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Cultural interfaces of self-determination and the rise of the neo-Biafran movement in Nigeria

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This article examines the 'cultural repertoires' of neo-Biafran separatist Igbo groups in south-eastern Nigeria, pointing to the ways in which cultural repertoires, narratives and emblems are deployed to forge a separatist ethno-political project in a multi-ethnic state. The neo-Biafran movement reveals the robustness of political resistance and the existence of multiple frameworks through which ethno-nationalist groups resist and challenge extant power structures of the state in the quest for self-determination. The article argues that ethnic groups have the capacity to initiate their own 'cultural repertoires' in order to construct group identity, identify forms of external identity (the 'other') and shore up the boundaries of their own collective group identity. Myths of origin, narratives of the past, images and symbols are rooted in certain cultural repertoires, and are elaborated, interpreted, invented and reinvented to produce political identities that are complex and fluid in the struggle for political power.

Keywords: culture; politics; self-determination; ethnic identity; Igbo; Nigeria

[Interfaces culturelles d'autodétermination et montée du mouvement néo-biafrais au Nigeria.] Cet article examine les « répertoires culturels » des groupes igbo séparatistes du néo-Biafra au sud-est du Nigeria, désignant les façons dont les répertoires culturels, récits et symboles sont développés pour forger un projet séparatiste ethno-politique dans un État multiethnique. Le mouvement néo-biafrais prouve la robustesse de la résistance politique et l'existence de multiples cadres au travers desquels les groupes ethno-nationalistes résistent et défient les structures de pouvoir existantes en quête d'auto-détermination. L'article affirme que les groupes ethniques ont la capacité d'initier leurs propres « répertoires culturels » afin de construire une identité de groupe, identifier des formes d'identité extérieure (« l'autre ») et construire les frontières de leur propre identité collective. Mythe des origines, récits du passé, images et symboles sont ancrés dans des répertoires culturels propres et sont élaborés, interprétés, inventés et réinventés pour produire des identités politiques qui sont complexes et fluides dans la lutte pour le pouvoir politique.

Mots-clés : culture ; politique ; auto-détermination ; identité ethnique ; Igbo ; Nigeria

Introduction

On 22 May 2000, the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) symbolically hoisted the green–red–black flag of the defunct 'Republic of Biafra' at the popular Ariaria International Market in the town of Aba, a major commercial hub in the Igbo heartland of south-eastern Nigeria. In a statement, titled: *Declaration of Our*

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Demand for a Sovereign State of New Biafra from the People and Government of Nigeria, the movement premised its emergence on a prior notion of Igbo statehood which existed briefly between 1967 and 1970. Among other things, the statement noted that:

> MASSOB has therefore packaged about 25 stages for the actualization of the sovereignty of the new Biafra State through Non-violence and Non Exodus. . . It also admits of non co-operation and passive resistance to oppressive and obnoxious laws of the authorities. Having hoisted the flag of our new Biafra today, we wish to declare our resolve to demand and pursue the realization of our sovereignty from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. (Biafraland 2004)

This declaration occurred within the context of Nigeria's return to civil rule and the opening up of the public space which unleashed a host of hitherto suppressed and dormant forces in the country, leading to a noticeable upsurge in the outbreak of ethnic, communal and religious conflicts after decades of prolonged military rule (Adebanwi 2004; Agbu 2004). This had dire implications for national security due to the fact that it precipitated the emergence of ethno-nationalist groups and ethnic militias within the expanded 'democratic' space, with each group staking its claims and seeking to reassert its identity in the struggle against perceived exclusion from access to power and resources (Akinyele 2001, 264–265; Nolte 2004, 61). These ethno-nationalist platforms invariably mobilised extensive support from their different ethnic enclaves in their struggle against the state, and in the quest for the resolution of the national question, the crisis of state legitimacy and citizenship in Nigeria.

This provides context for the advent of MASSOB and other variegated neo-Biafran groups as direct responses to the perceived failure of the Nigerian state and consecutive governments to address the 'Igbo predicament' since the end of the civil war in 1970. MASSOB was established in Lagos on 13 September 1999 to promote the interests of Igbo-speaking Nigerians (or those perceived to be 'Biafrans') who constitute one of the three main ethnic groups in the country. The Igbo, who are mainly concentrated in the south-east and some parts of the south-south, had earlier engaged the Nigerian state in a bitter war of secession between 1967 and 1970. Between 1970 when the civil war ended, and 1999 when the ghost of Biafra was publicly resuscitated with the founding of MASSOB, there were sociocultural Igbo groups like Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo, Aka Ikenga, Mkpoko Igbo, Eastern Mandate Union (EMU), Odenigbo Forum, South East Movement (SEM), Igbo National Assembly (INA), Ndi Igbo Liberation Forum, Igbo Salvation Front (ISF), Igbo Redemption Council (IRC), Igbo Peoples Congress (IPC) and the Igbo Question Movement (IQM),[1] but none of these espoused a radical or confrontational tendency. The Igbo were perceived as 'defeated' and 'vanquished', and post-civil war Igbo nationalism was largely dormant, compromising and seeking a reintegration into mainstream Nigerian politics. The emergence of the second wave of Igbo groups coincided with the advent of a civilian dispensation in Nigeria. These were basically youth groups (but not exclusively made up of youths), like the Igbo Youth Council (IYC), Igbo Youth Movement (IYM), the Bakassi Boys and the Federated Council of Igbo Youths (FCIY), which were not explicitly separatist, but displayed a more vibrant form of Igbo ethnic nationalism in their approach for equity and justice in Nigeria. The third group comprises what has become known as the 'neo-Biafran' movement. It includes MASSOB, the Biafra Youth Congress (BYC), MASSOB International, Biafran Liberation Council (BLC), and the Coalition of Biafra Liberation Groups (COBLIG), which claims to be an umbrella body comprising seven Igbo liberation groups in Nigeria and two among diaspora,[2] which all emerged concurrently with MASSOB and other splinter factions of MASSOB. Similar to MASSOB, these groups have also rejected a state-led process and are explicitly

radical in their quest for self-determination, and disengagement from the Nigerian project into an alternative administrative and political arrangement.

Based on extant analysis of various forms of political struggles, ethno-nationalist claims and separatist agitations embedded in collective efforts at self-determination, the activities of MASSOB and other neo-Biafran groups have been broadly placed within three analytical frames. Similar to the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) and other ethno-nationalist movements in Nigeria, the activities of the neo-Biafran movements have been located within the civil society literature that categorises these movements 'as overtly militant and non-mainstream groups that [exemplify] radical civil society par excellence' (Adekson 2004, 87). This is based on their expression of certain radical features, use of inflammatory rhetoric, quest to disengage from the Nigerian state project, and inevitable clash with State Security Services. The second analytical frame portrays these movements as ethnic militias that emerged within the framework of the country's return to civil rule, which also constitutes a dangerous development and a trend that could impact negatively on the stability of the country and its nascent democratic project (Adejumobi 2003; Agbu 2004; Sesay, Ukeje, Aina & Odebiyi 2003). The third dimension in this frame is a methodological one that draws largely on the sensationalist or delinquent treatment of the activities of the neo-Biafran groups in the day-to-day debate among Nigerians, in national newspaper coverages, policy and security-related statements by politicians, government and other stakeholders. This becomes obvious when attention focuses on news-making protest activities, demonstrations, or sit-at-home orders occasionally issued by the movement, while the character of their struggle is hardly made the focus of scholarly enquiry.

From the foregoing, it is pertinent to nuance the analysis of the neo-Biafran movement and stress the salient character of their struggle for self-determination. First, unlike other ethno-nationalist projects in contemporary Nigeria, the advent of MASSOB and other neo-Biafran groups marks a radical departure from recent literatures on self-determination in Nigeria which has largely been associated with minority ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta (Obi 1997, 2001; Osaghae 1995, 2001; Ukeje 2001), or the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) of the Yoruba ethnic extraction (Adebanwi 2005; Ukeje and Adebanwi 2008). Second, owing to the beleaguered experience of the Igbo and the specific nature of the 'Igbo question' in post-independence Nigeria, especially since the 1970, the neo-Biafran movement does not only seek a radical and fundamental restructuring of the Nigerian federation, it also seeks the exit of the Igbo nation from the Nigerian project. Third, the manner in which these groups contest the sovereignty of the Nigerian state over their Igbo homeland in the south-east, by evoking counter-claims of sovereignty, enacting specific regimes of security and seeking to create alternative spaces of power and influence, calls into question mainstream assumptions about sovereignty, political authority and social spaces. These movements reject state-centric approaches to governance and empirically unveil alternative forms of social regulation and governance as a form of resistance against formal state control and sovereignty.

The central aim of this paper is to evaluate the neo-Biafran quest for political disengagement by adequately focusing on the dynamics and diversities of cultural repertoires (both material and immaterial) employed in the quest for self-determination and exit from the Nigerian state. As a movement locked in a struggle with the Nigerian state, the forces and interests behind MASSOB and other neo-Biafran movements mobilise cultural repertoires, images, symbols, narratives of the Igbo past and a particular version of Igbo historiography and deploy them in a wider struggle for political power and as vehicles for entrenching their claim to self-determination. These have been empirically demonstrated

in the use of commemorations, anniversaries, Biafran flags and artefacts to articulate alternative versions of Igbo identity, to claim a unique place and demonstrate the salience of their quest for political disengagement. The analysis is premised on the notion that political contentions necessarily involve struggles over ideas, identities, symbols and strategies in any given context, and the inextricability and convergence of the 'culture of politics' and the 'politics of culture' in mobilisation processes. The introduction sets out the parameters of the main arguments. This is followed by an examination of the twin concepts of 'cultural' and 'political' nationalism. The third section critiques the role of culture in political action and political community in Africa. The fourth focuses attention on the role of culture in the making of Igbo identity. This is followed by an account of the emergence of the neo-Biafran movements and the mobilisation of cultural repertoires and emblems in the quest for self-determination, and the conclusion sums up the argument and its implications for the future of the Nigerian state.

The merging of 'cultural' and 'political' nationalism

This study engages 'culture' and 'politics' not as bounded or stable manifestations of neo-Biafran nationalism, but as shifting and fluid determinants in the context of Nigeria's multi-ethnic federation. Culture and politics are often intertwined and deployed as agencies in pursuance of the right to self-determination and struggle for power. Drawing on certain aspects of the work of Gellner (1983), Hobsbawm (1990) and Anderson (1991) as points of departure in the articulation of a political agenda on the platform of a cultural ideal, the study aims to ground the analysis concretely in the surrounding social and political realities which will serve as a backdrop in exploring the 'construction' and 'deconstruction' of the activities of the neo-Biafran movement.

Gellner's (1983) influential thesis on nationalism comprehends culture as a pretentious tool in the pursuit of a nationalist agenda, and argues that the academic study of nationalism must be detached from the corpus of nationalist dogmas and tenets, especially that which presumes the knowledge of nationality outside experience or history. Hobsbawm (1990) also follows this thread by arguing that culture is simply a fallout of broader societal development and a tool designed for a political motive. This 'modernist' view of culture is rejected by Armstrong (1982) and Hastings (1997), who present an 'anti-modernist' approach that displaces earlier nineteenth century views on culture and brings back the contested issue of the cultural reality of the nation. While the modernists reflect on the cultural leanings of nationalist movements as a legal pretence or extra-political consequence, the anti-modernists perceive culture as a constant evidence of a pre-existing reality (Leerssen 2006, 561). In Gellnerian terms, societal modernisation models drives nationalism, and 'nationalism invents nations' and cultures, while the anti-modernists perceive culture as a manifestation of the nation, and not merely as a preoccupation of nationalism. While these perspectives place 'culture' outside the nationalist ideology as something externally articulated or invoked, it is apposite to structure and systematise the relationship between cultural and political nationalism owing to the constant interaction between politics and culture in nationalist movements, and the intrinsic character of cultural narratives to nationalist projects. Through filtering, selecting, realigning and reconfiguring processes, which sometimes leads to the point of transmutation or reinvention, (political) nationalism emerges by harnessing competing cultural patterns (Leerssen 2006, 564). Material cultural artefacts (e.g., paintings, sculpture, antiquities, monuments, architecture and symbols such as flags and public buildings) and immaterial cultural repertoires (such as folktales/folk-dances, history, myths, legends, proverbs, customs and music) all experience significant

transformations by taking them beyond their context of origin, recontextualising and instrumentalising them for specific political purposes (Leerssen 2004). The complexities and intermingling of these processes transform culture into a site of political conflict, and this compels an 'analytic' rather than a 'descriptive' relationship between culture and politics in the process of nationalism.

The relationship between culture and politics was largely reflective of the post-colonial nation-building project in Africa. Post-independence nationalist leaders were committed to giving content to a new national culture and legitimising particular national cultural narratives as a means of fostering social cohesion and national unity. The role of state-sponsored cultural institutions in the process of giving content to an official national culture is aptly captured in Anderson's (1991, 5–7) definition of the nation, as a specific form of cultural artefact forging together groups of unrelated people who imagine themselves into a coherent community. The erection of a 'nationalistic, patriotic culture of the whole' employed colonialism as the counterpoint and backdrop against which the politics of national cultural recovery and rebirth were to occur (Arnoldi 2006, 55–56), and 'promotes a nationalistic, patriotic culture of the whole that mediates an assortment of vernacular interests' (Bodner 1992, 13–14). Yet, the bid to merge culture and politics to promote national unity was severely undercut in the first two decades after independence due to several challenges which confronted the state in Africa. These challenges include the dynamics, antecedents and contradictions of the development process on the continent, and the failure of democracy which is perceived to be a facilitator of development to produce positive outcomes and deliver on the post-independence social contract. These challenges brought national issues related to the unresolved crisis of state ownership, citizenship and power-sharing to the fore. Latent ethnic identities and competing patterns of self-identification were reproduced and the post-independence cultural vision became severely threatened by inter-ethnic rivalries among ethnic constituencies in different African states, and these assumed a much broader appeal, degenerating into a zero-sum contest and ushering in a host of other related crises.

Rethinking culture, political action and political community

The uniqueness of Africa's post-independence challenges has subjected it to interpretations that render its political, social and economic system as crisis-ridden. This understanding emanates from an excessively rigid framework for political action and political community in Africa, and it renders the cultural agencies associated with these developments as either 'trivial' or 'under-theorised'. It is overtly hinged on a structural understanding of African political, social and economic processes as immutable, and it forecloses the robustness and resilience of structures, and the possibilities that they can be reinforced or subverted by agency. Harrison (2002, 12) points out that the enduring structure–agency debate in the social sciences has produced a string of arguments that reject the rigidity or permanence of structures, but which emphasise the capacity of agencies and social relations to initiate slow, rapid or radical changes in the structure of a society. This tendency has inspired perceptions like 'structuration' (Giddens 1995), and the 'transformation of structure by agency' (Gill 1993), but, most importantly, points to an understanding of the nature of resistance by virtue of the fact that structures harbour certain cultural tendencies which are deployed in social contest and resistance.

While the notion of the African continent as one of repression, crisis and authoritarianism is fairly established, it does not tell the entire story, but frames the discourse in a manner that amounts to robbing Africans of individual and collective agencies. Even

when individual or collective agencies do not necessarily appear to challenge the status quo, processes of repression and oppression on the continent have produced their own strain of struggle, resistance and political contention which are rooted in culture (Harrison 2002, 13). Bearing in mind the peculiar context of their emergence, what may be critical in this regard is not the cultural forces and factors that are mobilised, but a consideration of the cultural grounding against which resistance, struggle and political contention are premised. The cultural images produced by Western analysis are captured in Edward Said's (1978) concept of 'Orientalism'. Said's Orientalism resonates with developments in Africa by virtue of the fact that Western culture frames itself in relation to the 'other', and constructions of Orientalism are based on 'exoticism' and 'barbarity'. While aspects of imperial ideology, like liberalism, Christianity, 'civilising missions', modernisation, and *Lusotropicalismo* (in the Portuguese context) have been identified as significant and 'positive' cultural components of imperialism (Harrison 2002, 12), Africa has been subjected to a broad range of cultural biases and prejudices born of savagery, primitivism, anarchy and dramatic tales of rituals. The extent to which these perceptions trivialise cultural agents not only invites us to ignore the broader impact of culture, it also ignores the possibility for cultural tendencies to undergo a historical transformation at specific historical junctures, and overlooks how culture can be harnessed in positioning various aspects of political, economic and social developments by its cultivation.

Following this development, most analysis on African culture rests on the logic of a civilising mission which defined European incursions on the continent. Murunga (2006, 28) points out that these studies were mostly grounded in anthropological studies of African institutions and cultures, which questioned the humanity of Africans, justified the colonial enterprise and advanced their domination as an engine of modernising the natives. In the research boom associated with anthropological readings of African society and polity, explanations of the role of culture in African politics have focused largely on the 'uncivil' character of African societies (Fatton 1995, 1999). African cultures have often been linked with the proliferation of different forms of violence (Boas 2002; Gore and Pratten 2003; Harnischfeger 2003; Paciotti and Mulder 2004; Smith 2004). Others have embedded African culture in the 're-traditionalisation' thesis which essentially amounts to a reversion to 'archaic' traditional institutions and culture for the maintenance of law and order, or an effort to 're-traditionalise' governance in an essentially modern space (Kagwanja 2003, 2006). Another tendency in literature concerns the overarching reliance on interpretations that validate a 'local/culturalist' rendition of African politics and society in a manner that gives primacy to religion, cultural symbols, witchcraft, ritual murders and traffic in heads (Ellis 2008; White 1997).

Grounded in a Eurocentric perspective, culture is portrayed as a peculiarly pre-colonial tendency perpetuating into the modern, and African culture is depicted as separate from the universal norm in a manner that notions of 're-traditionalisation' portray the movement of African society backwards from modernity (Murunga 2006, 29). The juxtaposing of 'tradition' and 'modernity', and the placing of African culture in the realm of the former, flags critical methodological and epistemological issues which are replete in recent studies of African society and polity. In describing the African society and polity, 'culturalist' explanations have spawned epithets, such as, the 'economy of affection' (Hyden 1980), 'prebendalism' (Joseph 1987), the 'politics of the belly' (Bayart 1993), 'patrimonialism' (Bratton and van de Walle 1994), the 'instrumentalisation of informal politics' (Chabal and Daloz 1999), and the 'disorientations of civil society'. These epithets seek to depict and explain the pathologies of state and politics in Africa by alluding to their

internal cultural dynamics, and in a sense promote a perpetual 'deadlock' in the study of politics, society and economy in Africa.

Culture and the making of Igbo identity

Early sources on Igbo culture only began to account for the Igbo as a monolithic group from the second decade of the twentieth century (Buchanan and Pugh 1962; Forde and Jones 1950; Green 1947; Ottenberg 1965, 1959) and the bulk of the literature in history and social anthropology describes pre-colonial Igbo society as mostly 'stateless', 'acephalous', 'segmentary' and 'individualistic' (Green 1947; Meek 1937; Uchendu 1965). Comprising autonomous villages and village groups ruled by dispersed authority void of formalised, permanent or hereditary leadership positions, the monolithic kingdoms, hierarchical administrative systems and centralised political structures that existed in the Hausa Emirates of northern Nigeria and the Yoruba constitutional monarchies of western Nigeria were not prevalent in Igbo societies. Chinua Achebe's trilogy of novels, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964), provides the most prominent account of Igbo culture over a spectrum of time. In terms of the mobilisation of values and in the transformation of society, Achebe considerably explored the Igbo culture, and provided a head start and a depth of history with which to articulate the Igbo culture, society and identity. The first in these series (*Things Fall Apart*, 1958) has been considered a classic which symbolises a crystallisation of Igbo culture and identity. The significance of the book for the emerging Igbo culture and identity lies in its critical presentation of a particular Igbo community, symbolic of a broader age-old culture, at the eve of the colonial project. The narrative fuses together the changes and challenges which the traditional Igbo community had to contend with when it came in to contact with Christianity, Western education and colonial culture.

While being cognisant of the fact that a collective Igbo consciousness emerged only recently, Achebe (1958) demonstrates that Igbo culture is indeed much older and traditional. Drawing on extensive ethnographic detail, Achebe engages with important aspects of Igbo culture relating to what they 'say' or 'do', traditional rituals of hospitality, festivals, music, family, clan and village organisation, and the entire Igbo worldview. Achebe's account of Igbo village life and its inherent worldview resonates deeply as a description of authentic Igbo culture which has since been ravaged by the colonial enterprise. Achebe's approach amounts to a portrayal of the Igbo or 'Igboness' in strictly essentialist terms, an approach referred to as the 'culture approach to ethnicity' (van den Bersselaar 1998, 19). The outcome of this approach infers primordial and culturally unique formations (Geertz 1963; Koepping 1995), and this approach has significantly influenced the understanding of Igbo identity and that of people who share a common culture. It contrasts with the 'social relations perspective to ethnicity', which advocates that rather than placing ethnicity on shared cultural elements, it should be based on the recognition of the people who share that specific cultural feature which is central to their ethnic identity (Barth 1969).

However, what emerges from the preceding position is a sense in which culture is imbued with emblems and repertoires which provide links between individuals and the ethnic group to which they belong. Ethnic emblems and repertoires are capable of providing a shared identity to individuals in different contexts and with different interests. Even in cases where people harbour diverse ideas about what constitutes their ethnic identity, they often have concrete ideas about the emblems that represent their identity. Common and shared experiences can invariably acquire meaning, and can be evocative and potent

through a process of reduction and interpretation of emblems (Nora 1984, 30), and in shared signs and symbols (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 59; Tonkin 1992, 126–127). The emblems and repertoires of an ethnic group include territory, name, dance, art, a shared history, past heroes and martyrs, and customs and ceremonies, and these collectively constitute durable aspects of an ethnic group's identity which are visible and distinct from others (Smith 1991, 77). Ethnic emblems are subject to the process of production and reproduction, and through these processes the content and value of these emblems take their shape and recognition, with obvious consequences for identity formation, just as Achebe's (1958) description of Igbo culture implies an effort to identify the role and relevance of emblems in the making of Igbo culture.

Culture, ethnic nationalism and the rise of the neo-Biafran movement

Regarded by the Igbo as a struggle for national liberation and an independent Igbo state on the one hand, and as an Igbo ethnic rebellion by official sources on the other hand, the Nigerian–Biafran War marked a turning point in Igbo history and Nigerian history alike. The war still constitutes a point of reference upon which subsequent issues related to Igbo identity are understood and articulated, and some are of the view that the injustices and conditions that made Biafra possible are still very much present in the Nigerian state (Duruji 2009; Ikpeze 2000; Ojukwu 2009). Not only was the war perceived in ethnic terms, but ethnic identity provided the context in which Igbo loyalties were mobilised, and the short-lived 'Republic of Biafra' represented the climax of Igbo nationalism and had a lasting impact on the Igbo ethnic identity. Recollections of Biafra resonate either heroically among the Igbo when they remember 'typical' Igbo traits of resilience, solidarity and resourcefulness that were displayed during the war, or bitterly when they recollect the loss experienced in human and material terms.[3] The re-emergence of neo-Biafran movements can be located within the context of recent developments in the Nigerian political process since the return to civil rule in 1999. Taking the discourse on Igbo culture, society and identity as it existed during the short-lived 'Republic of Biafra' as points of departure, two fundamental processes are examined: the 'production' of Igbo ethnic emblems and repertoires; and their 'deployment in contemporary struggles for self-determination in Nigeria'. The discourse represents not just the production and transmission of culture, but as Johnson (1987) and Strelitz (2000) both argue, more importantly, it reflects the merging of culture and political economy, and links meanings and symbols central to cultural identity to political economy concerns like ownership, structure and agenda setting.

The current neo-Biafran resurgence is championed by an assorted collection of diaspora Igbo organisations based in the United States, such as Igbo USA, Ekwe Nche, Biafra Nigeria World (BNW), Biafra Foundation (BF) and Biafra Actualisation Forum (BAF), most of which emerged in the last decade or so (BAF 2003; BNW 2002). Led by Chief Ralph Uwazuruike, an Indian-trained lawyer, MASSOB is at the forefront of the struggle at home and is often been perceived as embodying a platform capable of launching the broad ideological discourses of the neo-Biafran movement into practical action. MASSOB taps effectively into a transnational network of Igbo groups and identifies with the goals and aspirations of MASSOB in Europe and in the United States (Omeje 2005). The movement has an organisational structure which places the leader of the movement at the apex. It also has its national representatives, national co-ordinators, ambassadors, secretaries, regional administrators, chief area administrators, area administrators, provincial officers, district officers and ordinary members of the movement. MASSOB has widespread influence in the south-east, which it refers to as the 30 regions of Biafra,

and has declared 25 stages in the struggle for the actualisation of Biafra, with each stage featuring a different strategy as the struggle intensifies.

MASSOB represents a post-civil-war, second-generation, nationalist movement that contests the marginalisation of the Igbo since the end of the civil war and intends to resuscitate Igbo ambitions for self-determination. The movement is largely composed of Igbo youths below the age of 40, most of whom were born after the Nigerian Civil War in 1970 and young Igbo adults who are above 40 or middle-aged. Most of them did not experience the war, and those born shortly before the war or during the war were either too young, or were incapable of accurately recollecting the events of that period, but their attitude towards the effects of the war has been directly influenced by memories of the war (Onuoha 2012). As MASSOB's Area Administrator in Lagos, Morris Ogwu, observes:

> The Igbo suffers in present day Nigeria because they fought a war and were defeated... if the issue of addressing past wrongs and injustice is not dealt with, the memory of the defeat in the civil war will remain with most Igbo. (Personal communication, Lagos, 15 December 2009, cited in Onuoha 2011a, 113)

The connection between the present and the past, a past which most of them were not necessarily a part of, is forged through 'collective memory' and belonging to a community.

Apart from references to geographical or territorial identity, the neo-Biafran political project has been buttressed by a resort to memory politics and repertoires. While the Nigerian state is intent on shaping the official history, memories and narratives of the war to suit its own vision, interests and politics, the neo-Biafran movement still connects to the war as a war of Igbo national liberation and rejects the official views as the sole and legitimate framework for remembering and interpreting the war. The dual narratives generated by the Nigerian–Biafran War provide the context in which claims and counter-claims are enacted and the war's association with political violence in contemporary Nigeria. This aptly captures Gramsci's (1971) notion of 'hegemony' and the 'manufacture of consent', and how this is deployed by the ruling class through official culture to create consent. The deployment of Nigerian–Biafran War memory is functional to the extent that it reinforces both the quest and legitimacy of Igbo nationalism, while the aborted secessionist attempt of the Igbo-dominated eastern region from the main federation in the late 1960s and the violence which followed the war are used to shore up memories of Igbo liberation effort.

While it is constantly locked in a struggle with the Nigerian state, at another level and within the context of contemporary Igbo politics, the neo-Biafran movement represents a grassroots-based movement that provides a timely philosophical anchorage and inspiration for disgruntled Igbo youths. The neo-Biafran movement presents itself viable alternative to elite-led Igbo groups like *Ohanaeze Ndi-Igbo* and *Aka Ikenga*,[4] and the Igbo political establishment who tend to be more moderate, less focused and ideological, and who propagate an elitist agenda of ethnic nationalism which the Igbo at the grassroots level consider to be too woolly, malleable, uninspiring and unattractive to produce any change. Given its separatist stance, the entire Igbo elite (prominent Igbo politicians, legislators, governors in the south-eastern states and sociocultural organisations) have been unanimous in distancing themselves from the neo-Biafran movement (Akinyele 2001, 633). The neo-Biafran movement has accused these elite groups of complicity in the subversion of the Igbo agenda, describing them as a group of 'elderly cowards' who have aided the marginalisation of the Igbo (Akinyele 2001, 634). These opposing views have sometimes led to open threats of attack on prominent Igbo leader elites by the neo-Biafran movement, and with

the tacit and open support of these political elites in the south-east there have been several raids on the hideouts of the neo-Biafran movement across the region.[5]

The dynamics of MASSOB's struggle for self-determination began to assume local salience when the movement made headlines in several newspapers in early 2000 as it commenced the campaign to usher in what it referred to as the 'The Birth of a New Biafra' in many Nigerian cities and Igbo towns in the south-east (Uwazurike 2000). MASSOB latched on to ethnicity as a critical reference point, and its primordial and cultural inclinations turned out to be the only channel to ventilate group aspirations and make claims which were hitherto submerged. The relationship between 'exclusivist' ideologies in the Nigerian public space is dialectical and mutually reinforcing, and explains the fractured character of the state and citizenship, and the enduring problems of national cohesion. It is within the context of this development that MASSOB and other neo-Biafran movements began to exhibit separatist claims through the revival of concrete Igbo ethnic emblems and repertoires which constitute critical instruments in the 'construction' and 'deconstruction' of the social order. It is within the purview of this study to flag some of these developments.

Territory, identity and nationhood

The notion of territory is central to the legitimacy of the state and its ability to satisfy the imperatives of statehood, including the assertion of its authority over its entire territory. But ethno-nationalist movements tend to see territory as part of something greater, encompassing the concepts of homeland, culture, religion, spiritual sites, ancestors, sovereignty and security. The distinctive character of the neo-Biafran struggle exists in the unique pre-existing myth or ideal of independent 'territory' or 'statehood' which the movement draws upon, and which revives tendencies of state contestation (Onuoha 2011b). With the earnest commencement of its activities, MASSOB embarked on various forms of civil disobedience in a bid to dismantle all infrastructure that supports the Nigerian government in the south-east region. The movement established the Biafran Security Agency (BSA) to take on board security-related issues in major cities in the region, and to engage in civic and communal functions like enforcement of rules on residence of states considered to be Igbo states or Biafra territories and to peg rents where they are exorbitant; to enforce sanitation laws in urban cities in the region with punitive measures for defaulters; to vend and enforce the official price of petroleum products in filling stations in Igbo states and the forceful seizure of fuel tankers moving from any part of the south-east to the north as a sign of protest against the non-supply of adequate products to the region (*The Guardian*, 30 November 2000). In 2003, the movement floated the idea of a 'Biafran income tax' which would be non-voluntary and used in the provision of social welfare, sanitation and amenities (*Vanguard*, 24 November 2003). The movement also mobilised for the boycott of the National Identity Card Scheme, and the last census exercise (in 2006) in Igbo states of the south-east on the grounds that these states are not part of Nigeria, but Biafran territory, and therefore, harassed and intimidated those who participated (*Saturday Champion*, 7 July 2007, 14; *Daily Sun*, 1 December 2008, 19). In the last elections in 2007, MASSOB mobilised the Igbo of the south-east, Igbo political aspirants and office-holders through the use of handbills, posters and newspapers to boycott the elections, since it perceives the region as a separate entity and not as a part of Nigeria.[6]

MASSOB's claim is to achieve the self-determination of the Igbo by peaceful and non-violent means, but its activities, including stay-at-home strikes, rallies and intermittent civil disobedience pose a threat and a challenge to the sovereignty of the Nigerian state over Igboland. The movement evokes counter-claims of 'sovereignty' and 'security' and

seeks to create alternative spaces and parallel structures of power and influence in their Igbo homeland. These developments negate the absolutist view of the Nigerian state as the sole founder and main guarantor of law and order, the main source of social rules, norms and values guiding the day-to-day existence of the people in the region. It calls into question the state-centric approaches to governance and empirically unveils alternative forms of social regulation and governance as a form of resistance against formal state control and sovereignty. It brings to fore the conflicting notions of 'sovereignty' and 'security' as being played out in south-eastern Nigeria. While the Nigerian state depicts sovereignty and security from 'above', based on its territorial legitimacy and formal control of state apparatus, MASSOB evokes popular conceptions of sovereignty and security from 'below', which are couched in terms of preserving ethnic identity and achieving territorial independence.

Commemoration of the nation

Commemoration concerns 'who' or 'what' is to be preserved. The commemoration of the 'Biafra Day' by MASSOB demonstrates how the significance of a historical event is transformed from one generation to the next according to the changing context of the social order. The commemoration of the declaration of the 'Republic of Biafra' produces two motifs: cultural and political. Since the emergence of MASSOB in 1999, the movement has rejected outright official commemorations relating to the civil war, such as, the Armed Forces Remembrance Day and the other monuments relating to the war, but commemorates every 30 May to mark the anniversary of the founding of the Biafran nation on 30 May 1967. Commemoration, memory and identity fuse together in a manner that reinforces contemporary Igbo nationalism in Nigeria. This produces an agenda that recognises the creation of 'Biafra' as the height of collective Igbo culture, ideal and consciousness.

MASSOB draws on memories of violence perpetrated against the Igbo after the eastern region seceded from the Nigerian federation on 30 May 1967. Since this violence was carried out on a people (the Igbo) with one identity, MASSOB recalls this memory and ties it into Igbo identity. These commemorations are carried out in observable ceremonies and are always disrupted by State Security Services and the Nigerian Police Force, but more importantly, these ceremonies have become rituals characterised by a rule-governed activity of a symbolic character that draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling they hold to be of special significance (Lukes 1975). These practices have engendered political goals, like organisational integration, legitimation, construction of solidarity and inculcation of political beliefs (Kertzer 1991, 87), and the movement invariably 'channels emotions, guides cognition, organises social groups, and by providing a sense of continuity, links the past with the present and the present with the future' (Kertzer 1988, 9–10). Of crucial importance is the understanding that groups are not just followers or partakers in rituals, but that they also create these rituals, which makes ritual a powerful tool for political action (Kertzer 1988, 12). MASSOB seeks to give voice to some major transformations in Igbo history with a view to emphasising the structural, symbolic and narrative aspects of its identity in its struggle with the Nigerian state.

The Biafran anthem, flags and emblems

Flags and emblems are critical memory repertoires which nations draw on to mark significant events in their past. The flag is a potent symbol for all nations, and the use of flags

conjures up notions of ultimate statehood and unity. On the contrary, the choice of an alternative flag by MASSOB reflects the crisis of nationhood and Igbo citizenship in Nigeria. Since May 2000, when MASSOB symbolically hoisted the Biafran flag and officially presented the Declaration of Demand for a Sovereign State of Biafra from the People and Government of Nigeria, the flag has remained critical to its activities. The green–red–black Biafran flag has come to be a powerful symbol and reminder of Biafran nation and Igbo nationalism. There have been various successful and unsuccessful attempts to hoist the green–red–black Biafran flag in major roads, streets, billboards and strategic places in the south-eastern states of Nigeria. At all MASSOB rallies, most members of the movement carry the Biafran flag to show their allegiance and patriotism to the quest for self-determination, and these events are always marked by clashes between the movement and the State Security Services. Representations of Biafra, one of the most important being the emblem of the 'Land of the Rising Sun', serve as a crucial reminder of self-determination. The 'Rising Sun' has 11 sunrays, representing the 11 tribes of Israel. The Igbo regard themselves as one of the lost tribes of Israel and the twelfth one missing somewhere in Africa.[7] Within MASSOB premises, it is common to find members chanting Christian songs of deliverance and rendering the 'Biafran Anthem'. The 'Biafran Anthem' generates an apposite patriotic response and comes across as an instrument of unity, a symbol of statehood and aspirational machinery for a desired, but yet to be manifested, independent political entity. For members of the movement, the use of Biafran flags and anthem in the activities of the movement renews the Igbo nationalist spirit, and inspires members of the movement to aspire to a re-enactment of the freedom that was experienced with the creation of Biafra, but which they were forcefully deprived of by the Nigerian state.[8]

Biafran images, objects and literatures

MASSOB also employs the use of powerful images and objects to give meaning to the quest for self-determination. In several raids on the movement's hideouts across the south-east, Biafran military uniforms, belts, umbrellas, currencies, stickers, pictures of Biafran soldiers in military uniforms in training camps, Biafran documents, sewing machines and an almanac of Biafran hierarchy have been discovered. These images and objects are critical in the sense that they are consumed, manipulated and displayed in such a way that forces their consumption to create an environment of political awareness. MASSOB activists are not only intent on making the quest for Igbo self-determination visible within Nigeria, but they also intend to be reckoned with globally and in the international community. Hence, in addition to political protests and civil disobedience, images and objects are appropriated as effective ways of getting their message across to the domestic and global audience.

The use of Biafran T-shirts, mufflers and face-caps have constituted contemporary items of resistance against the Nigerian state. Biafran T-shirts, cardigans, mufflers and face caps have been worn by MASSOB activists who engage in protests and demonstrations in streets, town halls and in other public arenas. Like other neo-Biafran materials, the T-shirts, mufflers and face caps are portrayed against the overall background of the Biafran colour (green–red–black), and the strong preference for this attire is evident among the young men in the movement who are more confrontational in their attitude and stance on self-determination. The preference for this relatively confrontational strategy is indicative of the rebellious stance of the movement against the state, a tendency that resonates with other youth-dominated nationalist groups globally. The wearing of this attire indicates not only a social choice of consumption, but also a political choice based on

their interpretation and reaction to certain developments within the Nigeria state, and the need to locate their sense of identity and place within such contexts. In a sense, these items of clothing have become a popular national symbol of protest and remembrance in the public spaces across the entire region.

The proliferation of poorly produced literature, pamphlets, newspapers, handbills, posters and banners, among other materials, serves as a means of claiming the south-eastern urban space for their cause. The depiction of these materials with forthright political messages transforms the public space, changing streets and major roads in the region into a political space. This brings to the fore the manipulation of the public spaces to reflect the aims and objectives of the neo-Biafran cause in the region. The dotting of several strategic spaces with these materials means that the public spaces are taken over by political messages, and the public is forced to consume them on account of the fact that they cannot be avoided. This makes the public both a 'willing' and an 'unwilling' consumer of neo-Biafran politics. While the willing consumers are those who advocate and support the movement's quest for self-determination, the unwilling consumers are those who are forced to encounter these materials even when they see them as objects of political propaganda.

The Igbo–Jewish connection and processes of conscientisation

Perhaps, the most striking and exploited aspect of the neo-Biafran struggle for self-determination is the Igbo identification with the Jews, who are perceived to have suffered the same fate as the Igbo nation in the face of genocide. The neo-Biafran movement emphasises narratives that link the Igbo to oriental traditions of origin. These narratives stem from Nri, popularly described as the cradle of Igbo culture and home to the famous kingdom of Eri. The myth of Eri describes him as the founding father of the Igbo civilisation, the fifth son of the Gad, one of the original 12 sons of Jacob, and the lost tribe of Israel (Alaezi 1999, 94). Based on this, it is commonplace to assume that the Jews and Igbo are linked by virtue of their historical experiences and cultural practices such as purity taboos, circumcision, and animal sacrifices. While claims of Igbo 'Jewishness' remain fictitious, their importance in the discourse of Igbo nationalism lies in the reference to a real world-historic case of a people who have been victims of persecution, marginalisation and deprivation.

The neo-Biafran movement invokes biblical stories of the deliverance of the 'children of Israel' from Egyptian bondage, 'David and the Goliath' and 'Samson and the Philistines', and equates these with their struggle for self-determination from an oppressive and authoritarian Nigerian state.[9] The mobilisation of Christian virtues is one of the core strategies of the movement. At various times, apart from embarking on peaceful demonstrations and conscientising the Igbo populace to embark on civil disobedience, the movement has called for prayer and fasting sessions and has urged all churches (particularly in the east) to conduct special prayers for Biafra (*Daily Champion*, 26 August 2008; *Daily Champion*, 13 May 2008). The movement engages in lectures to emphasise and conscientise its members in the pro-Gandhian and non-violence philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, and the peaceful resistance movement of the African American civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr.

Biafran currency and international passport

Closely linked to the revival of Biafran statehood is the issue of currency. In 2005, the Biafran pound was reintroduced in the south-eastern part of Nigeria and in some Igbo-dominated markets across the West African sub-region. One of the ways in which regional Igbo diaspora nationalism has materialised has been through the mobilisation and use of the

Biafran pound for business transactions by Igbo traders who are active in the busy frontier markets in neighbouring countries like Benin, Togo and Ghana. This speaks to the symbolic and historical meaning attached to the currency, thereby producing a legacy that hinges on historical significance, network-embedded trust and future aspirations of a homeland (Owen 2009, 588–589). MASSOB's currency gambit is predicated on a historical past and an ethnic-nationalist mythology that draws on the notion of an idealised 'Republic of Biafra' whose liberating potential was tragically truncated before it could run its course. For MASSOB and other neo-Biafran groups, the Biafran project is usually portrayed in terms of realising the inherent economic potentials of a 'downtrodden' and 'marginalised' industrious Igbo nation, and the Biafran pound serves as a symbol of this moral project which intends to ward off a 'decadent, illegal and unholy union' called Nigeria (*Vanguard*, 24 November 2003). Apart from contesting the sovereignty of the Nigerian state through currency, on 1 July 2009, as part of events to celebrate its 10th anniversary, the movement purportedly launched the 'Biafran international passport' at the Freedom House in Okwe, Onuimo Local Government Area of Imo State. While these items are mainly symbolic in their value, they challenge the 'absolutist' posture of the Nigerian state as the main source of social rules guiding the day-to-day existence of the people in the region, and also point to a notable extent to how the 'currency' and 'passport' tie into the identity, politics and cultural repertoires of the Igbo.

Neo-Biafran websites

Like most ethno-nationalist movements, MASSOB draws on a collective sense of Igbo heroics and achievements in the past, and the present experience of deprivation, marginalisation and injustice against the Igbo within the context of the Nigerian nation-state. MASSOB and other neo-Biafran groups espouse and romanticise a brand of Igbo nationalism that delves into ethnic chauvinism. The websites of these groups are also inundated with clips, images and chants that eulogise the Igbo nation, history, heroes, achievements and folklores.[10] This manner of heroising narrative is grounded in the reconstruction of national past, which permeates temporality and evokes 'triumph', 'resilience' or 'victory' for the group based on enduring characteristics (Malkki 1995, 1, 55). It is not uncommon to find denigrations and indictments of other groups making them culpable for the perceived marginalisation of the Igbo (Ndi–Igbo) in Nigeria. Through the evocation of 'the exploitation and persecution of the Igbo by the Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba oligarchs', and their portrayal with highly subjective stereotypes, the pro-Biafran groups have been able to appeal to the senses and sensibilities of the Igbo people (Biafra Foundation 2004). Progressively, many diaspora pro-Biafran groups in the United States and Europe commemorate the annual Biafra Day with activities marked by the display of Biafran flag and artefacts, peaceful demonstrations and public symposia in support of the quest for self-determination.

Conclusion: culture and the politics of self-determination in Nigeria

This paper has focused on the hybrid of 'culture' (material and immaterial cultural repertoires) and 'politics' (rights, social justice and self-determination) in the making of ethno-nationalist projects. It unveils the manner in which cultural repertoires and political discourses influence nationalist ideals, and how they find expression in the dynamics of struggle and resistance. The fusion of culture and politics have become a veritable means of reclaiming the public space for the actualisation of ethno-nationalist projects, and they also play a critical role in reinforcing a sense of group identity and shape the practice

and ideology of self-determination movements. This analysis emphasises the relationship between identity on the one hand, and objects, images and ideas on the other hand, and the actual role of these objects, images and ideas in framing a notion of cultural authenticity in the politics of self-determination. The expressive function of this tendency is aptly captured by Appadurai (1996) as the conscious 'invention' and 'reinvention' of cultural identities in the context of self-determination movements targeted against nation-states.

The activities of the neo-Biafran movement can thus be seen as providing the contexts and extenuating circumstances under which 'cultural' and 'political' nationalism are intertwined as salient features of the Nigerian public space. The orientation of the neo-Biafran movement is shaped by the specific framework of cultural practices, ethnic identity and political contestation within which it emerged. The neo-Biafran movement inserts cultural repertoires into a particular version of Igbo history and Igbo encounter with the Nigerian state. The cultural clout which underpins the neo-Biafran struggle is loaded with symbolism and political utility, and marked by transformational, populist, and sometimes, ambiguous outcomes. For those who lived through the experience, Biafran artefacts and emblems are physical memorials to the short-lived existence of the republic; and for second-generation ethno-nationalist-minded Igbo youths who did not experience the war, it is a poignant connection between the past and the present. The present has successfully tapped into the past to fuel a timely opposition based on a perceived sense of marginalisation and exclusion of the Igbo nation from the benefits of citizenship and socioeconomic rights within the Nigerian polity.

Critical political economy approaches to culture recognise the fact that it is produced and consumed in a context laden with power relations, imbued with inequalities of power, prestige and profit. The extent to which culture is deployed to serve the interest of the powerful invites us to examine and rethink it in its relationship to social power. Clearly, MASSOB and other neo-Biafran movements present a novel challenge to the unresolved crisis of state legitimacy, citizenship and national question in Nigeria. Apart from its emphasis on cultural nationalism, the reinvention of the Biafran project throws light on the political underpinning and defining character of the movement, and how it is vested in fresh and innovative symbolism and status. As Leerssen (2006, 568) points out, the complexities of these processes still point to the need 'to address the agenda of cultural nationalism in analytic rather than merely descriptive terms'. What is more, the demands of cultural nationalism are much more enduring than other kinds of demands by virtue of its appropriation in addressing a critical issue in the Nigerian context. The Nigerian–Biafran War was not just any other event in Nigerian history; it occupies a critical place in the historical continuum of the Nigerian state and its memory-making project, one which transcends the state itself to include its different ethnic constituencies. Particularly interesting in the MASSOB and neo-Biafran context is the manner in which the notion of culture is appropriated not just in bridging the idea of 'tradition' and 'modernity', but in how it is deployed in the realisation of a critical political project. Adebanwi (2005, 363) alerts us to the conception of 'culture as a process, a space, as well as an institutionalised instrument of defining oneself in relation to others, individuals, group members and the world in general'. The 'cultural repertoires' of the neo-Biafran movement construct group identity, identify forms of external identities (the 'other') and shore up the boundaries of its own collective group identity, and are ultimately immersed in the social construction of power relations in a multi-ethnic Nigerian state.

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Notes

1. Some of these groups emerged in the early and mid 1990s, and their existence and activities are gleaned from Nigerian newspapers, author's fieldwork and interviews. However, some of these groups have ceased to exist (or are dormant), while others still remain active.
2. See <http://www.biafraland.com/NewsAnalysis2009/newsanalysis050809.htm>.
3. The latter category refers to those who experienced the horrors of the war. Personal communications (both formally and informally) with a cross-section of Igbo people above the age of 50 reveal that most are not favourably disposed to the idea of another war or a secessionist attempt. This difference is also reflected in the aggregation of individual expectations within MASSOB itself. For Emmanuel Onyeme, one of MASSOB's Area Administrators in Lagos, 'the realization of the Biafran dream may not be achieved immediately, but my present engagement with the struggle is meant to ensure that my children will enjoy the fruits of emancipation' (Personal Communication, Lagos, 26 January 2009, cited in Onuoha 2011). This view contrasts sharply with that of Chuks, a younger member of the MASSOB in Lagos, who asserts that 'all we want is Biafra and total independence now' (Personal Communication, Lagos, 19 January 2009, cited in Onuoha 2011).
4. Chief Goddy Uwazuruike maintained in an interview that the idea of succession resonates with younger generation of Igbo because they did not witness the war (Personal Communication, Lagos, 15 January 2009, cited in Onuoha 2011, 104).
5. *The Nation*, 30 September 2008; *Daily Punch*, 22 September 2008. This can also be gleaned from different narratives of members of the neo-Biafran movement in newspapers and personal interviews.
6. See the report on the election boycott at: <http://www.biafra.cwis.org/pdf/REPORT%20ON%20ELECTION.pdf>, accessed on 27 February 2009.
7. Some claim that the 11 rays of sun represents the former 11 provinces of the defunct 'Republic of Biafra'.
8. The use of these symbols and items of clothing was observed during my fieldwork, and on various occasions when I met formally and informally with different members of the neo-Biafran movement. For Morris Ogwu, the Area Administrator of MASSOB, who also operates the means of commercial transport in Lagos popularly known as *Okada,* the significance of always wearing MASSOB clothing is to affirm the existence of Biafra (Personal Communication, Lagos, 15 January 2009).
9. Depictions of the Igbo as the 'Jews of Africa' are amplified by a school of Hamitic historiography which claims that the Igbo are descendants of a migrant Israeli tribe.
10. These websites include: <www.biafraland.com>; <www.biafranet.com>; <http://magazine.biafranigeriaworld.com>; <www.umuigbousa.org>; <www.kwenu.com>; <http://ekwenche.org>; <http://biafraforum.biafranet.com>; <http://www.bianu.net>; <http://igboforum.igbonet.com>; and <http://wazobia.biafranigeria.com>.

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