

Ken Saro-Wiwa's  
Shadow  
(Expanded Edition)



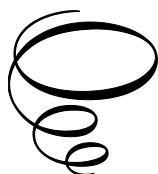
Ken Saro-Wiwa's  
Shadow  
(Expanded Edition):

*Politics, Nationalism and the  
Ogoni Protest Movement*

By

Sanya Osha

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The writing was completed at the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands where I was a guest of the Agency in Africa theme group between October and December 2005. I am grateful to my colleagues within the Centre and the theme group for their collegial support during my fellowship term.

Twenty years after the Ogoni Nine were hanged by the heinous General Sani Abacha regime in 1995, a series of events were held to commemorate the Ogoni tragedy. I was invited to serve a discussant at the 17<sup>th</sup> Lagos Book and Art Festival (LABAF) in

Lagos, Nigeria. The theme of the festival was "Texts of Self Determination", a direct reference to the Ogoni struggle for political upliftment. This particular engagement prompted a series of articles from me on the aftermath of the tragedy. It also encouraged me to take another look at the earlier version of this book published in 2007 with a view to revising and expanding it. As a result, I have added an epilogue to the initial text. I thank Jahman Anikulapo, a co-organiser of the book festival for facilitating my participation.

Parts of the epilogue have been published previously in *Socialism and Democracy*, Vol.30, No.1, and in the online platform, *The Elephant*, October 25, 2019. I thank the editors of both publications for granting me the permission to use these materials.

## FOREWORD

The Ogoni Bill of Rights<sup>1</sup> (OBR) submitted to the Federal Government of Nigeria in November 1990 can be said to encapsulate the kernel of the denunciation of a suffocating and antagonistic socio-economic system by Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni people. That Bill showed the holistic and non-violent approach to the fight for emancipation by the Ogoni people. In the course of the struggle to achieve the objectives of the OBR thousands of Ogonis were maimed or displaced, or lost their lives. Ogoni land and the entire Niger Delta also came to see extensive occupation by government security agencies clearly for the protection of petroleum infrastructure and not the people.

We remind ourselves of aspects of the OBR: "That oil was struck and produced in commercial quantities on our land in 1958 at K. Dere (Bomu oilfield). That oil has been mined on our land since 1958 to this day from the following oilfields: (i) Bomu (ii) Bodo West (iii) Tai (iv) Korokoro (v) Yorla (vi) Lubara Creek and (vii) Afam by Shell Petroleum Development Company (Nigeria) Limited. That in over 30 years of oil mining, the Ogoni nationality have provided the Nigerian nation with a total revenue estimated at over 40 billion Naira (N40 billion) or 30 billion dollars," and "That in return for the above contribution, the Ogoni people have received NOTHING."

The OBR went further to state, "That the search for oil has caused severe land and food shortages in Ogoni - one of the most densely populated areas of Africa (average: 1,500 per square mile; national average: 300 per square mile)." It added, among other

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<sup>1</sup> Ogoni Bill of Rights (1990).

<http://www.waado.org/nigerdelta/RightsDeclaration/Ogoni.html>



observations, "That neglectful environmental pollution laws and sub-standard inspection techniques of the Federal authorities have led to the complete degradation of the Ogoni environment, turning our homeland into an ecological disaster." Among the demands of the OBR was that Ogoni had the "right to protect the OGONI environment and ecology from further degradation."

Three years after the submission of the OBR, Shell was expelled from Ogoni by the people and almost three years further down the road, on 10 November 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa along with Saturday Dobe, Nordu Eawo, Daniel Gbooko, Paul Levera, Felix Nuate, Baribor Bera, Barinem Kiobel, and John Kpuine were led to the gallows following the patently flawed processes of a military tribunal.

We note that thirty years after its submission, the Nigerian government is yet to respond to the demands of the OBR. However, twenty-one years after its submission, and assessment of the Ogoni environment by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) laid to rest any doubts anyone may have had over the degree of hydrocarbons pollution in the Ogoniland, and by implication the Niger Delta. UNEP found at some locations that the ground water had an 8 cm layer of refined petroleum products floating on it and also that the water the people drank was polluted with benzene, a known carcinogen, at a level 900 times above World Health Organisation's standard.

In his statement before execution, Ken Saro-Wiwa declared that *we all stand before history*. We all stand at the brink of history every day any aspect of the ecological devastation of the Ogoni territory remains unaddressed. We stand at the line denoting the fact of the justness of the historic, determined and heroic calls for a clean-up of Ogoniland by Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni people. That scientific work proved to the whole world that Ogoniland has suffered extreme pollution and by interpretation that the response ought to be one of environmental emergency.

It has been a long and bloody road of the struggle for justice and every believer in the fundamental right to life must stand in solidarity with the Ogoni people and others who still breathe air loaded with hydrocarbon fumes, drink water laced with toxic chemicals, fish and farm in polluted lands and eat polluted foods. Today we recall a fragment from one of the letters Ken Saro-Wiwa wrote during his last imprisonment and note his cry for environmental justice:

*I'm not going into partisan politics. What I meant is that I would be taking a wider role in the nation's affairs—expanding the Ogoni struggle to other parts of the delta and beyond. I could never be a part of whatever Abacha is planning for the future. What I want to see, and what I will always argue for is ERECTISM — ethnic autonomy, resource and environmental control. If this comes to pass, then Ogoni will be free and it is to them that I wish to dedicate the rest of my life. And I hope that that can be an example to other ethnic groups. The translation of my dreams into reality. Nothing to do with partisan politics.<sup>2</sup>*

With decades of extreme hydrocarbons pollution, the environment of Ogoniland and several places in the Niger Delta have been literally out of control. There were 1,300 oil spills in the Niger Delta in 2018-2019, a short span of two years.<sup>3</sup> There are spills that occurred in early 1970s that are yet to be remediated and others that routinely spew into the environment for days, weeks and months before leakage points are clamped.

Twenty-five years after the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni leaders, we insist that the demands of the people are demands that we must all echo until justice is done. Although there

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<sup>2</sup> See Ken Saro-Wiwa (2013). Silence Would Be Treason- Last writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa. Letter written 24/10/1994

<sup>3</sup> Ayodeji Adegboyega. (June 8, 2020). NOSDRA: Nigeria records 1,300 oil spills in two years  
<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/396658-nosdra-nigeria-records-1300-oil-spills-in-two-years.html>

is an ongoing effort to clean-up Ogoni environment, the urgent need to provide potable drinking water to the people across the land is yet to be addressed. We also call for the commissioning of an assessment, or audit, of the entire Niger Delta as ongoing ecological assault has long reached the level of ecocide. It is also time for those who have committed crimes against the people and the environment to be brought to book and made to account for their misdeeds. There is an urgent need for a response by the Nigerian state to the Ogoni Bill of Rights and other charters of the peoples of the Niger Delta including the Kaiama Declaration, Oron Bill of Rights and the Urhobo Economic Summit Declaration, Aklaka Declaration of the Egi People and others.

Ken Saro-Wiwa looked into the past and peered into the future. He stood for truth and for justice. He led a coordinated peaceful movement against forces that discount human and ecological wellbeing on the altar of petrodollars. He paid the ultimate price for standing up against tyranny. His cry for justice, dignity and ecological sanity knew no political boundaries. He envisioned the translation of his dreams beyond Ogoni territory. Today we must look around us and commit to take up the challenge of fighting for freedom, resource democracy and the right to sovereignty wherever objective conditions call for these conditionalities. And, we submit that the conditions are ripe for us to arise. Everywhere!

We join Sanya Osha to remind ourselves that there is a long hard road to travel. Until victory.

Nnimmo Bassey,  
Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF),  
Benin City, Nigeria.  
June, 2020

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria maintains an important position in the world community. For instance, at the time the Ogoni Nine were hanged in 1995, the country was the European Union's first market and first supplier in sub-Saharan Africa, after South Africa. Nigeria also produced more than 7 per cent of the EU's crude oil imports during the height of the Ogoni crisis. Currently, several Western petroleum companies are of vital importance to the Nigerian economy such as Shell, Agip, Chevron, and Elf (even as corporate mergers continue to reconfigure the oil industry). Furthermore, of the \$37 billion which stood as the foreign debt during the mid-nineties, \$19.4 billion were owed to the members of the Paris Club which as we know is made of European countries. These are some of the facts if we choose to evaluate Nigeria's international status in relation to Europe during the height of the Ogoni crisis.

When Ken-Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni indigenes were hanged, it shocked the entire global community. Such an outrage would have been deemed hitherto impossible, not only because the manner of their deaths goes against the grain of contemporary civilised values but also because the fact that such a miscarriage of justice had occurred within the shores of Nigeria, a nation that is highly important in the West African sub-region and the entire African continent. The popular thinking was that since that tragedy could occur in Nigeria, then almost anything could be expected in a continent that maintains perhaps the least enviable place within the international community. One would suggest that such thinking may be regarded as valid, considering the various discouraging signals that had been emerging from the different regions of the beleaguered continent.

This assessment was not supposed to be the product of indulgence or of pessimistic and alarmist posturing. Indeed the signals were quite discouraging and had been so for a considerable period of time. Even with all the wealth that had accrued to Nigeria through crude oil, various projects of national development proved to be enormously problematic (Shelly, 2005). The infant mortality rate was alarmingly high just as the adult literacy level was still quite low. Social services were being rapidly depleted and no concrete plans were made to replace and sustain them.

But because of the importance of Nigeria within the international community, disillusion could not be encouraged. To be sure, Nigeria possesses a lot of potential that could be harnessed to strengthen the collective performance of the African continent. And so when the Nigerian government committed the blunder of hanging the Ogoni Nine, the world community deemed it fit to intervene. Fact finding missions of all kinds visited the country to discover what went wrong. In the process, other areas within the Nigerian polity came under intense scrutiny. The economy was reviewed just as the human rights situation was analysed and of course the issue of democracy in Nigeria also was a high priority with the international investigators. This was what the killing of the Ogoni Nine caused together with the then seemingly interminable June 12 presidential crisis which started in 1993.

It was important to put the Ogoni crisis in its proper perspective for several reasons. First of all, some of those that perpetrated the injustices in Ogoniland were bent on rewriting history or worse still destroying historical memory since they had the repressive machinery of state behind them. Nigerian history is replete with instances of such hypocritical revisionism. Consequently, all manner of historical incongruities have been created. Heroes can suddenly become villains through a mere decree and vice versa. For instance, General Yakubu Gowon (rtd.) once cut a villainous figure when the assassination of General Murtala Mohammed loomed large in the public mind, until General Ibrahim Babaginda (rtd.) rehabilitated him by series of extraordinary measures ranging

from establishing a centre in his name to giving him some of the highest honours in the land. Now, Gowon hovers in a sort of historical limbo. In other words, he has been reconstituted into a persona of little historical weight and also of minimal contemporary value as a result of the governmental efforts to efface official facts relating to his public life and real national value.

The same historical revisionism has been visited upon General Olusegun Obasanjo (rtd.). Obasanjo, who is the first soldier to have successfully carried out a transition to democracy programme in Nigeria, was wasting away in detention in spite of the tremendous international outcry in 1998, but through the machinations of the ubiquitous Ibrahim Babangida, he found his way to political power again in 1999. Before then, there had been elaborate official strategies aimed at demonising him. He had been implicated in the Colonel Lawan Gwadabe-led coup plot of 1995; evidence to prove his involvement in the plot was extremely scanty, yet he was kept in jail. But it is necessary to note that Obasanjo had been highly critical of the Abacha administration and General Sani Abacha did not tolerate criticism. This was why Wole Soyinka, Africa's first Nobel prize winner for literature, went into exile along with many other pro-democracy activists and journalists. Generally, Soyinka had always been critical of the Nigerian governmental establishment even when he was actively engaged in the nation-building process.

In his book, *The Open Sore of a Continent* (1996), Soyinka addresses the June 12 presidential crisis and its implications for the political future of Nigeria; apart from being a fervent call for democracy, it is also a considerably impassioned meditation on what a nation entails. Soyinka in his characteristically forthright manner argues:

A profound trust was betrayed, and only a community of fools will entrust its most sacred possession - nationhood - yet again to a class that has proven so fickle, so treacherous and dishonorable (1996: 9).

What the June 12 crisis and indeed the Ogoni crisis have demonstrated is that the geographical unity of Nigeria can and will be contested as long as certain vexatious anomalies are left unaddressed. As a result of the purported coup plot of 1995, the following military figures were jailed: Major General Shehu Yar'Adua (rtd), Colonel Lawan Gwadabe, Colonel Bello Fadile, Major Akinloye Akinyemi and a number of other individuals. Journalists jailed for the purported coup plot included Chris Anyanwu, publisher of the now defunct *TSM* magazine, Kunle Ajibade, editor of *The News* magazine, George Mba and Ben Charles Obi.

Such unfortunate events caused great concern about the democratic future of Nigeria. Between September 12 and 14, 1996, a workshop with the theme "The Nigerian Democratisation Process and the European Union" was held in Bordeaux, France under the auspices of the Centre d'Etude d'Afrique of the Institute of Political Studies, Damiane University and with the support of the European Union. The workshop only served to increase doubts as to the possibilities for evolving an acceptable democratic ethos for the country. Attahiru Jega, a former president of the then proscribed Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), in a paper delivered at the workshop entitled, "What is Democracy about in Nigeria?" argued that the Nigerian democratisation project was a military-conditioned, controlled and directed process and that it was more a function of the "contagion" effect of global and African developments as well as Euro-American impositions of the structural adjustment conditionalities of the Bretton Woods institutional order. By extension, militarism had become the bane of political evolution in Nigeria as in many other African countries. Under militarism in Nigeria, several civilian institutions in addition to civil concepts and political ideologies underwent the most bizarre transfigurations.

Federalism, democracy, the judiciary, ethnicity and even the Enlightenment notion of the university assumed baffling colorations when the military turned upon them. Indeed the military maintained a vice-like grip over Nigerian civil society and

this resulted in many sociopolitical catastrophes, least of all, the Ogoni crisis. In terms of general outlook and orientation, there is very little to differentiate the Ibrahim Babangida-led junta from the Sani Abacha regime. Both shared similar antecedents, goals and interests. And since their atrocities shared many similar characteristics it was in their interests to devise a conception of justice and survival that fell in line with their aims. In fact, Lord Avebury, member of the British House of Lords who was also chairman of the British Parliamentary Human Rights group, lent his weight to this view of the two military regimes that blighted the political processes in Nigeria. In an interview granted *Tell* magazine and published on September 23, 1996, Lord Avebury said:

What Abacha is doing is to repeat the techniques which Babangida used all the time. He is a good student of that master. I think he has even outdone his master. His transition is the ultimate triumph in deception.

In the same interview he had also said:

Indeed Abacha's tactics are similar to those of his predecessor. Some politicians for instance have claimed that he is bankrolling one or two political associations in his bid to hold on to power (ibid.).

It is quite encouraging to know that such accurate readings of the Nigerian political situation existed within the international community (see Birnbaum, 1995). Consequently, Tom Ikimi, the Nigeria's Foreign Affairs Minister during the Abacha era, tried to delude the international community in relation to the Ogoni crisis when he delivered a speech at the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Committee in London on June 24, 1996:

Since (the 1995 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting) Auckland, it has clearly come to light the Ogoni issue beamed at the time with an unparalleled sensationalism by the international



media, was highly over-politicised and over-dramatised. The myths were Ken Saro-Wiwa was tried for his environmentalist views; that Nigeria's interests were anchored on the need to protect its oil fields and that the trial was conducted under a military tribunal. The four Ogoni citizens who were ruthlessly murdered by Ken Saro-Wiwa and his accomplices have not been treated as persons deserving of human rights but rather as mere statistics.

The posturing in this extract was a mere afterthought as this as this study attempts to demonstrate. Concerted efforts were made by the Abacha junta and its agents to thrust the Ogoni crisis into the netherworld of oblivion, just as has been done with other instances of governmental injustice or folly. This study undertakes a historical reconstruction of the Ogoni crisis and also seeks to establish its validity as a national fiasco in the light of the somewhat problematic contemporary political circumstances in Nigeria.

These two tasks are necessary because the federal military government was bent on drastically diminishing the magnitude of the national tragedy. At the moment, the causes for which Ken Saro-Wiwa fought for are only given grudging recognition by the Nigerian ruling elite. Beginning from the time the kangaroo tribunal that tried Ken-Saro-Wiwa and his co-accused was established, there were several judicial irregularities as well as attempts to deflect the complexities of the situation. In this regard, Priscilla Vikue - who was a major prosecution witness during the tribunal - was highly instrumental in providing support for the military junta. Vikue did not stop there. She went on to form the Gokana Women Forum made up of largely gullible women and the organisation was responsible for pushing the official view regarding the Ogoni crisis among Ogoni indigenes.

There was also the Youths Association of Ogoni Oil Producing Communities (YAPCO) which was inaugurated on April 6, 1996 by Major Obi Umahi, a former commander of the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force, a task force that became the main vehicle for

the suppression of the Ogoni. This only confirmed the extent to which the government had been willing to go in its cover-up operations of both the magnitude and aftermath of the crisis.

Another group, the Concerned Ogoni Leaders of Thought (COLT), which appeared to have some independent leanings - judging from its stated intentions - was also created. This group which identified with the objectives of the more radical Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) also emerged in the aftermath of the Ogoni crisis. But it certainly did not go far in realising its aims, some of which included the creation of a new state for the Ogonis and the restoration of oil production activities in Ogoniland by multinational petroleum firms. What we can deduce from this is that the objectives for which organisations such as MOSOP were set up are still relevant in Ogoniland and other similar communities especially in the Niger Delta region. And what the Ogoni crisis has demonstrated is that the problems of oil-producing communities are fundamental, such that possess national and international dimensions (Ferguson, 2005). And finally, these dimensions are numerous; structural, historical, international and obviously socio-cultural, all of which need to be examined at some length to arrive at a better understanding of what can be done to forestall future occurrences of the crisis that currently affects the Ogoni in particular and the whole of the Niger Delta in general. In a similar vein, this work revisits the sociopolitical conditions surrounding the Ogoni crisis and the deaths of the Ogoni Nine.

This study is also an exploration of what I consider to be the genocidal consciousness. In this respect, not only acts of genocide constitute the genocidal consciousness. Ken Saro-Wiwa accused the Nigerian state of carrying out a policy of genocide against the Ogoni. I explore the discursive background that led to this accusation and then I attempt to give an indication to its limits. Extreme ethnocentrism and the espousal of rigid political identities as in the case of pre-1994 Rwanda indicate aspects of the genocidal consciousness. As neoliberalism causes more troubling

forms of dispossession, political identities become more distinct and instead of forging commonalities, communities tend to accentuate differences within and beyond their boundaries. The inability to forge commonalities among different communities is also an instance of what may lead to the genocidal consciousness. It is the rigidification of political identities without the possibility of cross-cultural intercourse and the inability to confront, recognise and respect the alterity of the Other. One is aware that this understanding of genocide may be quite problematic. This study does not set out directly to clarify it. Rather, it attempts to highlight its discursive complexities in order to better understand certain ideological positions, in this case, the ideological environment in which the Ogoni protest movement emerged, as well as the forms of counter-articulations that rose against it. Saro-Wiwa claimed that the Ogonis were victims of genocide. I suggest that this claim has more discursive than realistic weight. Also, I suggest that the intellectuals (such as Ben Naanen, but Johnson Nna is an exception) of the Ogoni protest movement, in not extending the critique of local postcolonial domination to the critique of broader forces of imperialism and the effects of global capital, first, underestimated the powers they were up against; second, they misread the various configurations of locality; and third, they failed to recognise that the ultimate genocidal effects are indeed spectral in nature. The spectrality of the genocidal effect is explored in chapter five.

A part of the theoretical paradigm of this study attempts to incorporate analyses of 1] the notion of genocide and 2] the nature[s] of totalitarian terror. In exploring these concepts, the study addresses the work of thinkers such as Hannah Arendt (on totalitarian terror), Peter Ekeh (on the intractable postcolonial predicament) and Eghosa Osaghae (on ethnicity and federalist theory).

The first chapter is as an analysis of the concepts of federalism and ethnicity in Nigeria. The problematic ethnic configuration of the Nigerian nation is well known. Some would argue that the civil war that engulfed the country between 1967 and 1970 was due to

the divisive tendencies of ethnic phenomenon. This chapter argues that the true picture is even more complex than this simplified notion of ethnicity. To address the challenges presented by ethnicity as it is underpinned by religion, the Nigerian state devised a peculiar version of federalism. This chapter traces this particular historical and political conjuncture. It also engages some of the current academic and popular discourses on ethnicity and the manner in which the religious factor plays out within them. Another point the chapter makes is that the Nigerian federal process and experiment are mediated by a somewhat unique combination of militarism, ethnicity and religion.

The second chapter attempts to explain the colonial origins of Niger Delta capitalism. It identifies the main actors involved in the making of this mode of capitalism on both sides of the colonial divide. It argues that an understanding of the trade in palm oil during the colonial era is necessary for an appreciation the history of petroleum exploitation in the Niger Delta.

The third chapter suggests that the conflict between Ogoni indigenes and the Nigerian government can be better appreciated within context of a much longer history beginning with the colonial encounter. It also identifies two main trajectories of colonialism; the first kind was imposed by the colonial regime and the second, which was pursued by the postcolonial state often in conjunction with multinational capital.

The fourth chapter addresses Nigerian forms of militarism. In particular, it analyses the military regimes of Ibrahim Babangida, Sani Abacha, Abdul-Salam Abubakar to illustrate how they created a culture of corruption within Nigerian officialdom and also how they contributed to the militarisation of the polity. Furthermore, this analysis traces the connections between militarism and recent Nigerian experiments with democracy. In other words, it assesses the democratic adventures embarked upon by Babangida, Abacha and Abubakar and their broad sociopolitical implications. Finally, it explores how the first president of the fourth Nigerian republic, Olusegun Obasanjo, came into power under the auspices of

residual militarism.

As mentioned earlier, the fifth chapter highlights the activities of international capital and the devastating impact it has had on local communities. Critics of neoliberalism liken its effects to a form of political terror (Albo 2005; Bond, 2004; Hart, 2005; Harvey, 2003). In the conclusion of this study, the themes of criminalisation and dissent are evoked in order to appreciate better the prevailing conditions in the Niger Delta and the wider terrain of sociopolitical relations in Nigeria.

In keeping the various ramifications of genocide in mind, we need to read Saro-Wiwa's conception of it against the backdrop of actual technologies of domination that various military regimes and civilian governments have visited on the indigenes of Ogoniland. We also have to bear in mind the types of violence that the spectralisation of capital wreaks on them in particular and the Nigerian underclass in general. In this way, the dimensions of genocidal dispossession become more intricate, thereby requiring greater analysis and deeper modes of interpretation. At some levels, this study is an attempt to highlight this complexity by incorporating critiques of militarism and its specific modes of domination in addition to suggesting the ways in which global processes are implicated in local technologies of repression.

The Ogoni crisis, in spite of its particularity, extends to broad facets of contemporary Nigerian politics. First, it provides avenues to analyse the constellation of issues around minority rights, social activism and politics in its conventional and heretical forms. Second, it brings to the fore the configurations of military power both within full-blown military rule and under residual militarism within the context of democratic governance. Third, it points to the innumerable and sometimes inexplicable ways in which local politics is shaped by global forces. Fourth, it reveals the complexity of the discourse of human rights between the ever-shifting polarities of militarism, democratic governance, widespread informalisation and processes of contemporary globalisation. If these theoretical suggestions are not always made explicit in this

study, they are nonetheless always implied. Furthermore, the ethnographic components of the study are assembled to underline what is not always theoretically explicit but inform the elements of discursivity.

## CHAPTER ONE

# FEDERALISM AND ETHNICITY IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION

This chapter examines a variety of sociopolitical configurations in which the Nigerian experience of federalism was forged. It suggests that the ongoing Nigerian experiment with federalism can be understood by confronting the confluences where militarism, ethnicity and religion converge. In addition, the Nigerian civil war also had a tremendous impact on how the contours of Nigerian federalism were shaped. The chapter begins with an examination of federalism itself as it relates to the Nigerian nation and then moves on to address the political instrumentalisation of religion and ethnicity. Indeed the histories of Nigerian sociopolitical events and categories such as militarism, ethnicity, religion as well as the imperatives of the nation-building project play against one another in a context that is never even and which is shaped often by factors of political expediency. In addition, the trauma of the Nigerian civil war is partly responsible for the various pressures for the federalisation of the polity. At many moments during periods of militarism, unitarism appeared to be more dominant than the practice of federalism successive military regimes claimed to uphold. In relation to the dominant discourse on ethnicity in Nigeria, this chapter suggests that an unyielding focus on the primordiality of ethnicity does not do justice to the manner in which waves of contemporary globalisation as well as the imperatives of the age of virtuality reconfigure the contours of personal and collective identity. In this respect, the limits of

political economy become clear when it fails to account the migrant dimensions of identity construction in the current global age. Thus the expatriation of the struggles relating to the construction of Nigerian identity has become a legitimate source to examine what shape the pressures for the federalisation of the polity will take. Indeed migrant Nigerian identities operate within diverse categories in terms of class, gender and ethnicity and with a wide range of professional affiliations some of which are legitimate while others are not. The literature that is analysed in this chapter does not address this important dimension. More specifically, the final sections on the nature of Nigerian ethnicity suggest that apart from concentrating on the more primordial manifestations of ethnicity (*the politics of the soil and blood*), there is also the need to examine the expatriation of the struggles for the construction of identity, that is, the virtualisation of experiences by which the politics of identity construction is manifested in order to discern how they resonate within the 'bounded' Nigerian nation.

### **Processes of a nation-building project**

After almost five decades of "constitutional federalism" and an even longer history of colonial regionalism, Nigeria is still frantically grappling with the hydra-headed problems associated with the multi-ethnic state. These problems manifest themselves in a variety of ways and the factors responsible for them must be sought within the decisive context of colonialism and the colonial legacy. Nigeria, just as other African nations, is solely a construction of the European colonial enterprise and is, to employ a more apt term, "a geographical expression" as Obafemi Awolowo (1947), the late Nigerian statesman, called the territory. But for several reasons, different categories of political actors have sought to change or at least undermine this telling perception of the nation. The cost of keeping the nation intact has undoubtedly been quite prohibitive. Various competing interests and historical antecedents have combined to direct or misdirect the course of Nigeria's



political destiny according to the changing demands of expediency. To comprehend the perplexities of the country's evolving history, we shall have to examine at some length its pluralist nature and the various attempts by different political leaders to implant the seemingly necessary yet problematic concept of federalism. In doing this, we shall come to understand the apparently intractable nature of multi-ethnic societies and perhaps eventually, we shall be able to discern measures that augur well for conflict management in those societies.

The notion of federalism in Nigeria has obviously become a handy political tool. But even after many decades of political engineering, federalism as a political concept remains in the main, elusive. The continuous problematisation of the concept is reflected by the fact that a Federal Character Commission was constituted yet again in December 1995 by the Abacha administration. Among its terms of reference were the aims to:

- ◆ work out an equitable formula for the distribution of all cadres of offices in the federal and state public services, as well as government-owned companies and agencies;
- ◆ Promote, monitor and enforce compliance with the principles of proportional sharing of all bureaucratic, economic, media and political posts at the levels of government, and
- ◆ take such legal measures against any individual, ministry, government body or agency which fails to comply with any federal character principle or formula prescribed or adopted by the commission.

The Federal Character Commission had hardly settled down to work when charges that it had become "an arena of intrigues bordering on crisis of confidence, ethnic, jingoism and favouritism" (*The Guardian on Sunday*, March 10, 1996) were levelled against it. To make matters worse, Sabo Bako, the Commission's Secretary was compelled to resign. Among his reasons for resigning were "the manner in which the former Secretary to the Commission,

Miss Anna Peple was appointed and removed. This angered some southern members of the Commission, who saw the appointment of Chairman and Secretary from the northern part of the country, though from different geo-political zones, as a negation of the principle of the federal character by the Commission itself." Bako, who had been a prominent Marxist at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in the mid-eighties, also said his tenure as Secretary of the Commission had been "horrendous and disappointing". On another level, the Commission was plagued with problems of logistics concerning funding, accommodation, administrative organisation and terms of contract regarding hired personnel. This, surely, was no way to put the Commission on a sound footing and inspire public confidence. It also confirmed a certain view that a degree of levity or indecisiveness afflicts Nigerian political leadership generally in relation to the issue of federalism.

However, before we examine the issue of federalism any further, we ought to also explore the problem of ethnicity. Ethnicity has been defined in various ways and some of the categories include: (1) collective consciousness; (2) bases of affinity; and (3) behavioural inclinations (Premdas, 1993: 7). These are obviously slightly sophisticated frameworks which Ralph Premdas identifies. To begin at a more basic level, Eghosa Osaghae posits that ethnicity "is a derivative of ethnic group which may ensue when two or more ethnic groups (identities) are involved in a competitive setting" (1994b: 2). He also asserts that:

An ethnic group may be defined as a group whose members differentiate themselves from others on the basis of certain common objective criteria like language, culture and territory, and subjective criteria like the myth of common origin... which provides the basis for forging a common destiny for the people who can lay no claim to actual kinship (ibid.2-3).

Thus, the ethnic quest is essentially a "primordial attachment" to a given culture and social structure. Osaghae also points out that ethnicity "is more of a political than a cultural phenomenon"

(Ibid.6). This point shall now be explored. Ethnic affiliations become strengthened through the need to acquire political relevance or even power. From a certain angle, it may even be argued that the ethnic question is nothing more than a “will to power”, to employ a popular Nietzschean expression. But unfortunately, there are several drawbacks that militate against ethnicity as a basis for political activity, especially on the Africa continent where it has been conceived in more ways than one as the scourge of democracy and truly enlightened and inclusive political practice. Okwudiba Nnoli minces no words in asserting that:

Ethnicity is...seen as one of the main obstacles to democracy because it leads to the substitution of ethnic interest for the national interest, favouritism, nepotism, and the accentuation of social inequality (1994: 10).

African socialists made fervent attempts to downplay the phenomenon of ethnicity within the African political scene (Osaghae, 1992: 215). In what Basil Davidson would call “the poverty of ideological thought” on the part of African political theorists and intellectuals, attempts were made to wish ethnicity away into the primordiality of prehistory. The explicit objective was to cast “Africa-oriented” ideologies into categories recognisable to the scientific Western mind. But in the process of imposing supposedly scientific modes of analyses on obviously novel and also apparently problematic African conditions, these African political theorists committed a fatal error, one from which they are yet to recover from completely. And so to understand ethnicity in its multifaceted manifestations and also through its possibilities we are compelled to look further back into the profound dislocations wrought by the colonial encounter.

In doing this, it would be most instructive to turn to Basil Davidson’s now rather famous book, *The Black Man’s Burden* (1993). Davidson reveals that the colonial European often found it convenient to refer to the diverse African ethnic identities as tribes, hence the now pejorative term tribalism which is no different from

the prototype species of European nationalism and possibly what is now referred to as ethnonationalism. In colonial Africa, tribalism became a suitable platform to launch the numerous nation-statist programmes that were to bring about independence for the colonially created African geographical entities. So rather than being a disincentive for mass political mobilisation or a source intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic confrontation, tribalism became a veritable organising force. However, this cannot be said of the present-day understanding or persuasion of the term. To be precise, Davidson (1993) argues that modern tribalism flourishes under conditions of sociopolitical disorder, that it is destructive of civil society and undermines public morality and the rule of law.

It is also argued that this modern version of tribalism discourages the institution of a suitable democratic ethos for Africa. As to be expected, post-colonial African nations have become the sites of the most virulent cases of clientelism in which cunning and aggressive rulers can turn the instruments of state (through the privatisation of public authority) for purely personal use, motivated in addition by favouritism, nepotism, graft and the concomitant brutality (what Achille Mbembe terms processes of brutalisation) necessary to maintain political power. Several case studies would testify to this assessment: Liberia (under Samuel Doe), Uganda (under Idi Amin and Milton Obote) and even to some extent, Nigeria (where clientelism has become one of the surest means of economic and political survival) are all nation-spaces ravaged by the fallout of political brutalisation. Consequently, the political centre, or to be more exact, the state has become the site of violent contestation in which a winner-takes-all mentality not only prevails but is enacted over again to the detriment of what has been called "the nation-statist project".

However, let us limit the discursive focus to the geographical space called Nigeria. During the colonial era, the British colonialists needed to operate a mode of governance that would serve their economic and administrative purposes and this task was considerably difficult given the diverse, multi-ethnic character of

the territory. As Osuntokun (1979: 91) contends, the pluralistic nature of the territory was tackled by a tried and tested approach through which ethnic and cultural diversities “existed as separate units”. This approach had worked in Canada, Australia and South Africa, so it was assumed that it could also work in Nigeria. The adoption of the principle of federalism marked the origins of its export by that great colonial superpower, Britain. Indeed, federalism served another related need and objective since it was “more or less an evidence of some form of disunity, political weakness and uneven economic development, the British definitely wanted to keep the federating units as apart as possible. In this way, the British might continue to meddle in the internal affairs of their former dependency to their own economic and political advantage after they would have granted the dependency her independence.” (ibid.)

In 1912, the two large territories of Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria were placed under the control of one man, Sir Frederick Lugard. And then for reasons pertaining to administrative expediency and also economic efficiency the two disparate provinces were amalgamated two years later. Thus began a bold if reckless experiment in social and political engineering that would change permanently the course of the lives of various peoples who make up modern-day Nigeria. This step, needless to say, failed to consider several serious implications it was certain to bring in its train. The two old protectorates of Nigeria were not only diverse in terms of culture, language, political organisation and aspirations but also in terms of land mass, and this triggered off apprehensions of domination in different parts of the country. Later on, during the sociopolitical evolutionary process that started with the framework of classical colonialism, or more precisely during colonial regionalism, Northern Nigeria made up 79 per cent of the nation’s territory while the Eastern part of Nigeria accounted for 8.3 per cent, and Western Nigeria, made up on its part, 44.2 per cent.

These disparities generated ambivalent attitudes on the part of the various ethnic groups towards the federation. These fundamental

differences were accentuated in turn by highly diverse historical imperatives which the colonial situation failed to negotiate. Thus, the failure of the colonial encounter to recognise certain basic African historical realities has become the very bane of the nation-building process all over the continent in relation to the enduring problematics of [de]territorialisation engendered by various stages and histories of failed states, the politics and actualities of decolonisation, and the new political economy of war in postcolonial Africa.

In Northern Nigeria, where the emirate system existed and continues to this day, the hierarchical structure of rulership was not entirely uniform, as the zone that came to be known as the Middle Belt presented an intractable administrative problem to Lugard and the British administrators who followed his administrative line of thinking (Osuntokun, 1979: 94). And so Lugard chanced upon an “unimaginative panacea to this administrative bottleneck by the choice of indirect rule.” This system of indirect rule was to put in action “an entrenched local aristocracy which shared power with agents of an army of occupation... but it later acquired an aura of orthodoxy among both officials in Northern Nigeria and principal clerks of the British Colonial office” (ibid.) The European colonial enterprise was notorious for resorting to such arbitrary acts of political and administrative dislocation (Soyinka, 1999b). A celebrated instance of this arbitrariness is the case of the Belgian colonial authorities in the territory known as Rwanda. Jinmi Adisa in his book, *The Comfort of Strangers* (1996), which is a study of the Rwandan refugee situation after the tragedy of 1994, demonstrates how what he has appropriately termed “the politicization of ethnicity” came into existence. In his words:

The Belgian colonial authorities erected their power base on an ethnic analysis of society, control being exercised through the dominant Tutsi minority; this ethnic difference was sharpened by (among other things) the introduction of ethnic identity cards in 1930. (Adisa 1996: 19).