negotiate her largely uncertain and unassured destiny as a nation-state in a state of becoming. This condition of national narrativity with its constitutive representational sites participates in an agonistic history whose trajectory is woven around the pathology of the Nigerian state. Even though this narrative event possesses the capacity to rankle the festering wounds for national healing, it is not always imagined and interrogated as a galvanizing force for national re-imagining and re-invention. Rather, the narrative foreground is almost always invested with strands mediated by killer instincts and the deterministic will to a ruinous destiny and destination. This makes Nigeria a veritable narrative engagement with the trappings of a tragic plot as she routinely participates in a violent history and a history of violence. This tragic rite began with the colonial encounter and its empire-building machinations, reaching an anticlimax in the brutal civil imbroglio of 1967-70. The war itself was a culmination of socio-political and cultural narratives consistent with imagined, heterogeneous communities and groups within a fractious entity. Rooted deeply in such conflictual contextual configurations, the contours of national engineering have been conditioned by centrifugal tendencies which have constantly threatened the substratum and very soul of the fragile nation-state. This paper negotiates the contexts and contests that have structured Nigeria's efforts at (re)inventing coherent nationhood beginning with the maiden 1966 putsch, the 1967-70 debacle between Biafra and the Federal forces through the years of military interregnum which terminated in 1999. The governing argument of the paper is that the contentious issues at the heart of Nigeria's construction of national identity have always been over-determined by narratives of political desire, longing and belonging, weaving national and sub-national allegories that idealise Selfness and negate Otherness. The continued currency of the narratives allegorizing nationhood and the inherent contradictions that are synonymous with Nigeria have registered their presence through legitimizing strategies of violent "killer" narrativisations. The paper concludes that politics and power constitute the driving forces behind these narratives and the elitist manipulation of them through ideological state apparatuses

has continued to violate the sanctity of the Nigerian nation-state and to create visible crevices within a supposed monolith.

The idea that nations are invented has become more widely recognised... literary myth too has been complicit in the creation of nations-above all, through the genre that accompanied the rise of the European vernaculars, their institution as language of state after 1820 and the separation of literature into various 'national' literatures by the German Romantics at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role. And the rise of European nationalism coincides especially with one form of literature - the novel... It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one', yet many of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles. Socially, the novel joined the newspaper as the major vehicle of the national print media, helping to standardise language, encourage literacy, and remove mutual incomprehensibility. But it did much more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation. (Brennan 49)

Introduction

Nigeria is a veritable product of the British empire-building project in Africa and other peripheral spaces of the world. This imperial process started with the penetration of what has been variously called the "Heart of Darkness", the "white man's grave" and the "white man's burden" by the European explorers and writers building up to the pacification of the variegated indigenous populations.¹ Through fraudulent treaties for "protection" and other obnoxious colonial policies and practices, the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates was ratified in 1914, effectively creating Nigeria, a nation of nations and the institutionalization of the Indirect Rule policy. Nigeria's very name bears eloquent and compelling witness to this imperial history. It is a name which etymologically signifies "Niger Area". It is a derivative from the River Niger, one of the biggest rivers that traverse its vast landscape. The name was given by Flora Shaw, the mistress, and later, wife of Lord Lugard, the first Governor-General.² This effectively lends credibility to the European cultural politics of assigning names to specific spaces as a culmination of the imperial arrogance of imposing epistemological authority and control over

marginal spaces and inscribing Empire onto their physical landscape and cultural fabrics.

This naming rite proceeded simultaneously with the trope of “discovery” which in the European imaginary entailed the occupation of physical space and the inscription of the self on native others. As a powerful expression of western cultural agency and subjectivity, the discovery trope also represented the deleterious dimensions of European cultural assertion and its entrenched, overarching interests in the cultures of others. Quite often, demonization and vulgarization was the definition fixed on these cultures. Lugard’s “dual mandate” would soon graduate into what Niall Ferguson (2004) refers to as the “new imperialism”, a reality that gave concrete substance to the colonial project. As Jyotsna Singh observes,

...this discovery motif has frequently emerged in the language of colonisation enabling European travellers-writers to represent the newly “discovered” lands as an empty space, a *tabula rasa* on which they could inscribe their linguistic, cultural and later, territorial claims... Rhetorically, however, the trope of discovery took on shifting, multiple meanings... being constantly refurbished and mobilised in the service of other colonising, rescuing, and idealising or demonising their... subjects as “others”. (1-2)

Nigeria as a narrative fashioned by the imperial imagination and colonial design can as such be located within these historical particularities and contextual specificities of British colonial engineering. It is, therefore, received epistemology that the very fabrication of Nigeria was in the imperial interest. Britain, like other European nations with expansionist aspirations, was prospecting for raw materials, markets and profitable investments. In the main, oil, first palm oil and later crude, featured prominently as articles of trade. These were mostly concentrated in the South in what later became known as “the Oil Rivers” (Oliver and Atmore 2004:75). Further inland, there were groundnuts, beni-seed, cotton, among others in the North and hence the construction of a railway line to facilitate the expropriation and evacuation of these products to the ports in the coastal South for onward transportation to the metropolitan centre. The making of Nigeria therefore involved the throwing into relief of an elaborate colonial programme with far-reaching consequences whose life-span endures till today.

Towards a Theory of the Nation

Benedict Anderson’s theorisation of the nation as “an imagined political community...both inherently limited and sovereign” and his thesis that its fabrication is historically consistent with modernity is particularly relevant to the discourse here. Nations are, indeed, veritable products of modernity as their

emergence in enlightenment Europe was conditioned by historical realities which inaugurated the modern moment. They participate in modernity through the social, political and juridical institutions they evolve and the Gramscian notion of hegemonic state apparatuses they fashion which embody and mediate their superstructures. This historicist and modernist perspective of the nation is fascinating because it constitutes the nation as a contingent socio-political and cultural construction. This makes nations limited in the sense that they exist within finite, well-defined, well-delineated boundaries different from other nations. They are also sovereign because the imperatives of modernity call for democratic processes which should normally compromise the emergence of a sovereign in the form of a monarchical ethos. However, Anderson's concept of national sovereignty in a modern world appears to have been intensely interrogated by totalitarian military regimes and quasi-democratic contraptions by civilian autocrats in Africa and other parts of the peripheral world.

The idea of the nation as a social construction is also attested to by Eric Hobsbawm. As imagined communities, nations according to Hobsbawm, develop national traditions and a legacy of ethical mores and values which are invented by the elite. These traditions and values - anthems, symbols, emblems, names, flags, constitutions, etc. - are codified, institutionalised and so become part of the communal property which binds together the citizens in a supposed horizontal relationship. The sense of communion and comradeship which defines *nationness* is nevertheless mediated by hierarchical structures and other oppositional binaries but these are tempered by nationalism as an over-riding concern. It is the nationalist spirit and consciousness that is central to national survival and efflorescence and serves as a veritable justification for the existence of the nation. National cohesion is assured even when the politics of ethnic nationalism and other agents of polarisation exist simultaneously with national feeling because of the entrenched interests that a shared history of origins and values foster.

Inevitably, to theorise the nation and, invariably, its nation-ness, necessarily implicates the participation of time in the invention of the nation through the kinesis of human history. This historical determination of what the nation is yields symbolic value and confers enormous political and spiritual capital. This is, perhaps, why Timothy Brennan initiates a discourse concerning the distinction between the nation as a product of modernity and ancientness. He states:

As for the 'nation', it is both historically determined and general. As a term, it refers both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous - the 'natio' - a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging. The distinction is often obscured by nationalists who seek to place their own country in an 'immemorial past' where its arbitrariness cannot be questioned. (45)

Ideationally, Brennan's concept of the 'natio', though too restrictive in a modern sense, affords us a historical vision of the originariness of the nation and its authentic character, hence the nebulosity of its very nature in a modern sense. This historical vision and the nebulosity of the modern nation-state and its gestures to the archives of historical memory and re-memory are responsible for the dutiful constructions of mythologies and allegories which seek to spatio-temporally locate the nation in modernity.

Brennan proceeds to locate the rise of the modern nation-state in Europe in the temporal frame of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and attributes it to literary narrative scripts or "imaginative literature". He elaborates:

The rise of the modern nation-state in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is inseparable from the forms and subjects of imaginative literature. On the one hand, the political tasks of modern nationalism directed the course of literature, leading through the Romantic concepts of 'folk character' and 'national language'... On the other hand, and just as fundamentally, literature participated in the formation of nations through the creation of 'national print media' - the newspaper and the novel... it was specially the novel as a composite but clearly bordered work of art that was crucial in defining the nation.... (48)

It is this same idea of the 'natio' that Raymond Williams (1983) mobilises in his reification of the nation. Williams too situates his hermeneutic idea of the nation in historical perspective latching on the imaginary of nativity, place and placement within a specific *topos*. To him, this symbolic attachment to a legacy of common, shared origins through birth - not necessarily in a physical sense but also metaphorically - is what socialises people into national bonds. He elaborates:

'Nation' as a term is radically connected with 'native'. We are *born* into relationships which are typically settled in a place. This form of primary and 'placeable' bonding is of quite fundamental human and natural importance. Yet the jump from that to anything like the modern nation-state is entirely artificial. (19)

Though Raymond's perspective on the original ontology of the nation gravitates precariously to what can be said to be its *folk* character, it teleologically establishes and accentuates the tension between the negotiation of the nation in its historical sense and the artificial fabrication of modern nations contemporaneous with eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe which also impacted positively or negatively on other marginal spaces during the defining moment of the colonialist and imperialist encounter. The artificiality and brittleness of national territorial boundaries concomitant with the project of colonial empire-building, according to

Paul Ricouer, requires that indigenous colonised peoples massed in the 'natio' "forge a national spirit, and unfurl this spiritual and cultural re-vindication before the colonialist's personality". He further argues that: "But in order to take part in modern civilisation, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandonment of a whole cultural past." (276-277) In the formerly colonised world, this appears to be the grand paradox of nationhood and national becoming, particularly in Africa.

The theory of the nation and nation-ness also produces a spiritual dimension as Ernest Renan refracts the nation as a "spiritual principle" and "soul". The spiritual dimension revises the purely historical extrapolations that overdetermined the rise of the nation in Europe and elsewhere. Renan's position, however, strikes a delicate balance between the historicist-materialist and spiritualist networks which are crucial to modern nationhood. His perspective which appears essentialist is actually a unitarist conflation of the two grids governed by the idea of time past and time present which is enriched by a legacy of communal memories and the communication of consent and willingness to consolidate on the traditions retrieved from history. To Renan, therefore,

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are one, constitute this spiritual soul. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.... (19)

In re/constructing this dichotomy between the historical and spiritual axes, Régis Debray also envisions the nation in terms of sacredness and spirituality thus:

...the nation is an invariable which cuts across modes of production...We should not become obsessed by the determinate historical form of the nation-state but try to see what that form is made out of. It is created from a natural organisational proper to *homo sapiens*, one through which life itself is rendered untouchable or sacred. This sacred character constitutes the real national question. (26)

A framing concern in the preceding arguments negotiating the nation is that it is a historical contingency which is consistent with modernity. Another defining epistemology is that the nation is social construction which imagines itself in terms of a community with shared historical experiences and common origins. This commonality is what provides the impetus for social and cultural solidarity among the peoples that constitute a nation. But in a much more fundamental dimension, the ruminations on nationhood also imagine it as constructed by narratives which are

themselves an index of modernity as they are consistent with a literate culture and an emergent educated elite.

It must, however, be obvious that some of the narratives are oral in temperament and this does not vitiate their capacity for narrating nationhood. Indeed, in narrating nationhood, both oral and written traditions intersect and overlap and become mutual, analogous categories. It is in this regard that Homi Bhabha observes concerning the nation and its narration thus:

It is the mark of the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy- and an apparatus of power-that it produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic categories, like the people, minorities or 'cultural difference' that continually overlap in the act of writing the nation. What is displayed in this displacement and repetition of terms is the nation as the measure of the liminality of cultural modernity. (292)

Thus, a dialectical bond exists between the nation and na(rra)tion: while nations will and weave into life their narratives, narratives also incarnate nations and breathe life into them.

The Postcolonial Imaginary and the Narrativisation of Nigerian Nationhood

If there is a brutally frank and appropriate metaphor that represents the contradictions which underwrite the Nigerian condition as a postcolonial nation-state grappling with the contingencies of modernity, it is that Nigeria is a narrative. This is, however, a narrative in transition. The transitional character of the narrative equally compels the negotiation of Nigerianness to be necessarily contingent and in strict fidelity to the historical process. Nevertheless, the narrative possesses the incredible capacity to intrigue, stir, confound, and compel sustained attention. There is, indeed, a plethora of reasons why Nigeria is fascinating as a narrative. Nigeria is demographically the most populous Black country in Africa and, indeed, the whole world. One in every five Black people is believed to be a Nigerian (*Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*).

The country is prodigiously endowed with rich human and material resources including crude oil. Nigeria ranks as the sixth or seventh largest producer of crude in the world. But this crude oil which “primarily sustains the economy and holds the component parts in (dis)harmonious communion as a corporate entity has the paradoxical potentials of brutally wounding and healing, of sickness and therapy” (Tsaaior 75). The landmass is simply intimidating with rich arable soil for the production of food and cash crops. Except for the northernmost reaches of the country which is close to the Sahara Desert, most of the country has a rich alluvial and loamy soil composition beginning with the forest region in the south through

the guinea savannah in the middle belt and the sahel in the north. In terms of physical relief, Nigeria is drained by two major rivers, the Niger and the Benue, among several other rivers, tributaries, creeks, estuaries, etc. The nation's shores are washed by the Atlantic Ocean, itself a major source of offshore crude.

Much of Nigeria is a cultural mosaic with a heterogeneous collectivity of ethnic nationalities home to a rich fund of cultures and traditions. Nigerians are industrious, resourceful, resilient, creative and innovative people. However, the paradox of the Nigerian nation as a postcolonial state inheres in the fact that with these enormous endowments, Africa's self-adulatory giant remains a dwarf, a pitiable narrative whose strands refuse to cohere. Ali Mazrui captures this paradoxical condition by deploying the Swiftian metaphor of Gulliver and his travels among the Lilliputians. According to him, Nigeria, the "giant of Africa" has been "in danger of becoming the midget of the world. Africa's Gulliver faced the threat of becoming the Lilliput of the world." (54) Though Mazrui's appropriation of the Gulliver metaphor appears conceited, it will seem that Jonathan Swift was prophetically allegorizing Africa's crippled giant well before it heaved into existence.

Tragedy is the defining character of Nigeria as a narrative. The tragic dimensions of the Nigerian narrative congeal in the fact that the nation has willfully refused to creatively harness her diversities in the facets of ethnicity, culture, demographic preponderance, abundant human and natural resource base and the goodwill of Nature and History. Rather, it has embraced the culture of corruption, political instability, economic stagnation, ethnocentrism, social morass and cultural stasis. Nigeria, for instance, does not have what can be validly characterized as a national ethos, a Nigerian way of meaningfully engaging nationhood, and the world. As Femi Osofisan quaintly observes, Nigeria's does not have a national ethos but if it exists, its profile is abysmal, conflictual and contradictory. In his words, "formed by colonial fiat from disparate ethnic groups and rival kingdoms - can one call it a nation when...the old suspicions and animosities have refused to die." (26) Osofisan again states that the "nation is still in the process of becoming" and that "our national ethos is still undefined, chaotic, self-contradictory...our present state of incoherence that is, paradoxically and tragically; our nation's lack of a national ethos." (35, 37) It is this atrocious lack of a national ethos that drives Nigeria to the brink of a yawning precipice in its national strivings and narrativisations.

The old suspicions and animosities alluded to here register the gratuitous ethnic acrimonies and sharp differences which have bedeviled the Nigerian imaginary and intensely interrogated its incoherent postcoloniality. The politics of ethnic pluralism which should constitute an asset for national re/invention has become a monumental liability. The yoking together by violence of the heterogeneous peoples

of Nigeria by British imperial ideology and the stoking of the embers of division by the colonial authorities still underwrite the essential Nigerian character. It is either you are Hausa-Fulani, Igbo or Yoruba, the so-called majorities, or you are massed among the minorities such as Efik, Ibibio, Izon, Tiv, Urhobo, etc in an ossifying ethnic oppositional binary. Ironically, the minorities constitute the majority when put together. The irony again is that there is a Nigeria but hardly any Nigerians as individual loyalty is almost always first to ethnicity before the nation.

In many ways, Nigeria as a narrative is a synecdochic or microcosmic representation of the African continent. According to Jideofor Adibe who sums up the African postcolonial predicament with solid implications for Nigeria,

No continent is pulled in as many directions and often conflictual directions as Africa. It is the continent where different countries, and even nationalities within countries, are sharply divided, and sometimes defined by emotive external allegiances. Hence, we have Anglophone Africa, Francophone Africa, Lusophone Africa, Arab Africa, Bantu Africa, Christian Africa, Islamic Africa, Diaspora Africa etc. ("Africa: Cursed by History?" 6)

No doubt, the idea of Africa as a continent under the curse of history has attracted a complex of interpretive possibilities. There is, for instance, no single, unified, or monolithic but multiple Africas. These polarizations are emblematic of that imperial curse imposed by metropolitan imperial and cultural ideologies. Adekeye Adebajo has felicitously referred to this violent history with its corpus of predicaments as "the curse of Berlin" referring to how "historical and structural events continue to affect and shape Africa's contemporary international relations". (3) As Adekeye further observes, Otto von Bismarck's 1884-85 Berlin conference which comprehensively mapped out the scramble for and partition of Africa pronounced a curse on the continent which continues to haunt it in varied ways especially in the guise of the modern nation-state. In an insightful, counter-historical inversion of the Eurocentric notion of Africa as the white man's burden, Basil Davidson also latches on the curse of history in a compelling title which reads ominously as the White man being the Black man's burden through the curse of the modern nation-state.³ Here, Davidson alludes to the history of artificial fabrication of nations and arbitrary boundaries to meet the overzealous interests of European imperial enterprise as many of the nations merely serve metropolitan causes.

Nigeria as a nation of nations also shares in this curse of history. The invention of Nigeria by British colonial fiat constituted it as an imagined cartography for the imperial gaze, a sphere of influence for colonial domination and exploitation. The nation which was cobbled from disparate ethnic configurations existed for the pleasure of Empire and its overweening lust for territories as it was consistent with

the European scramble for and partition of Africa. The corollary of this zealous imperial programme was that many of the nations which emerged from the colonial laboratory were already infected with congenitally terminal pathologies which started manifesting soon after their parturition. Nigeria ended up in this category soon after political autonomy in 1960.

As it may be apparent from the discursive drift so far, the seeds of Nigeria's fractious nationhood were sown right from the moment of the colonial encounter. The totalising divide-and-rule policies of the colonial overlords initiated a process of mutual suspicion and pathological hate and fear among the disparate ethnicities that configured the inchoate nation. It is in the nature of imperial ideology to nurture animosities among its subjects. By playing one ethnicity over the others as it is consistent with colonialism, it was difficult to build a cohesive whole to successfully resist post/colonial domination and exploitation. The politics of nationalist struggle with the founding fathers like Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Tafawa Balewa, Ahmadu Bello, Obafemi Awolowo, Margaret Ekpo, etc. only barely managed to wrest political autonomy from the British when it was no longer politically expedient, economically viable and morally defensible to administer the nation.

Though nationalist resistance yielded independence, the ethnic wrangling and disquiet continued unabated and inevitably culminated in the crises of the First Republic. But this was perhaps the only historical moment when Nigeria's narrativity cohered as the nationalists were united by the common goal of transcending colonial suzerainty. Anthony Giddens postulates that in the construction of modern nationhood, the progressive forces that constitute the nationalist collective are pulled in divergent directions based on ethnic affiliations, regional cleavages or religious sympathies. A complex of dilemmas presents itself in such slippery circumstances. He comments on the first dilemma that confronts the progressive forces in the modern situation:

The first dilemma is that of unification versus fragmentation. Modernity fragments; it also unites. On the level of the individual right up to that of planetary systems as a whole, the tendencies towards dispersal vie with those promoting integration...the problem of unification concerns protecting and reconstructing the narrative of self-identity in the face of the massive intensional and extensional changes which modernity sets into being. (416)

In Nigeria, the facade of nationalist solidarity soon crumbled and ethnic solidarity became enthroned with fierce competition for the soul of the nation and its patrimony. Indications in this direction were apparent at the very beginning as apprehensions of hegemonic domination were expressed when the North preferred political autonomy later than the South. The southern political elite who were in the

vanguard of resistance against colonialism called for independence around 1956 earlier than Ghana's historic success in 1957. Nationalist leaders in the North cited the excuse that the region was unprepared for independence because it was behind the South in terms of development. Personal and communal narratives, official and popular, particular and general, were mobilised in the articulation of these alternative ethnic, regional and religious perspectives. These narratives exerted profound impact on the national imagination as they were invested or imbued with ethnic/sectarian undertones which undermined the substratum for national cohesion. Besides, they instigated fear and suspicion with gross repercussions on national unity and be/longing.

Obafemi Awolowo, one of the nationalists, was to famously announce that Nigeria is not a nation but a mere geographical expression and that he was first a Yoruba before being a Nigerian. This avowal clearly meant that the basis for Nigerian unity was vacuous as individuals owed their loyalty to their ethnicities before the nation. In his autobiographical narrative eponymously titled *Awo*, he was to ventilate his animosity for the Igbo and his political adversary, Azikiwe in what can be said to have set the tone for the discordant orchestral notes in Nigerian politics with spiralling repercussions. He said:

[...] in spite of his protestations to the contrary, Dr. Azikiwe was himself an unabashed Ibo jingoist. And he gave the game completely away when he said inter alia in his presidential address to the Ibo Federal Union in 1949, as follows: "It would appear that the God of Africa has specially created the Ibo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of the 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." (172)

Awolowo was not done with his regurgitation of the offensive pronouncements of his political foe. He proceeded to state:

It was clear from these statements and from the general political and journalistic maneuvers of Dr. Azikiwe over the years that his great objective was to set himself up as a dictator over Nigeria and to make the Ibo nation the master race. It would appear according to his reckoning that the only obstacle in the path of his ambition was the Yoruba intelligentsia, and these must be removed at all costs...I am implacably opposed to dictatorship as well as the doctrine of *Herrenvolk* whether it was Hitler's or Dr. Azikiwe's. (172)

Two realities immediately emerge from Awolowo's statement: one is that the construction of divisive ethnic structures was consistent with nationalist politics and

not a post-independence phenomenon. Two, it would appear that there was a crisis of motivation for the political careers of some of the nationalists as they joined the nationalist struggle not for patriotic reasons but for self-aggrandisement, ethnic solidarity and preservation. Awo's autobiographical narrative, like many others in the same mould, possesses canonical capital and prefigures how Nigeria was imagined during the anti-colonial resistance and in postcolonial politics. Its decidedly centrifugal tendencies clearly foregrounded the path the general narrative trajectory was headed.

Till today, there is running antagonism and a contagion of hate and suspicion between the Igbo and the Yoruba, a reality which was compounded by the civil war for which the Igbo have not forgiven the Yoruba for betraying them by fighting with the federal forces. It is interesting that the other major nationalists, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Ahmadu Bello have also ventilated their concerns about Nigeria in their autobiographical narratives, *My Odyssey* and *My Life*, respectively. These narratives constitute an intertextual dialogue with Awolowo's *Awo* and seek to undermine its claims while privileging their perspectives on national issues. Significantly, the narratives have not been innocent expressions of individual subjectivity by the three nationalists and founding fathers of Nigeria. Indeed, they represent entrenched sentiments of ethnicity, region and religion nourished by them and their followers. This in itself underscores the epistemological power and potency of such narratives in structuring social and cultural relations between ethnicities in a plural nation-state like Nigeria.

One of the major narratives that have commanded national attention is of communal/regional nature: that the British colonial authorities were more favourably disposed to the North than the South. They found the northern population more amenable and governable because of their established political and religious institutions under the emirate systems. In radical contradistinction, much of the South especially Igboland, was largely segmentary with some of the groups acephalous and without unified central political structures. This made the implementation of the Indirect Rule policy a real challenge in the South. Besides, southern politicians were more independent-minded, unco-operative and unmalleable than their northern ilk. Crawford Young affirms that,

Iboland was the most difficult part of Nigeria to subdue. The centralised Hausa-Fulani emirates could be conquered from the top; in Yorubaland utter fatigue from the debilitating nineteenth-century civil wars...led to ready acceptance of British rule. But acephalous Iboland had to be subjugated segment by segment". (461)

In the estimation of the British, the narratives affirm, it served British colonial interests better to cede power at independence to the North than the South. This narrative reality resonated with diverse political possibilities on the future destiny of the Nigerian nation. One of these which compel attention today is the near monopolisation of political power by the North since independence especially through the military establishment and a coup culture.

Other narratives are of ethnic nationalist colouration. The first coup of 15 January, 1966 was led by dominantly Igbo army officers and hence the appellation it has received as an "Igbo coup". Even though with the intervention of time it has become established that the coup was staged for patriotic reasons, the narrative still inspires credibility for many as they have refused to suspend their credulity. Obafemi Awolowo, a Yoruba politician, was allegedly designated as the person to be installed as leader of the nation. This narrative is speculative and so exists at the labyrinthine intersection of the popular imagination and the justificatory labour of selflessness and ethnic neutrality by the coup leaders and their more humane sympathisers. To many, the genuine reasons for the coup could not have been patriotic and salutary as the Igbo officers that led it constituted a self-legitimising vanguard for Igbo domination. This is also because many of the victims of the coup were the northern political and military elite leaving out the Igbo intelligentsia.

The reprisal killings which followed the coup assumed the colouration of genocide against the Igbo. This inevitably resulted in the civil imbroglio during which millions were decimated in what has been described as a senseless and avoidable war. Narratives with a killer temperament were clearly at the centre of the war: that the maiden coup was an Igbo action especially with the assassination of many prominent officers and politicians of Northern extraction. This narrative became more compelling following the eventual emergence of General Johnson Aguiyi Ironsi, an Igbo man and the most senior officer in the Nigerian Army. Pathological fears of Igbo hegemonic domination in the Armed Forces and in diverse publics of national life were now rife. This was aggravated with Ironsi's unwillingness to swiftly and decisively punish the coupists and the construction of nationhood during that delicate and thin moment of history on a unitary political arrangement. This centrist policy accentuated the fears of adversarial elements within and without the military and political establishment that the Igbo were consolidating themselves in power.

Narratives with an uncharitable character viscerally implicate General Ironsi in the paroxysms of violence and state of anarchy that pervaded his military administration. However, more sympathetic accounts volunteer more balanced explanations which assign General Ironsi an apparently messianic role which he did not deliberately prepare for as he was merely reacting to circumstances imposed by

an aberrant history and its exigencies. In this schema, the introduction of a unitary political system was also part of an official narrative that constituted itself as a grand plan to advance the Igbo hegemonic agenda. Ironsi was assassinated the same year in a military action that was believed to be a strategy for containing this overarching Igbo desire to exclusively appropriate the national patrimony. Yet another narrative with an ethnic temperament is that which suggests that the counter-coup of July 1966 was intended for the North to secede from Nigeria and form a separate nation. It claims that it was the British who persuaded the northerners to remain in a federal Nigeria because of the huge oil deposits in the South which they would lose in the event of secession. Events have demonstrated sufficiently that truth resides in this narrative as it is oil that sustains Nigeria's largely mono-cultural economy. The North is believed to be the greatest beneficiary from this rich resource and recent youth unrests in the oil-rich Niger Delta region are a violent reaction to the continued exploitation of the area by a federal structure which sees the area as a conquered territory.

As a monumental historical moment negotiating Nigerian nationhood, the Civil War was constructed as a grand narrative by the official testimonies of the Federal Government. Appropriately, therefore, the Biafran insurgency was an elemental rebellious rite, a wilful centrifugal tendency which was meant to undermine national integrity and compromise the sovereignty of Nigeria. Such official narrative appropriations were themselves lent stridency and popular appeal by the state media apparatuses which subscribed to the rhythms of allegorical telling and re-telling, a tissue of versions that sought to articulate the remote and immediate precipitating causes for the war.

In the same mould, such official narrativisations, not ideologically innocent in themselves, were intended to compel popular credibility/credulity and confer valuation to the accounts. However, they became intensely contested and problematised by marginal discourses. Such alternative discourses assigned radically opposed and mutually irreconcilable motivations for the violent civil disquiet. On the Biafran side, the war was a veritable act of ethnic cleansing, a slow genocide organised by the Federal Government against the Igbo who became an endangered species in their own country under the flimsy, diversionary claim that Biafra was a secessionist agenda borne out of personal aggrandisement and lust for power by Col. Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu.

In the labyrinth between official and unofficial narrativisations lurk forms of telling and re-telling which critically re-imagine and interrogate these conventional modes of discourse on Nigerian postcoloniality. The testimonies which represent in-betweenness are embodied by the silent or more appropriately the silenced as their silence also articulates large statements that define the Nigerian paradox and

predicament. This inevitably remaps the discursive boundaries in radical dimensions thereby orchestrating a re-thinking of the scripted narratives. Implicated here is Gayatri Spivak's now famous question about the ability of the subaltern to communicate through the appropriation of speaking rites. The reality of the Nigerian postcolonial condition demonstrates sufficiently that there are layers of subalternity: there are subalterns within subalterns each straining, not just to speak, but also to be heard. But even where they express individual subjectivity and agency by refusing to speak or when silence is imposed on them by totalising forms of hegemonic state apparatuses, their deafening silence alone constitutes an alternative discursive strain which narrates the Nigerian nation.

Consistent with the contested and contestable sites of narrative representation was the construction of popular myths which sought to explain and articulate the salvific roles of particular personages in the narratives that became quintessential of the war. Ojukwu was delineated as an epic hero both in the secessionist media apparatuses and the popular Biafran imagination. He was not motivated by the cult of personality but by a survivalist instinct intended for ethnic preservation, honour and justice. General Yakubu Gowon, then head of state, was a patriotic leader, who unlike Nero, would fiddle while Nigeria burned under the Biafran insurrection. Gowon soon became the acronym for "Go on with one Nigeria."

The systematic massacres of the Igbo in the North as part of the reprisal measures against the felling of prominent Northern politicians and military officers in the 1966 putsch governed the popular imagination and dictated the actions of the military and politicians. In other words, official and unofficial narratives in the aftermath of the coup determined the direction of events in the nation: Northerners were on a revenge mission against the Igbo for killing their own and for pursuing an agenda to dominate Nigeria and impose their will on the rest of the nation. The retailing of these narratives in diverse publics had nothing to do with their veracity or authenticity and hence their potentials to be capable of elastic and protean interpretive possibilities most of which had violent and killer propensities.

According to Crawford Young, "when cultural communities collectively perceive threats to communal status in the political environment, group solidarity tends to increase". (461) This means that a potent threat to ethnic identity or communal consciousness necessitates the strengthening of bonds and the cultural nationalism of the threatened group. This is precisely what happened in the Igbo situation when Nigerians of Igbo extraction discovered that their sense of longing for and belonging to a united Nigeria was severely compromised by the systematic killings of their kin in the North. The corollary to this was the rebellion against the central government and the declaration of a sovereign state of Biafra. The emergence of Biafra as an alternative national engineering project was precipitated by what Easterners saw as

the politics of exclusion through inclusion and so asserted their will to self-determination so as to avoid liquidation. This discontent continues to define their attitude to political participation in Nigeria and this obvious with the emergence of pro-Biafra bodies like the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOB whose activities have been outlawed by the state.

The Years of Military (Mis)Adventure: 1984 - 1999

The military dispensation in Nigeria's postcolonial existence has been aptly described as the "locust years".⁴ This metaphor symbolises the pestilential and calamitous fate the military establishment foisted on the nation in its belaboured, martial tactics of re/inventing and re/imagining nationhood. Locusts are insects whose visitation spells devastating consequences on community life beginning with crops, vegetal life and the entire environment. Crops are the source of nourishment and life for humanity and animals and anything that destroys them represents a potent threat to human existence. The result is widespread famine with disastrous repercussions. Famine has ravaged much of the Horn of Africa, not as a result of locust infestation, though this is also located within the dynamic of political instability, mis-governance and corruption, other manifestations of a history of "locust" legacies.

This was not without its narrative possibilities in Nigeria. Since the collapse of the First Republic from 1960-1966, the military infiltrated the Nigerian political landscape as a "corrective" alternative to the malfeasance and the debris of corruption that the nascent political elite plunged the nation into. From then on successive military adventurists beginning with General Aguiyi Ironsi (1966), General Yakubu Gowon (1966-1975), Murtala Muhammed (1975-1976) and Olusegun Obasanjo (1976-1979) introduced martial law and decrees thereby subverting and undermining the democratic process.

A brief reprieve came the way of a harried nation between 1979-1983 when Shehu Shagari led a civilian administration which was overthrown in another military coup led by General Muhammadu Buhari (1983-1985). The corrective aspirations and revolutionary fervour of the regime was ended in a palace coup led by General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) who is reputed to have institutionalised official corruption in Nigeria. It was Babangida who ran the most serpentine political transition in Nigeria's history which ended anti-climactically in the 12 June general elections which he unilaterally annulled. Ernest Shonekan led an interim government for less than a year when military strongman, General Sani Abacha sacked him in clearly anticipated circumstances. Abacha's dictatorship ended dramatically in his sudden death paving the way for General Abdulsalam Abubakar (1998-1999) who, after the shortest transition programme in Nigeria's political

history, handed over the reins of state power to Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military head of state. Since then, a democratic experiment which witnessed the first ever civilian to civilian transfer of power occurred when the late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua was elected. He had since been replaced on his death in 2010 by President Goodluck Jonathan who is the present democratically elected president of Nigeria.

A historical reconnaissance of governance in postcolonial Nigeria demonstrates the dominance of the military in political engineering processes. While the military has ruled for 28 years, democratic governance has held sway for only 23 years suggesting an imbalance in favour of military aggression over representative democracy. Some of the misfortunes which are consistent with the Nigerian narrative have been attributable to the incursion of the military into politics, a role they were ill-equipped for. Ironsi is reputed to have promulgated the now odious Unification Decree which changed the structure of the nation from a federal republic to a unitary state. Narratives negotiating this epoch of national life seek to maul the policy as the inaugural programme by the Igbo ethnic nationality to impose its hegemony on the rest of the nation. Gowon has the less than salutary fame of telling the world that Nigeria then had too much money from the boom in oil resources and that money was not the problem, how to spend it was the challenge confronting the young postcolonial nation-state.

Gowon also drove the nation into the 1967-1970 Civil War. He, however, created states which many believe has consolidated the unity of the fragile nation even though alternative perspectives interpret state creation efforts as undermining the autonomy of the constituent units of the federation. Murtala was a fierce soldier who was consumed in the revolutionary fires he stoked. His patriotic zeal was cut short by the rampaging bullets of adversarial army officers who assassinated him in 1976. He, however, moved the nation's capital from commercial city Lagos to the more central location of Abuja. Obasanjo enjoys the goodwill of having continued with Murtala's radical policies and for voluntarily relinquishing power to the civilian government of Shagari.

It is significant that besides personal ambition and self-aggrandisement, all of the military juntas that ruled Nigeria have deployed ethnic, regional or religious sentiments in taking over state power and consolidating themselves in office. Quite often, they also thrive on the employment of narratives which undermine the cohesion of the opposition and subvert the popular will by appealing to sectional interests. Usually, these narratives drive the populace apart rather than uniting them for the onerous responsibility of nation-building. Such a divide-and-rule policy weakens potential oppositional strongholds into divisive thresholds and compromises the potency of alternative visions to Nigerian national narrativisation.

Conclusion

From all indications, Nigeria, Africa's most populous democracy, is not in a hurry to abandon the negotiation of its nationhood through killer or violent narratives. If anything, as the discussion has demonstrated, the stakes based on ethnicity, region and religion are heightening concerning which group should have control over the "national cake". This has instituted mutual recriminations, suspicions and spiralling cut-throat competitions between the majorities and minorities in an increasingly polarised landscape. Calls for the dismemberment of the nation precipitated by killer narratives have become more vociferous. One option has been the convocation of a sovereign national conference which the proponents argue will renegotiate the basis for unity built around a true federal arrangement, fiscal policy, state police, equitable distribution of resources, and a free judicial system which will respect and defend the rights and freedoms of all citizens. This position is not acceptable to official state policy, though because federalists see in it an epitaph for an indivisible, sovereign Nigeria.

In the immediate post-1999 political dispensation which has seen the exit of the military and the uninterrupted practice of democracy for over a decade, ethnic animosities, regional divisions and religious violence have also risen astronomically. Ethnic groupings with centrifugal tendencies like Oodua Peoples' Congress (among the Yoruba), Egbesu Boys, Niger Delta Volunteer Force, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, etc. (among Niger Delta communities), Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (among the Ogoni), Arewa Peoples' Congress (among the Hausa-Fulani) and Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (among the Igbo) became more active and vocal in their aspirations for self-determination.

At the regional level, Nigeria has also demonstrated the uncommon capacity in how not to engineer and narrate nationhood. Organisations like Afenifere (Yoruba), Arewa Consultative Forum (Hausa-Fulani), Ohanaeze Ndigbo (Igbo), Middle Belt Forum (ethnicities in central Nigeria), have also been complicit in ossifying relations and freezing regional interactions in the name of seeking for regional solidarity, development, justice and equity. More recently, the national contradictions have been exacerbated with the emergence of fundamentalist religious groups especially Boko Haram which has been involved in Al Qaeda-style operations through the bombing of national institutions and buildings to register its opposition to western forms of modernity including education. This dimension has accentuated the sharp religious differences between the North and South, Christians and Moslems, with devastating consequences on national peace and development.

The common denominator in all these sordid realities is the killer narratives which have been distilled over time and have continued to gain currency through renewed narrative assaults. In narrating the Nigerian nation, many of the strands have become coloured with bloodstains because of the killer instincts which have become internalised and concretised within the narrative schema. Beginning with the 1967-70 Civil War during which millions were decimated in a senseless bloodbath, Nigeria's narrative possibilities have been defined and conditioned by a history of violence and a legacy of unrelieved nightmares which the nation is struggling to wake from. Whether Nigeria overcomes this culture of killer narrativisation or not remains a matter of slippery conjecture as the nation slouches like a wounded beast of plural births hoping to be reborn and to survive its protean contradictions as a postcolonial state whose jeremiad narrative refuses to cohere.

Notes

¹ Many European explorers and writers constructed their ideas of Africa and other marginal spaces based on their warped and prejudiced imagination to meet with the exotic tastes of their metropolitan publics, ideas which were not representative of the continent. For more, see Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a fictional representation of Africa which falls into this formulaic representational pattern.

² The imperial naming of "Others" by the European Self was executed as a process of ideologically imposing colonial authority and the constitution of such spaces as spheres of influence. For more on the naming of Nigeria as an imperial outpost, see *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* under the title "Nigeria".

³ See Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*. New York: Times Books, 1992.

⁴ The metaphor of the "locusts" as a referent to military adventurers in Nigeria has attracted literary discourses especially in the poetic sensibility of Nigerian writers. See Joe Ushie's volume, *A Reign of Locusts*, for instance, whose thematic thrust negotiates military dictatorship in Nigeria and the African continent.

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