



# Youth Activism and Ethnic Violence in Nigeria: From Decolonisation to the Nigeria-Biafra War

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## Abstract

Scholarship on violent conflicts in Africa has often constructed two images of the youth: the powerless victims deprived of any human agency and the ruthless perpetrators of acts of violence seen in many cases of child soldiers, armed militias, rapists and looters. Relying on interviews, archival materials and other sources, this article examines youth activities in Nigeria during the decolonisation politics and the first decade of independence, including the Nigeria-Biafra War and post-war period, focusing on ethnic violence and survival. It argues that the politicisation of ethnicity and resource distribution in Nigeria unleashed chains of violence that culminated in the thirty-month devastating war; and that in terms of the pre-war, wartime, and post-war events, Nigerian youth have played complex and varied roles that make it difficult to classify them as either actors or victims of the violent conflicts in the country.

## Résumé

Les études sur les conflits violents en Afrique ont souvent construit deux images de la jeunesse : des victimes impuissantes privées de toute compétence humaine et les auteurs impitoyables d'actes de violence d'enfants-soldats, de milices armées, de violeurs et de pilleurs. S'appuyant sur des entretiens, des documents d'archives et d'autres sources, cet article examine les activités des jeunes au Nigeria pendant la décolonisation et la première décennie d'indépendance, y compris pendant la guerre Nigéria-Biafra et la période d'après-guerre, en mettant l'accent sur les violences ethniques et la survie. L'article affirme que la politisation de l'appartenance ethnique et de la répartition des ressources au Nigéria a déclenché des cycles de violence

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qui ont abouti à la guerre dévastatrice qui a duré trente mois; et qu'en ce qui concerne les événements d'avant-guerre, de guerre et d'après-guerre, la jeunesse nigériane a joué des rôles complexes et variés qui rendent difficile leur classification en acteurs ou victimes des conflits violents dans le pays.

## **Introduction**

Scholarship on violent conflicts in Africa has often constructed two images of the youth: as powerless victims deprived of any human agency, a depiction which resonates strongly within the humanitarian community; and as ruthless perpetrators of acts of violence seen in the many cases of child soldiers, armed militias, rapists and looters (Beah 2007; Denov and Maclure 2007; Human Rights Watch 2003; 1994; Barth 2002). The ambiguity of the youth as vulnerable victims of development crises, as well as 'ultra-empowered' agents and perpetrators of violent acts who have played a key role in the collapse of African states, has been documented (Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Abbink and Kessel 2004). Yet, there are youth who, due to their privileged position and sheer hard work and determination, have contributed to national liberation, nation building and development in Africa. The history of warfare in modern Africa has shown that young people have increasingly constituted major combatants in civil wars. While the majority of these teenage combatants have been young men and boys, girl fighters have also become increasingly common (MacKenzie 2012; O'Gorman 2011; Coulter 2009; Coulter, Persson and Utas 2008; McDonnell and Akallo 2007; McKay and Mazurana 2004; Wilson 1991). There are several reasons why African youths have been drawn into violent conflicts as members of national armies, paramilitaries, rebel groups and other armed organisations. While some were abducted and physically forced to become combatants, others willingly volunteered to fight. In their study of why young soldiers voluntarily choose to fight, Rachel Brett and Irma Specht (2004) discuss a number of reasons, including general environmental factors, such as conditions of impoverishment, the individual personal history of the youth and the disintegration of their world. Other factors include poverty, lack of access to education and other basic social services, youth unemployment, hopelessness and despair, as well as the influence of family and friends, politics and ideology, culture and tradition.

Citizenship status, ethnicisation of politics and the politicisation of ethnolinguistic pluralism in many African countries have served as motivating factors, as communities and social groups feel marginalised, alienated, under-represented or denied of their rights to exist as bona fide members of the state (Sall 2004; Nnoli 1998; Kandeh 1992). Mamadou Diouf (2003: 5) aptly

notes that the exclusion of young Africans from the 'arenas of power, work, education, and leisure' has forced them to 'construct [spaces] of socialization and new sociabilities' in which they assert their identity, either on the margin or at the centre of society. These problems are often blamed on the elites (political, military and business), who not only control the political and economic apparatuses of the state, but have also placed their personalities and ethnolinguistic backgrounds or religious orientations above good governance and the well-being of the citizens. Elite disdain and indifference and the consequent geography of youth delinquency and resistance have made generational tensions and youth crises prominent themes in recent analyses of civil conflicts in Africa (Burton and Charton-Bigot 2010; Waller 2006).

In this article, I examine youth activities and ethnic violence in Nigeria from the decolonisation politics to the Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967–70. The article discusses the roles of young Nigerian men and women in the events leading to the outbreak of the war and during the war. I argue that the politicisation of ethnicity and resource distribution in Nigeria unleashed chains of violence that culminated in the thirty-month devastating war, and that in terms of the pre-war, wartime and post-war events, Nigerian youth played complex and varied roles that make it difficult to classify them as either actors or victims of the violent conflicts in the country. Among Nigerian youth were intellectuals, students and activists who engaged in the decolonisation struggle and nation-building efforts, as well as those who felt exploited, marginalised and excluded from avenues of power and resources by the colonial and post-colonial states, thereby becoming perpetrators of violent acts. In demanding their rights, inclusion and integration, Nigerian youth had engaged in contentious politics or contentious collective actions, employing violent acts as a legitimate weapon of negotiation against real or perceived state and societal oppression, marginalisation and indifference. Understandably, studies on Nigerian youth during these periods have largely focused on urban poverty, juvenile delinquency, vigilantism and criminalisation (Osaghae et al. 2011; Heap 1997; 2010; Pratten 2008; Fourchard 2005; 2006). While this article has benefited from these studies, it extends the discussion by including the roles of Nigerian youth as intellectuals, nationalists and nation builders; and as perpetrators of acts of violence and victims of senseless killings. At this juncture, it is important to define who constitute the youth.

### **Who are the youth?**

There are multiple definitions and categorisations of the youth. In this article, I refer to the youth as a demographic and social category whose members are eligible to participate in specific institutions and functions. They are the

foundation and future leaders of any society due to their creative energies and talents, their labour power and dynamism. Because the youth are seen as a measure of how a country can reproduce and sustain itself, they are regarded as the greatest investment for a country's development as they are in the most productive phase of their life as citizens. The youth include individuals who do not yet have the material means and the recognition to establish themselves as providers for others, and are often a vulnerable group with peculiar but unmet needs and aspirations. Generally, the youth have a history of considerable tensions and conflicts, engendered by the process of social and physical maturation as well as struggles to adjust to societal realities around them.

Youth are often described in literature as a victimised, marginalised, excluded, threatened and abused social category, and consequently angry, bitter, frustrated, desperate and violent. Due to the increasing disappearance of traditional kin-based, community and multi-generational associations that had managed the transformation from boyhood or girlhood to manhood or womanhood, and the inability of institutions of the African state and society to mediate or mitigate adverse effects of such an inevitable transition, Nigerian and African youth have constantly struggled and negotiated for survival, identity and inclusion. As a political force, they have related and responded to state and society, depending on their levels of incorporation or alienation, engagement or disengagement, integration or deviance, and rapprochement or resistance.

This article reinforces the dichotomous and yet complex image of the youth as agents of development and nation-building on one hand, as well as instruments of violence and underdevelopment on the other hand, as captured in African youth studies (Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Abbink and Kessel 2004). It suggests that governments and non-governmental organisations have used biological age to categorise the youth. While the United Nations General Assembly defines the youth as those persons between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, the African Youth Charter categorises individuals from fifteen to thirty-five years old as youth or young people. The Nigerian government classifies the youth as young men and women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. In colonial Nigeria, out of a total population of 30.4 million in 1952–53, males constituted 48.9 per cent and females 51.1 per cent. For ages below fourteen years during this period, the population was 46.1 per cent male and 45.1 per cent female; ages 15–59, 46.6 per cent male, and 46.4 per cent female; and above 50 years, it was 7.3 per cent male and 8.5 per cent female. In 1963, there were 28.1 million males and 27.6 million females out of a total population of 55.7 million (Ekundare 1973; Mabogunje 1968).

According to the 1991 Population Census in Nigeria, there were 30 million youth out of a population of 88.9 million, and of these, 14 million (47 per cent) were male and 16 million (53 per cent) were female (Federal Government of Nigeria 2001). While in 2006 the youth constituted about 40 per cent of the 140 million people in Nigeria; in 2011, they accounted for 43 per cent of the 162 million Nigerians (Population Reference Bureau 2011). It was in recognition of the growing population of the Nigerian youth and their critical role in development that the government established the National Youth Policy in the 1980s, with subsequent reviews over the years (Federal Government of Nigeria 2009; 2001). The African Youth Charter's categorisation of individuals between fifteen and thirty-five years old as youth is adopted here because the age bracket reflects colonial and postcolonial categorisations of youths in Nigeria. However, it is important to note that the youth organisations examined below had senior or elderly members and leaders who were self-proclaimed 'youth'. The discussion below relies on different genres of primary and secondary sources, including archival records and oral interviews.

### **Nigerian youth and the decolonisation movement, 1930s–50s**

The British brought together different ethnolinguistic groups into what became known as Nigeria through several processes of conquests, cooptation and amalgamation. The British colonial administration introduced a number of innovations, such as increased access to Western education, which brought about literacy and multilingualism; health and other social services; infrastructural development; increased urbanisation; a monetised economy; and increased access to foreign capital. These innovations helped to improve the lives of many Nigerians. At the same time, the colonial government pursued exploitative policies and discriminatory practices that alienated many Nigerians from the colonial state and undermined their well-being. Colonialism engendered a culture of violence and exploitation, which had serious consequences for the decolonisation politics and process of nation building in postcolonial Nigeria (Falola 2009; Ochonu 2009; Chuku 2005; Lugard 1920; Nigerian National Archives, Enugu (NNAE) 1914). Colonial administrative policies – regionalism, development of administrative headquarters, infrastructural development, increased urbanisation, among others – had ambivalent impacts on inter-group relations in Nigeria. As Obaro Ikime has argued, 'colonial rule was something of a paradox: on the one hand, it brought Nigerian peoples together in new groupings and for new purposes; on the other, it emphasised already existing differences and introduced new ones' (2006: 97).

The history of the youth movement in Nigeria can be traced back to the 1920s when the Union of Young Nigerians (UYN) was established by a group of progressives in Lagos. Under the leadership of J.C. Vaughn (Yoruba), Ayo Williams (Yoruba) and Ernest Ikoli (Ijo), the UYN was founded immediately after the 1923 elections to the Legislative Council in order to emancipate young Nigerian men from the political domination of such older figures as Herbert Macaulay and John K. Randle and to develop their interests in the affairs of their country (Coleman 1958: 217). The UYN remained active for five years and contested elections, but was unsuccessful. Similarly, the generational differences between forward-looking youth and old-time conservative moderates led to the formation of the Nigerian Union of Young Democrats (NUYD) in 1938 by professional and middle-class supporters of the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). They detested the 'accommodationist and parochial outlook' of the leadership of the NNDP (Sklar 1963: 58). Ayo Williams, a barrister and former leader of the UYN, became the first president of the NUYD.

Another youth organisation of importance is the Lagos Youth Movement (LYM) that was founded in 1933 by Ikoli, Vaughan, Samuel Akinsanya and H.O. Davies. Eyo Ita (1903–72) and his Nigeria Youth League Movement (NYLM) in Calabar, with the slogan 'Youth Must Save Society', influenced the founding of the LYM (Azikiwe 1961: 306–7). Regarded as 'the nucleus of Nigeria's first genuine nationalist organization', the LYM was critical of the 'inferior status of the Yaba Higher College' as a vocational institution for diplomas and therefore demanded government scholarships for its students to pursue more studies in the United Kingdom (Coleman 1958: 218). Leaders of the youth movement also demanded the appointment of Africans to high positions of the civil service. They campaigned against legislative discriminatory practices against Africans. In 1936, the LYM changed its name to the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM).

The NYM was described as the first genuine Nigerian nationalist organisation, which was strengthened by the return of Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904–96) in 1937 (after his nine-year sojourn in the United States of America and three years in the Gold Coast), who in 1938 brought to the movement 'militant racial consciousness; an expanding sensationalist press; and a large number of educated Nigerians previously excluded or unmobilized' (Coleman 1958: 224). Many Igbo youth also joined the NYM due to Azikiwe's influence. With an increased number of radical members and its own newspaper, the *Service* (later, the *Daily Service*), the NYM assumed more active political and nationalist roles hitherto unknown, and contested and won elections to the Lagos Town Council and all three seats in the Legislative Council in 1938. The successful election results ended the

political dominance of Herbert Macaulay's NNDP. In its Nigerian Youth Charter and Constitution, the NYM emphasised self-determination and national unity. It pursued the unification of Nigerian ethnolinguistic groups as well as public education for national consciousness. With branches in major cities throughout Nigeria, the NYM embodied a multi-ethnic principle in character and in its membership. The NYM's success was so remarkable that it was described as the 'first major step in the Nigerianization of the nationalist movement' (Coleman 1958: 225).

It is important to note that both older and young men dominated the leadership and membership of the NYM. Women's involvement in the NYM was as auxiliaries through the NYM Ladies' Section, which was headed by Oyinkan Abayomi (1897–1990), whose husband, Kofoworola Abayomi, once served as the president of the parent body. If there were women members of the NYM or LYM, they were few and were excluded from the executive committees and policy-making positions of the movements. Yet, women provided the movement's powerful support base for voter and resource mobilisation. Reasons for the limited involvement of young women in the affairs of the NYM could be explained. The politics of gender within the ranks of the NYM and lack of interest on the part of male members to advance women's interests forced a few interested women, such as Abayomi, to focus their effort on women's organisations to address issues important to them. The patriarchal sensibilities that emphasised the education of sons over daughters whereby, parents preferred to send their sons as heirs to formal schools since daughters, would be married away, placed women in a disadvantaged position. The gendered nature of mission and colonial education offered boys and young men opportunities to train for leadership and other positions in society while domesticating girls and young women through a curriculum that emphasised wifehood, motherhood, home economics and management, hygiene, needlework and other related activities. Moreover, the NYM and its predecessors were urban-based. In colonial Nigeria, women and girls, especially single ones, were discouraged from moving to the cities through job discrimination, their demonisation and criminalisation as prostitutes and carriers or transmitters of diseases. As Akin Mabogunje (1968: 265–6) rightly observed, during this period, 'Lagos remained a predominantly male and very youthful city.' Patriarchal sensibilities also explained why when political parties were formed by men in the 1950s, women could only be admitted as auxiliaries through their membership of women's wings of those parties (Chuku 2009; Mba 1982).

From 1939, a chain of events, shaped by the intersections of ethnicity, generational competition, personalities and policy issues occurred, and culminated in the demise of the NYM in 1951. There were discernible



cracks in its leadership as older members pursued moderate proposals of giving educated Nigerians a greater share in the government, as more radical members, led by Azikiwe, campaigned for a rapid process of self-determination. At the age of thirty-five, Azikiwe resigned from the executive committee in 1939, citing business concerns related to the competition between his group of newspapers, especially the *West African Pilot* and the *Daily Service* under the editorship of Ernest Ikoli. There were also political and intra-ethnic problems. Following the resignation of K. Abayomi from the Legislative Council in February 1941, Ikoli (president of the NYM) and Samuel Akinsanya (an Ijebu Yoruba and the vice president) competed for the legislative vacant seat. With overwhelming Yoruba support, mainly from non-Ijebu, Ikoli defeated Akinsanya who enjoyed Azikiwe's support. Akinsanya and his Ijebu Yoruba kinsmen, as well as Azikiwe and other Igbo members of the NYM, interpreted Ikoli's victory as a manifestation of intra-Yoruba ethnic prejudice in which Lagos Yoruba could not support an Ijebu Yoruba. But Obafemi Awolowo (1909–87), an Ijebu, supported Ikoli over his fellow Ijebu. Consequently, Azikiwe, Akinsanya and their supporters left the NYM and a press war ensued between the *West African Pilot* and the *Daily Service* (Okafor 1989; Arifalo 1986; Awolowo 1960). The departure was a major blow to the NYM, which got its mass support from the Igbo. Richard Sklar (1963) attributed Azikiwe's clash with the Yoruba elite of the NYM as a latent sign of Igbo-Yoruba tension and a major factor in the ethnic hostility that erupted later.

Nigerian youths also played important roles as student union activists. Organised student activism in Nigeria started with the formation of the Nigerian Union of Students (NUS) in 1939 by a new generation of secondary school students and young educated Nigerians at Abeokuta Grammar School. With three branches by 1943, leaders and members of the NUS organised the Ojokoro Youth Rally in the outskirts of Lagos, protesting to the Secretary of State for the Colonies against restrictions preventing Nigerian students from going to the United Kingdom for further studies. Leading nationalist figures spoke at the rally, and at the end, participants affirmed the need to pursue Nigeria's self-government through a united national front. Because of its success and impact on young Nigerian minds, the rally was described as 'one of the critical events in the political mobilization of youth in World War II' years (Coleman 1958: 263).

In March 1944, students of King's College, Lagos went on strike when the colonial government converted their dormitories into an army barrack. The strike was forcefully suppressed and some of the student leaders were conscripted into the army. Frustrated by the strike experience and the high-



handedness of the government, student leaders saw the need for coordinated nationalist efforts under a central body. On 10 June 1944, the NUS organised a mass meeting at the Glover Memorial Hall, Lagos, to address the strike, ways of raising funds for a national school, and the establishment of a representative national body. The meeting was presided over by Herbert Macaulay and the outcome was the establishment of the National Council of Nigeria (NCN) on 26 August 1944, with over forty organisations, which included political parties, ethnic unions, trade unions, professional associations, literary societies, religious groups, social clubs and women's organisations. As members of the NCN, these organisations resolved to work in unity to achieve Nigeria's independence. Macaulay was elected as president of the Council, and Azikiwe as the general secretary, two personalities whose domineering political influence allegedly prevented leaders of the NYM from joining the new organisation. By 1945, the NCN had over 100 affiliate organisations, including three ethnic unions from the Cameroons, resulting in a change of name to the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). Following the death of Macaulay in 1946, Azikiwe took over the leadership of the NCNC, utilised his chain of newspapers and turned it into a formidable nationalist organisation. It has been generally acknowledged that from 1944 to 1957, the NCNC, which later became a political party in 1951, operated as the leading pan-Nigerian nationalist organisation (Sklar 1963; Coleman 1958). Though men dominated its leadership, the membership of the NCNC was overwhelmingly youth.

Another important youth organisation during this period was the Zikist Movement, founded in 1946 by a group of young Nigerians, including Kolawole Balogun (Yoruba), Abiodun Aloba (Edo), Habib Abdallah (Igbira) and Igbo youths: Melie Ajuluchukwu, Osita Agwuna, Mokwugo Okoye, Nduka Eze and many others. Inspired by Azikiwe and his writings, the Zikist Movement was the most radical anti-colonial movement in Nigeria because the Zikists (members of the movement), in their call for 'Positive Action', included labour activism, civil disobedience and armed sabotage as legitimate instruments of decolonisation. In 1948, they issued 'A Call for Revolution' in which they viciously attacked the colonial system from all fronts and urged Nigerians to mobilise for violent civil disobedience. Through the Zikist-controlled newspapers, such as the *African Echo* and *New Africa*, as well as Azikiwe's *West African Pilot*, the Zikists campaigned for non-payment of taxes, boycott of European goods and culture, and the rejection of regionalism, gradualism and ethnic divisiveness among Nigerians. They declared Azikiwe their leader and vowed to defend and protect him at all costs for laying the foundation of Zikism, which they espoused (Iweriebo

1996; Olusanya 1966; Agwuna 1949). Ironically, Azikiwe criticised the violent utterances of the Zikists and disassociated himself and the NCNC from the movement. For this reason, some of the Zikists resented and never forgave Azikiwe, even though he used his newspaper to defend some of their members following their arrests, trials and imprisonment on grounds of sedition. The Zikists were also inspired by Nwafor Orizu, who in his book called on African youth to mobilise for political action against colonialism and for an African redemption or *African Irredentism* already espoused by Azikiwe in his *Renasant Africa*. Orizu was the one who propounded 'Zikism' as a philosophy (Orizu 1944; n.d.).

The Zikists and other youth were involved in the widespread protest demonstrations over a labour tragedy in which twenty-one striking miners of the Iva Valley coal mines near Enugu were massacred and fifty-one were wounded by the colonial police in November 1949. The tragedy brought prominent members of the NCNC, the leadership of the Zikist Movement and the NYM, and other Nigerian youths together to form the National Emergency Committee (NEC). As a coalition of leading nationalists, the NEC called for immediate self-government for Nigeria and the investigation of the shootings at Enugu. It fearlessly criticised the brutality of the colonial government and its police against Nigerians. As a consequence of the Iva Valley tragedy, anti-government protests erupted in major eastern towns, including Enugu, Onitsha, Aba, Awka, Owerri, Port Harcourt, Calabar and Umuahia (Colonia Office 1950; NNAE 1949). While the government accused leaders of the Zikist Movement of instigating and mobilising the masses for the protests, and cracked down hard on them and the demonstrators with increased police violence, it worked through the NEC to contain the crisis. As a result, the NEC called on the miners to resume work. It also condemned the monopolistic and exploitative practices of European firms and this was instrumental in the abolition of discriminatory practices against African staff at the University College, Ibadan. The Iva Valley crisis also brought together unionists and led to the formation of the Nigerian Labour Congress in 1950 (Jaja 1982/1983; Akpala 1965; Colonial Office 1950). The proscription of the Zikist Movement in April 1950 did not silence its members. Former Zikists formed a new organisation, the NCNC Youth Association in January 1951, and played a key role in helping the NCNC Central Working Committee to assert its authority over 'recalcitrant ministers' in Eastern and Central governments who were forced to resign from their ministerial positions. However, its members were bitterly disappointed when the NCNC party leadership chose regionalism in 1954 against a unitary state they espoused (Sklar 1963).

The anti-government protests over the shooting of striking coal miners triggered other protests in the Eastern Region, organised by World War II veterans, some of whom were young men. The ex-servicemen saw themselves as victims of broken promises and injustice by the government. They formed the National Ex-Servicemen's Welfare Association (NEWA) in 1946, the Nigerian Union of Demobilized Servicemen (NUDS) in mid-1946, which was soon overtaken by the Nigerian Ex-Servicemen's Union (NESU), to demand for their rights. In May 1949, a group of them broke away from the NESU and founded the Unemployed Ex-Servicemen's Union (UEU) at Aba, Eastern Region. Many members of the UEU and other demobilised soldiers joined the Zikist Movement and the NCNC. They became resolute in their campaign to destabilise the colonial government through acts of civil disobedience. Aside from organising protests, which threatened public order, and joining the decolonisation politics, some of the war veterans carried out anti-social acts such as robbery, while others entered different types of trade (Nwaka 1987; Olusanya 1968). The experiences and activities of the youth members of World War II veterans constituted part of the broader history of youth activism, violence and decolonisation politics of the 1940s–50s.

There was also active youth mobilisation for nationalist political consciousness in the north. The inauguration of the College Old Boys Association by graduates of Katsina College in 1939 marked the beginning of this process. Though the association existed for only two years, its former members formed several discussion groups of educated young men in many northern towns in the 1940s. These included the Zaria Friendly Society, the Zaria Provincial Progressive Union, the Sokoto Youth Social Circle, the Kano Citizens' Association, the Bauchi Discussion Circle, and the Bauchi General Improvement Union. Leaders and members of these associations were educated northern Nigerian youth in public service, who had been exposed to nationalist ideals from southern Nigeria and abroad. They were thus able to pioneer what was regarded as 'embryonic political societies' in the north. Two of the most important of these societies were the Bauchi General Improvement Union (BGIU) and the Youth Social Circle (YSC) of Sokoto.

The BGIU was established in 1943 as a quasi-political party under the leadership of Sa'adu Zungur (1915–58, a Hausa) and Aminu Kano (1921–83, a Fulani). Zungur and Kano were fervent critics of indirect rule and the system of Native Administration. With other educated northern youth, they used the BGIU as a platform to attack the Native Authority system and agitate for reforms; activities that were not taken lightly by the emirs of northern Nigeria, who felt threatened. The BGIU prompted the

formation of similar pressure groups in the north. The Youth Social Circle of Sokoto (YSC) was founded in 1945 by progressive intellectuals such as Shehu Shagari, Ahmadu Danbaba and Ibrahim Gusau, with Ahmadu Bello, the Sarduna of Sokoto, as its adviser and patron. The goal of the YSC was to reform the autocratic and exploitative system of Native Administration. Founders and members of the YSC later became leaders of the Sokoto branch of the Northern People's Congress (NPC). In 1948, the YSC was affiliated to the NPC (Whitaker 1970; Dudley 1968).

Another important youth organisation in the north was the Northern Elements' Progressive Association (NEPA, 1945–49). The NEPA was founded in Kano by Habib Raji Abdullah (an Igbera), who was one of the leaders of the Zikist Movement, Abdurahman Bida (Nupe), Abba Said, Abubakar Zukogi (Fulani), Umaru Agaie (Nupe) and others. The NEPA campaigned for economic development, political reform and educational opportunity for northern students. It was a major youth association that rallied support for the NCNC's pan-Nigerian delegation national tour of 1946 and was thus incorrectly regarded as Azikiwe's anti-colonial movement in the north. The association faced strong opposition from the Kano Native Authority as its members were fired from the civil service. It became moribund in 1949 when Abdullah and other leaders of the Zikist Movement were imprisoned (Whitaker 1970; Post 1963). The NEPA was regarded as the forerunner of the Northern Elements' Progressive Union (NEPU).

Opposition to the Native Authority system by the younger generation of Hausa, Fulani, Igbera and Nupe ethnicities that gave rise to the above-mentioned youth organisations, including the NPC and NEPU, also motivated educated Kanuri youth to establish the Bornu Youth Improvement Association (BYIA) in 1949, under the leadership of Ibrahim Imam (1916–80), a Kanuri progressive politician. The BYIA was in a way the forerunner of the Bornu Youth Movement (BYM). The BYM was founded in June 1954 as a political party by a group of young Kanuri in Bornu emirate, who were critical of the Native Authority. United by Kanuri nationalist consciousness and with Imam as their patron, young radical Kanuri members of the party fought to reform the Native Administration through political activism. They entered into alliance with NEPU (1956–58) and in 1956 won two of the 131 seats in the Northern House of Assembly for Yerwa (Maiduguri) and eight seats in the Town Council elections of 1957. In the 1959 federal elections, the BYM-Action Group Alliance contested for seats (Whitaker 1970; Dudley 1968; Post 1963). The BYM became a major opposition party to the NPC, opposition that resulted in several political disturbances in the north.

Nigerian youth were undoubtedly dominant features of the major political parties that were involved in decolonisation politics: the NCNC, Action Group (AG), the NPC and the NEPU. While some of the political parties were formed by adults, others drew their membership and support from young Nigerians. From the 1950s when Empire Day was transformed into National Youth Day, such youth crowd gatherings were galvanized into large political rallies by Nigerian nationalist leaders and their political parties (Aderinto 2018). One example of political parties founded by Nigerian youth was NEPU. It was formed in Kano by a group of radical young educated men who were dissatisfied with the conservatives that dominated the *Jam'iyyar Mutanen Arewa* (Northern People's Congress). NEPU members used Azikiwe's *Daily Comet* in Kano and the *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo* to publish their criticisms of the Native Administrations and other political issues. They campaigned for the emancipation of the *Talakawa* (commoners), equal access to better health facilities, more schools in the north, a northern University College, and increased scholarships for northerners to study in the UK. NEPU emphasised the indivisibility of the north and south; supported the NCNC leadership during the Eastern House of Assembly crisis; but opposed the creation of the Middle Belt State championed by the United Middle Belt Congress. In the 1959 Federal Parliamentary elections, NEPU won eight of the 174 seats from the north (Dudley 1968; Post 1963).

Southern Nigerian women and female youth were also politically active during this period. They featured prominently in the formation and membership of an all-female political party, the Nigerian Women's Party (NWP), founded in 1944 under the leadership of Oyinkan Abayomi. Nigerian women were driven by their long history of marginalisation from the political leadership of the colony and their struggle for political relevance. Under the platform of the NWP, women and female youth campaigned for women's rights: the right to vote and be represented on the Lagos Town Council (LTC) and the Legislative Council for the Colony; more vocational and secondary schools and training centres for girls and women; women's admission to the police force; and improvement of women's healthcare. They also protested against the restriction placed on young girls from migrating to Lagos and discrimination against African nurses, among other issues of concern. The NWP drew its membership from the elite and market women, girls and young women, some of whom were schoolgirls and members of the Girls Guide. The party's manifesto contained mentoring and preparing these young women for modern politics and nation building (Chuku 2009; Awe 1992; Mba 1982; *Daily Service* 1944; *West African Pilot* 1944a; 1944b). With a limited franchise in 1950, the NWP fielded the first women

political candidates of colonial Nigeria. Though the party lost the two seats to the LTC that it contested, its establishment and activities were major achievements in the history of Nigerian women in politics.

Unfortunately, the three major political parties mentioned above followed ethnic lines: the AG was dominated by the Yoruba, the NPC by the Hausa-Fulani, and the NCNC by the Igbo. Nigeria was polarised by the ethnic politics of these political parties and the colonial policy of regionalisation. The educational imbalance between the Northern and Southern Provinces derailed the country's independence and exacerbated the situation. For instance, while by 1937 primary school enrollment in the north was merely 10 per cent and secondary school less than 2 per cent; in the south in the 1940s there were 400,000 primary school students in Nigeria with only 30,000 coming from the whole of the north. The record was worse in higher education where in 1951 out of 16 million northerners, only one had a full university degree – Dr A.R.B. Dikko of Zaria – and a few others, such as Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and Aminu Kano, with two-year post-teacher college university training in the UK (Ozigi and Ocho 1981; Fafunwa 1974; Public Record Office 1930). Thus, when on 31 March 1953, Anthony Enahoro, the AG House of Representative member from Ishan Division, tabled a motion for the attainment of self-government for Nigeria in 1956, northern members led by Balewa and Bello objected on the grounds that they were not ready. When the motion failed, the northern Representatives were insulted and abused by the Lagos crowds in addition to being criticised and ridiculed in the southern newspapers. As a reaction, they issued an eight-point programme, containing secession of the Northern Region from Nigeria (Enahoro 1965; Sklar 1963).

The leaders of the AG and NCNC thought that touring the northern cities to campaign for self-government in 1956 would be useful. But when

S.L. Akintola of the AG scheduled a tour of Kano with members of his delegation in May 1953, the move was met with a violent uprising (16–19 May), which resulted in the killing of thirty-six men, twenty-two of whom were of Igbo origin, with 241 wounded. Igbo landed property and businesses worth tens of thousands of pounds were destroyed and looted. The official record of the dead was fifteen northerners and twenty-one southerners (Ekwe-Ekwe 1990; Coleman 1958; *The Northern Region of Nigeria* 1953). It was an irony that the Igbo became casualties of a conflict between the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba. Apparently, it was due to the northern perception of Igbo economic threat and political domination. Ahmadu Bello (1962: 136–7) acknowledged that 'while the Action Group in Lagos had been the prime mover', the fighting in Kano was 'between the

Hausas ... and the Ibos [Igbo]; the Yorubas ... were, oddly enough, out of it.' The northern fear of Igbo domination was not without any basis. Their culture of individualism, competitiveness, entrepreneurship and liberalism facilitated Igbo educational and economic progress, and their settlement in northern towns where they managed private businesses and dominated the public service and government statutory corporations. While from a northern perspective, the attacks on the Igbo were justified due to long endured acts of provocation, to the Igbo, such acts of violence against them were unwarranted and unjustifiable. It is important to note that the perpetrators of the Kano violence were mostly youth.

Fear of regional and ethnic domination had fuelled the quests and agitation for either secession from Nigeria or the creation of separate states within the regions and the country. The 1950s, in particular, witnessed a number of secession agendas and agitations, which mostly came from the NPC-led Northern Region and the AG-led Western Region. For instance, in 1950, at the Ibadan General Conference, the north used the threat of secession to demand and obtain north-south parity of representation in the federal legislature instead of the recommended 45:33:33 per cent quotas for the Northern, Eastern and Western Provinces respectively. In 1956, the Northern House of Assembly and House of Chiefs passed a resolution that virtually endorsed secession and demanded that 'self-government' for Nigeria in 1956 be replaced with self-government 'as soon as practicable' (Tamuno 1970; Sklar 1963; Bello 1962; Smith 1960; NNAI 1958 and 1950). The NPC's motto: 'One North, One People', and the policy of northernisation it had pursued since 1954 to reduce dependence on southern civil servants and professionals did not help the already existing tension between the north and south (Schwarz 1968; Bello 1962). Similarly, following the debate over the status of Lagos (a Yoruba town) at the 1953 London Constitutional Conference, the AG-led Western Region threatened to secede. At the 1954 Constitutional Conference in Lagos, the AG delegation demanded the inclusion of the right of secession in the constitution. Azikiwe, the leader of the NCNC, vehemently rejected secession, arguing that it 'is incompatible with federalism'; it 'is an invitation to anarchy'; and it 'is suicidal' (Azikiwe 1961, 126-7; Ezera 1960: 186-9).

Increased demands for state creation by ethnic minorities started in 1954, following the adoption of a federal system and the institutionalisation of regional governments as powerful political entities dominated by the three major ethnic groups: the Northern Region and the NPC by the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups (often referred to politically as the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group), the Eastern Region and the NCNC by the Igbo, and the



Western Region and the AG by the Yoruba. Bitter ethnic contestations and the perceived fear of ethnic marginalisation of minorities led to the establishment of the Minorities (or Willink) Commission of 1957, chaired by Henry Willink, whose responsibilities comprised recommending ways of allaying minority fears and determining whether state creation would constitute a lasting solution. Even though the Commission confirmed the existence of genuine fears and apprehension on the part of ethnic minority groups in Nigeria, it was against state creation for a number of reasons, including the non-viability of new states due to the financial burden and insufficiently trained administrative staff, and the general belief that such a move would not end ethnic minorities' problems in Nigeria. The Commission instead recommended safeguarding ethnic minorities through a strong federal government where no single ethnic group would dominate, federal control of the police force, and protection of fundamental human rights (Vickers 2010; Colonial Office 1958). More secession threats and agitation for ethnic self-determination and state creation occurred after Nigeria's independence with devastating consequences. In spite of the deep-rooted problems facing Nigeria, nationalist leaders and British officials were able to broker the country's independence on 1 October 1960, with Balewa as the prime minister and Azikiwe as the governor-general. On 1 October 1963, Nigeria became a federal republic.

### **Nigerian youth and post-independence crises leading to the outbreak of the war**

Unfortunately, all the problems of the 1940s and 1950s – a contentious federal system; aggressive regional rivalries; fraudulent and highly contended census exercises; divisive and volatile party politics and power struggles; gender inequality; thuggery; rigged and violent elections; intra-ethnic violence; ethnic distrust and hostilities; and fears of ethnic minorities of their domination by the majorities, among others – continued after independence. For instance, the Tiv uprisings of February and November 1964, which led to the death of over 326 civilians and eleven policemen, were as a result of their perceived marginalisation in the Northern Region by the majority Hausa-Fulani and their NPC government. The Tiv agitations for the creation of the Middle Belt State since the 1950s, and their threat of secession in 1965, which were understandably opposed by the NPC-led government, were decisively crushed by government police and military forces (Post and Vickers 1973; Tamuno 1970).

Another violent separatist movement was led by the Ijo youth in Eastern Region who were dissatisfied with the recommendations of the Minorities

Commission. In February 1966, Isaac Boro, Sam Owonaro and Nottingham Dick led a group of Ijo youth to a violent secession bid and declared an independent Ijo state – ‘Delta Peoples Republic’ – to be carved out of the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region. The rebellion was swiftly suppressed by the military and the three young leaders were arrested, tried and condemned to death for treason. They were later released in 1967 but Boro and Dick died shortly after while fighting to defend the newly created Rivers State and the unity of Nigeria (Tamuno 1970).

The 1964 and 1965 elections were marred by electoral mal-practices and increased civil disorder and violent protests. With growing discontent among many Nigerians and observers alike, it became obvious that the federal system, as it was operated in the country, was dysfunctional and needed to be amended or changed. Consequently, a bloody military coup led by an Igbo, Chukwuma Nzeogwu (1937–67) was carried out on 15 January 1966. The plan was to kill all senior federal government officials, premiers of the four regions and senior military officers. But, whereas the coup was well executed in the Northern and Western Regions where some of the marked politicians, such as Prime Minister Balewa, Bello, premier of the Northern Region and Akintola, premier of the Western Region, were killed, it was unsuccessful in the Eastern Region because those pencilled in to be killed somehow escaped. Loyal officers and troops foiled the coup and rallied in defence of the government, and a new military government headed by Major General T. Aguiyi Ironsi was established (Mainasara 1982; Ademoyega 1981; Madiebo 1980; Panter-Brick 1970).

Initially, the coup was well-received by many Nigerians, particularly in the south, and was seen as a last resort to turn the country around from the brink of collapse and end the corruption and divisive politics of incompetent politicians. However, opponents of the coup, especially northerners, had a different interpretation. They saw the coup as an Igbo effort to dominate the Nigerian government and military since many of the coup plotters were young Igbo officers and none of the marked Igbo politicians was killed. Unfortunately, the suspicion of an Igbo conspiracy to control the country and destroy northern power was reinforced by Ironsi’s policies and actions. For instance, contrary to northern opposition, Ironsi abolished federalism and the four regions, and established a unitary government with a unified civil service. The four regions as the federating units controlled their civil services. The Northern Regional government was able to reduce perceived Igbo or southern Nigerian domination by employing, on a contract basis, Asians and Middle Easterners, who were replaced with northern graduates as soon as they qualified to serve in those positions. Thus, the northern

leadership and informed northerners saw Ironsi's unitary government as an attack on the 'little' regional autonomy they had enjoyed and as a part of the grand plan to impose and entrench Igbo and southern hegemony on them. They were also dissatisfied with the Ironsi administration's handling of the coup plotters, accusing Ironsi of not being decisive in condemning their actions and bringing them to justice.

Consequently, violent demonstrations erupted in the north against Ironsi and Igbo residents there. In May 1966, students of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) and the Institute of Administration, Zaria, and gangs of northern youth invaded Igbo neighbourhoods, looted Igbo shops, destroyed their property, killed and wounded many (interview, Akpan, 2012; interview, Oraeki, 2012; interview, Odi, 2003; interview, Enigwe, 1993; interview, Uga, 1993). Mary Oraeki, an undergraduate at ABU during this period, witnessed the horror and was still terrified when she shared her experience with me in 2012. With claims of Igbo domination and exploitation of northerners, the violence escalated to other northern cities where the Igbo played prominent roles in commerce and transportation. It was also alleged that some Igbo northern residents exhibited hubristic behaviour; they were thoughtless in their actions and utterances. For instance, a few of them allegedly made caricatures of the northern leaders who were killed in the coup. During the pogroms against the easterners, northern youth carried placards, calling for the secession of the north and the destruction of Ironsi and his administration (Schwarz 1968). It was estimated that between 300,000 and 500,000 Igbo fled the north (Eastern Nigerian Government 2000a [1966]; 2000b [1966]). Unfortunately, Ironsi was so concerned with demonstrating that his administration was not an Igbo one but a national government that he did nothing to end these senseless massacres of the Igbo in the north.

On 29 July 1966, young northern military officers carried out a counter-coup against the Ironsi administration, killing him and many Igbo officers and troops. They demanded the secession of the north from Nigeria, a demand also echoed by the emirs. But with the successful execution of the July coup, northern leaders advised against secession, which they saw as an 'irrational proposition' that would cut off the north from the sea and 'from Nigeria's promising new oil wealth' (Schwarz 1968: 206, 210). Consequently, Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon (October 1934–), a young officer from the Middle Belt and of Angas ethnicity, became the military head of state. He restored the regions and proposed a constitutional conference to consider an acceptable system of government and basis of association for the regions and ethnic groups in Nigeria. Unfortunately, conference delegates could not arrive at a consensus. C. Odumegwu Ojukwu (1933–2011), the military governor of the Eastern Region, refused to recognise Gowon on the grounds that he

was not the most senior and qualified officer to head the Nigerian military government.

Meanwhile, between September and October 1966, northerners launched another series of violent attacks against the Igbo and other easterners. As was the case in the May massacres, 'ex-politicians, civil servants, local government officials and former party stalwarts stage-managed the pogroms. The main difference was that this time the army joined in' (Schwarz 1968: 215–16). While the systematic massacres of easterners were instigated and stage-managed by the northern elite, they were carried out by their youth, many of whom were the most vulnerable and victims of political corruption, neglect and manipulation, a case of victims becoming killers too. With increased numbers of casualties (10,000 to 30,000), mounting fear, suspicion and insecurity, many Igbo in the north (between 1.5 and 2 million) fled to their homeland in the Eastern Region (De St. Jorre 1972; Lewis 1968).

Escalating tensions led to mass exodus of easterners from the north, west, mid-west and Lagos; and in the east, the arrival of bodies of the dead and wounded increased the problems of absorbing returnees. Ojukwu ordered the evacuation of non-easterners from the region. The air in the Eastern Region was filled with anger, frustration, sorrow and demand for secession. The Igbo and many other easterners felt that their fundamental human rights had been violated, yet the government was unable or unwilling to ensure their protection and bring to justice the perpetrators of the pogroms against them. During the meeting of the Eastern Consultative Assembly, 26–27 May 1967, Ojukwu was given the mandate to declare the independence of Eastern Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra 'at an early practicable date' (Biafran Government 1967; Ojukwu 1967).

The Gowon administration responded by declaring a state of emergency throughout the country and announcing, on 27 May 1967 the creation of twelve states to replace the four regions (five in the north; three in the west; three in the east; and the mid-west). It also re-imposed the blockade, which was initially imposed against the east in early May in retaliation to the Eastern Regional government's appropriation of federal revenues (excluding those from oil) in order to address the problems of returnees, especially federal civil servants, but was revoked on 20 May (Nigeria 1968; Schwarz 1968). The Igbo saw these actions as a smart move by Gowon to neutralise them politically and economically, especially as he carved out most parts of the oil-producing areas from the Igbo-dominated state. On 30 May 1967, the Eastern Region seceded when Ojukwu declared the Republic of Biafra. Eastern youth, women and children rushed to the streets in excitement and jubilation (interview, Cookey, 2012; interview, Obi, 2012; interview, Udoh,

2012; Akpan 1972). Though the easterners were determined to survive, the jubilation, however, was short-lived as events soon turned into a horrific experience of bloodbath and starvation.

## The war

Following the successive events discussed above and after unsuccessful peace attempts, the federal military government declared war against Biafra on 6 July 1967. It is ironic that the pre-war pogroms against the Igbo and some other easterners by the northerners were aimed at driving them out of Nigeria, and yet, when they seceded, it was the same Hausa-Fulani-dominated north that went to war to keep them in Nigeria. Within the federal circle, it was believed that 'police' action against Biafrans would take only a few weeks to bring them back to Nigeria. But the war lasted for thirty months. Biafrans gallantly defended their sovereignty, but by the middle of 1968, they had lost almost the entire territory inhabited by non-Igbo ethnicities, many of whom supported the federal government mainly due to their fear of Igbo domination and exploitation. At this point, Biafra was completely blockaded by sea and soon after reduced to the Igbo heartland.

Many Biafrans, especially the Igbo, were displaced. They had to adjust to the realities of the war, which included scarcities of food, medical services, means of transportation and other necessities of life. While the federal government employed starvation as a war tactic, the Biafra propaganda spread rumours that Nigerian authorities were using poison to complete their genocide against the Igbo and other Biafrans. The result was severe starvation, malnutrition, *kwashiorkor* (a protein deficiency disease) and death of many Biafrans, especially children, women and the elderly. The situation could have been graver but for the activities of relief organisations (Byrne 1997; Africa Research Group 1970; Smock 1970; Africa Concern 1969; Brown and Mayer 1969). Biafrans were also faced with insecurities caused by constant air raids, heavy artillery, shelling, and the menace of both federal and Biafran soldiers.

However, Biafrans demonstrated resilience in the face of unimaginable hardships and serious threat of extinction. While many young men and women volunteered, others were conscripted to serve in military and paramilitary units. Many others went into hiding. Young men formed the Biafra Organization of Freedom Fighters (BOFF) and received special training to engage in guerrilla warfare and espionage. There were Biafran female spies, who often solicited favours from either Biafran or Nigerian officers. Some of these women and other young Biafrans joined different Civil Defense organisations to safeguard civilian populations and their quarters as well as mobilise provisions, articles of clothing and medications

for the military. Biafrans demonstrated their resilience and ingenuity through many technological innovations and inventions carried out in their Research and Production Directorate (known as RAP). Under RAP, Biafran scientists, engineers and technicians produced different kinds of weapons, equipment, tools and machines that helped to sustain the war for almost three years and placed Biafra on the path of technological development. Other directorates included the Directorate of Food, the Directorate of Information and the Directorate of Transport and Fuel (Oragwu 2010; Arene 1997; Nwankwo 1972). Some young Biafran men and women were involved in overseas missions, educating their audience about the Biafran cause, and soliciting and mobilising aid.

Civilians were mobilised for war efforts; striving to survive and working in government establishments, hospitals, schools and with different relief organisations. Many households experienced role reversal as women became breadwinners or heads of households and did everything within their capability to ensure the survival of their families. Girls and young Biafran women were engaged in the risky smuggling trade across the Biafra borders for food, provisions, medicines and the Nigerian currency. Although farming was irregular and hazardous, women and girls did their best to produce food for their families and for sale. Others combed the forests for wild foodstuffs. Some women sold prepared food, and others established mini-restaurants and drinking houses. But a few privileged ones became food contractors, supplying foodstuff to either Biafran or Nigerian military units (Uchendu 2007b; Chuku 2002).

Many of the people directly involved in the war, either militarily or in non-military capacities were youths. Biafra soldiers and recruits were in their youthful age; many were teenagers or in their early twenties (interview, Chiorlu, 2012; interview, Ekanem, 2012; interview, Onwudinjo, 2012; interview, Iloeje, 2012; Uchendu 2007a; interview, Acholonu, 1993). In fact, the two leaders of the war were relatively young; Gowon was thirty-two years old and Ojukwu thirty-three. John de St. Jorre (1972: 373) noted: 'The war was fought by the early- and mid-thirties like the leaders themselves .... They scorned the older generations of politicians, lawyers and administrators who had failed old Nigeria and pushed them into the background.' The federal military attacks and the devastating impact of the embargo forced Biafra to surrender on 12 January 1970.

## **Consequences of the war and post-war Nigeria**

It is estimated that between 2 and 3 million people died, most of them of Igbo extraction. There were also over 3 million displaced Igbo (Falola and Heaton 2008). Many of the civilian casualties died of starvation. As actors

and victims, the war affected the youth individually and collectively and in their positions as members of the military, paramilitary, and displaced and dispersed populations. So many lost their lives and others were permanently disabled. The survivors have constantly struggled with the horrors and scars of the war and many have passed on. Eastern Nigeria, especially Igbo homeland, suffered from enormous devastation and destruction. Its economy was in ruins.

Some of the Biafran young women and girls who were abducted by the soldiers as well as those who, as an economic survival mechanism, engaged in war 'marriages' through patterns of relationships with Nigerian soldiers of different ethnicities, had lasting experiences. A few of them were happily married after the war when their soldier partners performed customary marriage rituals to legitimise their relationships. One such woman became the first lady of Nigeria when her husband became the military head of state. These were the few lucky ones. For many wartime female partners of non-Igbo Nigerian soldiers, the relationships ended inauspiciously after the war, with residual outcomes that included embarrassment, destitution, broken hearts, stigmatisation and rejection by their Igbo relatives and communities. The experience was traumatic and they had to live with the humiliation and social stigma associated with that type of life. Sample quotes from those whom I interviewed between 1991 and 2007 illustrate their states of despair, decades after the war had ended: 'Look at me! Is this a life worth living?' 'Please, do not ask me about that war. I do not want to talk about it .... War is bad and should be prevented at all cost.' 'While we all went to hell during that war, only few of us came back alive ... we cannot be the same again.' 'I am like a living corpse, rejected by my Hausa husband and Igbo relatives' (respondents prefer anonymity).

Individually and collectively, the Igbo and other Biafrans did everything within their power to rehabilitate themselves and reconstruct their homeland. Many self-help organisations and community development associations sprang up for these purposes and were successful. The federal government, for its part, launched a programme of reintegration and rehabilitation centred on 'three Rs': Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation. As early as March 1968, it established the National Rehabilitation Commission to oversee the implementation of the programme (interview, Ogonnaya, 2003; interview, Olumba, 1993). Many Igbo personnel were reabsorbed into the civil service and military. Efforts were made to rebuild destroyed infrastructure, including public utilities and social services, but not to pre-war levels.

Having realised the destructive nature of ethnic conflicts, the federal government pursued policies that promoted national unity and security.



Emphasis was placed on programmes that would increase interaction, tolerance and understanding among Nigerians of different ethnicities. One such programme was the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC), established in 1973. The NYSC programme required graduates of tertiary institutions to engage in one-year compulsory national service in a state other than their state of origin. The goal was to promote national unity and integration through greater inter-ethnic interaction and understanding among Nigerian youth. It was hoped that the programme would help to raise a new group of highly disciplined and 'detrribalised' Nigerian youth, the future leaders of the country. The Citizenship and Leadership Training Center, Shere Hills, Jos, which was established in 1951 for youth with leadership potential, was modified in 1989 for leadership training, empowerment and character development among Nigerian youth (Federal Government of Nigeria 2009; Marenin 1979).

Many have commended Gowon's 'no victor, no vanquished' policy for helping to ensure the integration of the Igbo back into Nigerian society without government retribution, Igbo re-entry into the military and the civil service, as well as access to university education. Inasmuch as the above observation might be true, it is also important to note that it was the same government that pursued a banking policy immediately after the war that denied the Igbo access to their pre-war bank accounts in Nigeria, and offered those who deposited Biafran money in banks only 20 pounds, regardless of the amount involved. This policy was followed soon after with the Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree (Indigenization Decree) of 1972 that naturalised foreign enterprises and assets in Nigeria. Only Nigerians with enough capital were able to buy up shares of the naturalised foreign firms. Financially, the Igbo were not in a position to bid for the auctioned enterprises. Thus, the cumulative outcome of federal post-war fiscal and economic policies for the Igbo was that they were pushed down from their pre-war commanding economic apex. They had to start from scratch to rebuild their lives, economy and homeland.

The Igbo also suffered from the 'abandoned property' issue, which was worse in Port Harcourt, the city they literally built (Chuku 1999; interview, Nwapa, 1993; interview, Nwogu, 1993). When the Igbo fled Port Harcourt as a result of the war, their houses and other landed property were either occupied or claimed by non-Igbo ethnicities of Rivers State (created in 1967). At the end of the war, when they returned to reclaim their property, they were informed that a body, the Abandoned Property Authority (APA), created by the Rivers State government in August 1969, had been 'vested with powers for the custody, control and management of every abandoned property within the [state]' (Tamuno 1972: 277). The Rivers State government gave persons claiming their property sixty days to register with authentic documents of

ownership. There was no measure taken to ensure that those who lost their property documents in the course of the war recovered their property. Having taken off during the war, the Rivers State government was faced with a scarcity of office buildings and other structures, and Igbo property came in handy. Such property was taken by the state permanently. The East Central State government (the only Igbo state created in 1967) was critical of the Rivers State policy on Igbo property and claimed that the people lost 5,600 buildings, undeveloped land, machinery and petrol stations in Port Harcourt and the surrounding areas. Ironically, the Rivers State government failed to disclose the list of Igbo property in the state (Tamuno 1972: 278). In a number of northern cities, such as Kano, Kaduna and Jos, many Igbo recovered their property and renegotiated their position in the new political and economic environment of post-war northern Nigeria (Anthony 2002).

While, undoubtedly, the war led to widespread popular resentment toward the Igbo, as many Nigerians blamed them for the war and its devastating impact, the Igbo had often felt a sense of alienation from the country and distrust of other ethnic groups. Consequently, the war strengthened ethnic ties and led to the proliferation of ethnic associations. Accusations of ethnic marginalisation increased in the country, as the economic and political conditions continued to worsen with many Nigerians feeling alienated from the state. It is not surprising that there has been a resurgence of ethno-nationalist sentiments and separatist movements in the country, a topic which is beyond the scope of this article

## **Conclusion**

Young Nigerian men and women embodied complex identities as nationalists, political leaders, student activists, heads of state, military officers, coup plotters, scientists, administrators, civilians, market women and men, civil servants, unionists, security-guards and bodyguards. Through the efforts of many of them, Nigerians regained their freedom from Britain. When the political and military elites and their cohorts, who hijacked the state apparatus to entrench their privileged status and fan ethnic flames, exhibited a life of unlimited opportunities and affluence, alienating the majority of the population from the state and confining them to the margins of the society, it was the Nigerian youth that initiated a revolutionary process to overthrow them. They organised a bloody coup and counter-coup of 1966 against the elites. Nigerian youth were perpetrators and victims of violent acts. They responded violently to the ethnicisation of politics and the politicisation of ethno-linguistic pluralism and resource distribution engineered by the elites. They were instrumental to the outbreak of the war. The two heads of state – Gowon and Ojukwu – were

youths; many of their advisors and those who executed the war were mostly young men and women. At times, the youth had been manipulated by the elites, as we saw in the chains of violence unleashed against the Igbo and other easterners in the north in 1966.

Unfortunately, the problems that led to the outbreak of the war have not been seriously addressed. Segments of the Nigerian population believe in 'moving on' in the interest of peace and national unity. Those who subscribe to this view have neither bothered to ask nor addressed the serious question of why post-war Nigeria has witnessed the proliferation of ethnic separatist agitations and movements, phenomena that have been spearheaded by the youth. Rather than criminalise and brutalise the youth who engage in ethnically-driven political movements, efforts should be made to address their concerns and fears. If not promptly and seriously addressed by those in authority, the growing youth disillusionment and hopelessness, especially in the face of authoritarian, extravagant and exploitative dispositions by the state and its controllers amidst economic crisis, a high unemployment rate and increased poverty and hardship, could have a more destabilising effect on the country than can be imagined.

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