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History and Nation Imagination: Igbo and the Videos of Nationalism

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> A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is a present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.
>
> (Ernest Renan 1990:19)

I. Introduction: The Imagination of the Nation

The concept of the nation is posited in various modes by modern scholars, most of whom identify it as some kind of an assemblage of disparate alignments cohered by the will of the people. It is "an imagined political community" (Anderson 6), "a daily plebiscite" (Renan 19), and "a contested construct" (Yewah 45) sustained not by any actual affiliation but by the imagination of its citizens who, according to Tara Brabazon, "must consent to their nationality" (par. 3).[1] The nation, however, whether imagined, constructed, or invented, implies, by its very imagination or construction, a degree of materiality, real enough to have a name even if it is mutable—and a more or less circumscribable geography—even if this too is not inviolable. As Anderson suggests, it is imagined as "inherently limited" with "finite, if elastic boundaries" (6). Although this ambiguous construct is predicated upon a union of sorts, it is internally differentiated along numerous dissentious fractions. Joseph argues that the "contradictions and differences that the nation attempts to remove are in fact constitutive of the concept of the nation" (57). Paradoxically, this means that the very dream of homogeneity that attempts to forge the nation is an illusion because the nation itself is constructed out of articulate differences that often contest, or at best evaluate, their nation status. But as a *nation* it continues to strive towards a homogenization or

[1] Tara Brabazon explains that this consent is obtained through manipulations of power relations. "Empowered classes must reach beyond their own interests and organise disempowered groups so that they consent to their own oppression" (Notes, no. 1). If "consent" here implies "accept" or "agree" I must contest it on the basis that, no matter how strategically managed, disempowered or oppressed, citizens do contest their oppression. The Hegelian thesis of a complicitous relationship between master and slave and master is clearly false within the context of violent assertions, and the equally violent disavowals, of nation taking place all over the globe.

stitching of these restive differences. Thus the nation is an unfinished, indeed, unfinishable, process. Some of these fragments or constituent differences include history, ethnicity, religion, class, language, race, gender, and culture.

Nationalism is defined as "loyalty to the nation above and beyond individual differences" (Sullivan 71), or "a projection of individual diversity onto a collective narrative" (Brabazon par. 5). Ultimately what nationalism advocates is an eliding, if not an outright effacement of these constitutive differences. However, if the nation is constructed out of articulate differences then nationalism is a denial of this very nation construction. It is a dream, an elusive ideal perennially imagined and pursued in spite of, or perhaps even because of the impossibility of its realization. It is the ongoing nature and uncertainty of this pursuit that makes nationalism an inherently contentious concept. Because the nation is a fragile and unformed construct, any concerted shift in loyalty from the nation imagination to any of its constituent fragments challenges the foundation of that imagination and often results in structural disfigurement and a re-drawing of its cultural, social, and physical geography.

One such shift that is foundational to the construction, or more appropriately, de-construction, of nationalism that is of interest to us in this paper is the Nigeria/Biafra civil war of 1967-1970. This war typifies what Basil Davidson terms "the perversities of nationalism" (8). Affirming the absurdity of the prose of inviolable nation space upon which the war was executed, Soyinka states that "any exercise of self decimation *solely* in defence of the inviolability of temporal demarcations called nations is a mindless travesty of idealism" (*The Man Died* 175, original emphasis). Rather, he stresses that "[it] is we, the occupants of the whole or the part who must decide whether it serves our collective interest to stay together or pull apart" (*The Open Sore* 30). But therein lies the pitfall of nationhood. From all evidence, its occupants have not always consented to "stay together or pull apart." In every part of the globe national fragments confront the imagined homogeneity. Only in certain parts of the globe are these confrontations sufficiently compromised without dire consequences to the nation construct. To be sure, some fragments are forced, some legislated, negotiated, and tricked into their nationality. A cursory look at the present material history of nationalism in Europe, especially Eastern and Central Europe, Asia, and Africa demonstrates the inherent ambiguity and instability of the term. It clearly chronicles fierce contestations of nationalities into which certain communities of people are bounded. The former Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Somalia, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Burundi provide a few of the most notorious theatres where nationalism performed its absurdity.

II. History Discourse

Past events are conceived as "invented" basically in the very sense of their "pastness." Their recovery is performed through the agency of human memory whereby they are re-presented or re-echoed. But pasts are by no means imaginary in the sense of lacking in actuality. They were (are) real and true because they actually happened in time and space. Significant pasts usually demonstrate their "having-happened" through the discernible marks they leave on the physical reality and memory of the present. Thus there are continuities between pasts and the present. What occurs when these pasts are "invented," however, is that they become presentations of a positioned re-construction configured, as it were, through a subjective prism. History itself, which is a partial and subjective record of past events, can only be remembered and narrated from the positionality of the narrator. Keith Jenkins submits that history is an interpretation, a mediated perception, rather than a literal documentation of past events. It does not narrate or relate events that are "factually correct" but rather transforms past experiences or "facts" into "patterns of meaning that any literal representation of them as facts could never produce" (33). The narration of history invariably involves the selection of "a version of the past and a way of appropriating it" (70), or, as P. Hernadi puts it, "past events envisioned by a present consciousness" (260). This positioned version of the past as history becomes a "truthful" representation not by virtue of its objective accuracy or veracity but because of its power to make the reader not only identify with the narrative but also to accept it as probable. The ability of historians to present comprehensible narratives of the past is ascribable to "their skilful construction of 'followable' narratives" (248). The point, therefore, is that historical texts are discursive and fundamentally ideological for they are positioned renderings intended to align the reader with or against other contesting positions. These texts thus defend the position of their producers but marginalize those of others. The ideological positioning of historical writing is critiqued by many postcolonial scholars who contest imperial history produced by colonizers as mere inventions designed to validate their hegemony over the colonized.[2] When the oppressed people undertake the reconstruction of their past, the writing of their history, they contest the official versions by presenting another perspective, one which is also inevitably discursive and ideological. They proffer perceptions of reality constructed from their common positions as marginalized and "untold" subjects. In the case of the Nigeria/Biafra civil war, the fact of its actuality is evidenced by its telling effects on contemporary social, cultural, political, and economic structures, while its invention manifests in the sharply differentiated

[2] One instance is the work of the Subaltern Studies Group which has taken on the challenge of recovering the local or peasant history of decolonization to formulate a counter discourse to the "lie" of imperial historiography which gave authorized accounts that discredited and grossly marginalized the agency of the common people (Ranajit Guha 1988).

narratives it has inhabited. The common people, in their own invention of this encounter, adopt a perspective that severely counters the impersonal official versions which grossly elide the existential narrative of the war in favor of causality and acts of heroism in pursuit of the nation being. Yet, because the common people do not control the media of knowledge dissemination their invention continues to be silenced and marginalized particularly by the chest-thumping biographic narratives invented by the "heroes" of that tragic past.[3] This positional rendering of history is both implicitly and explicitly conveyed in the two video films selected for this study. They clearly present a version, no doubt invented and therefore both discursive and ideological, of that actual past from the position of the victimized.

III. The Fact of an Actual Past

The Nigerian nation came into existence when it was invented by the British in 1914 and validated through the performance of independence in 1960 and other consequent rituals which try to bestow the status of autonomy and a common (albeit imperial) history on this new invention. All the earliest histories of its numerous fragments were leveled by this process, and on the ruins was erected a unilateral tradition of origin. Thus, the new nation has a circumscribed spatial identity, a common history, and a name. But this invention, in spite of its imaging in a "complex set of mediations and representations" through such "visual symbols" as "flags, maps, statuary, micro-cosmic ceremonials" (Anderson 319) has failed to cohere the diverse nationalities, open-ended formations and heterogeneous histories it sought to graft together. Metaphors, vacuous symbols, verbiage, and ceremonies, no matter how grandiose, have proved ineffective in the nation ritual. The "nations" (nationalities) of Nigeria predate imperial presence and it is the obvious undermining of these centuries-old identities in the new invention that constitutes the problem of nationhood in the country.

The Nigeria/Biafra civil war was a militarist repression of the agitation for self-determination by one of the nation's nationalities. It was a war fought, as was popularly chorused in the country at the time, "to keep Nigeria one." The nation of Biafra, declared by Odumegwu Ojukwu in 1967, comprised some of the communities in south-eastern Nigeria, the most dominant being Igbo. The ensuing war lasted from May 1967 to January 1970. By the time Biafra announced its surrender on 1st January 1970, its territory, especially its cities, such as Onitsha, Enugu, and Owerri, had literally been razed to the ground. Although Yakubu Gowon, the then Head of State of the Federal Republic, enthused the magnanimity of victorious Nigeria in his "No Victor no Vanquished" incantation, post-war relations leave little doubt as to who is victor and who is vanquished.

[3] See, for instance, Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu (1989), Ademoyega Adewale (1981), Olusegun Obasanjo (1981).

Ethnic feuds continue and the Igbo complain of undue harassment, marginalization, and institutional victimization. The petition on "Violations of Human and Civil Rights of Ndi Igbo in the Federation of Nigeria" made to the Human Rights Violations Investigating Committee by Oha-na-eze Ndi Igbo ("The Apex Organisation of the entire Igbo people of Nigeria") in 1999 articulates "some of the violations of human and civil rights of Ndi Igbo and other crimes and injustices against us as only illustrative of the numerous deprivations, discriminations and violations of rights which Ndi Igbo have suffered and continue to suffer in our country" (Oha-na-eze Ndi Igbo 5). This document not only chronicles cases of abuse which it claims began in the immediate pre-war period, it states that the Igbo continue to be marginalized and reduced to "second class citizens in Nigeria, 30 years after a civil war in which General Gowon had declared 'No Victor no Vanquished'" (9). This document underlines the absence of any appreciable progress in the proclaimed reconciliation of the ethnic animosity that led to the war, since the Igbo still conspicuously constitute "the enemy," being the butt of most violent ethnic, political, and religious grievances in the country. The objective of the war, which was articulated in the chant, "To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done," was indeed cartographically and politically achieved, but was a nation identity constructed, reimagined or upheld?

IV. The Invention

It is against this social and historical backdrop that the two films selected for this study are critically projected. They engage the problem of reconciliation as it concerns the major warring factions in the Nigeria/Biafra confrontation. While one is set in the war period, the other is located in the post-war present. They thus provide one continuous narrative of Nigeria's political and social history from the hostilities of the war era to the ethnic-related disturbances of the present. The fundamental dislocations, both physical and consequentially psychological, suffered by Nigerians, especially the Igbo, as a result of this war provide a primary infrastructure for the reconstruction of popular history in a manner that is radically discursive, ideological, and political. Karin Barber observes that the earlier assumption that African popular arts are "naïve, cheerful and carefree has been replaced by the recognition that genres billed as entertainment usually talk about matters of deep interest and concern to the people who produce them" (1997: 2). This is the case with these films, both of which are intensely ideological and politically popular texts. They defend a position that is ethnically skewed in what is clearly a matter of life and death debate in a contentious social and political engagement. They are discursive in their defense of the position of a people against other contesting positions implicitly to win over and make the viewer engage the narratives from an affected perspective. Although deceptively blithe and populist in style, they are serious positions which address the sovereignty of the Igbo and their struggle for a place in the collective

space that constitutes the wider Nigerian socio-political sphere. These films constitute nuanced ethno-nationalistic narratives which interpellate the constituent discourses that engendered the Nigeria/Biafra civil war in the first place and characterize the dissentient terrain of post-war relations. As substantially ideological texts, they also present what is obviously the popular Igbo case in the social and political historiography of Nigeria's nationhood.

The selected films are *The Battle of Love* (directed by Simi Opeoluwa) and *Laraba* (directed by Ndubuisi Okoh). Although they neither directly chronicle the actual events of the war nor offer cold facts about its causes, players or highlights, they articulate a position towards social and historical reconstruction that is experiential and humanist on the one hand, and popular and ideological on the other. The war functions as a historical primer against which seemingly ordinary, largely fictive, texts are projected. It is effectively an undercoat upon which the contentious reality which it (mis)begot is articulated. While *The Battle of Love* is set in the war time, *Laraba* is set in the post-war period. Together they present a historical and social narrative of Nigeria's imperiled journey towards nationhood from 1967 to the present.

Both films are set in Northern Nigeria and can be construed thematically as "the battle of love" to bridge the dislocating ethnic prejudice in the nation. This ethnic antipathy is between the Igbo and the Hausa, the two most conspicuous ethnicities pitched against each other in the Nigerian civil war. In *The Battle of Love*, the sounds of actual warfare frame and underscore the actions of the film, but the war does not in itself constitute the main plot of the narrative. In Laraba, a different kind of war propels the dramatic conflict. Although this war is in the form of a passionate ethnic hatred and distrust, and the film makes no actual reference to the civil war, the sensibilities expressed are reflective of mindsets engendered by the war itself. Both films demonstrate the ruinous consequences of these states of mind on the construction of the nation and, ultimately, they seem to proffer a potentially subversive challenge to the very coherence of nation identity.

The Battle of Love is a tale of love facing the challenges of intense hostility. Dubem, an Igbo Major in the Nigerian army, marries Habiba, an Hausa woman, and suddenly finds himself trapped in the violence and ethnic genocide being committed against his people in northern Nigeria. The story of the film is basically his travail as he journeys from Nigeria to his "motherland," which has now become Biafra. Habiba was, however, affianced during childhood to Bako who decides to claim her as wife in spite of her marriage to someone else. Dubem, who had previously cultivated Bako's ire in an earlier encounter because of Habiba, finds himself at his mercy. In the course of his escape from Nigeria, he is captured and brought coincidentally under Bako's authority. Bako declares him a Biafran spy, tortures him and seeks to execute him publicly, yet this is prevented by the timely intervention of Habiba. Moved

by his love for Habiba and the vow he made to her as a boy, Bako then helps Dubem and Habiba to escape from Nigeria.

Laraba is another tragic tale of two lovers who resolve to get married in defiance of the intense opposition of their parents. Laraba (Hausa or "Jarawa") is in love with Christopher, who is Igbo. Both parents are passionately opposed to the relationship, especially Laraba's father, who has procured a prestigious spouse for her in the shape of a young senator from an influential Hausa family. Preaching nationalist unity and human brotherhood, the lovers try to make their parents see the illogicality of their opposition, which is based on nothing other than ethnic passion. Failing to expunge or mollify this blinding animosity the lovers take their lives before the eyes of the parents.

I begin an examination of the ideological bent of the narratives by examining their telling of the way the home transforms into "exile" and how that transformation initiates an urgent and inevitable re-alignment of geographical, political, and social identity in a hostile and estranging landscape. This analysis also evidences the manner in which "the spread of terror fragments inhabited spaces, blows apart temporal frames of reference, and diminishes the possibilities available to individuals to fulfill themselves as continuous subjects" (Mbembe 267). Oha-na-eze validates this estrangement when it agitates for "full reconciliation, and integration into the Nigerian Federation so as to give Ndi Igbo the necessary sense of belonging as Nigerians" (5). This estrangement is encapsulated in Dubem's pronouncement in *The Battle of Love*: "Like fugitives we must leave." They proceed to flee the space that once functioned as home and country for a new "motherland." They engage in a desperate and helpless re-definition of identity; a re-alignment of loyalty from the imagined whole to its constituent fragment. Dubem and the other Igbo officers and men, who had earlier "homed" themselves amongst the Hausa of northern Nigeria, begin the journey of re-alignment to a new political construct, Biafra, defined by the less tenuous affiliation of ethnicity: cultural, ancestral, linguistic, and geographical propinquity. The new home becomes "the small space and inherited estate where direct, proximate relationships are reinforced by membership in a common genealogy" (Mbembe 266). In this respect, they begin to reformulate identity from the slippery fragility of the Nigerian nation to the more propitious politics of Igbo home identity. Dubem, who had earlier prided himself on being "a Major in the Nigerian Army," is now declared a Biafran spy.

Similarly, in *Laraba*, Christopher's father, who has been "living with these people for thirty years," is pronounced "Inyamiri" which, according to Laraba, is "a name that breeds hatred." What is positioned here as an alternative to the "unhomeliness" of the whole, or the collapse of political nationalism, is ethno-nationalism. This is a shifting of loyalty from the nation to one of its restive fragments. The narrative strategizes this re-negotiation of identity, the de-centering of nationalism, as a helpless, even unattractive yet necessary choice predicated on a violent unhomeliness of the nation. Thus, the viewer is compelled to sympathise with the unjustly

dislocated and estranged subjects who are forced to reformulate yet another national identity. Of more discursive, and fundamentally more political and ideological significance, is the nuanced presentation of the Them-and-Us polarity. Through the narrative strategy of positioning, the films portray the Igbo as Self against the Hausa Other, or, as already posited, they defend the Igbo position by encouraging the viewer to read from a perspective that morally privileges it. Drawing upon the norms of presenting Otherness the Hausa is portrayed as irrational, insensitive, and peculiar. The Igbo is the victim while the Hausa is the motiveless aggressor. This narrative scheme suggests the Igbo to favorably disposed to reconciliation and brotherhood while the Hausa is not. The general treatment is a valorization of the Igbo position and the demonization of the Hausa. A consideration of a few instances from the films will suffice. The brutality of the Hausa is presented as insensitive and motiveless. The Oha-na-eze document decries the brutal treatment of Biafran prisoners-of-war "in a manner inconsistent with the Geneva Convention" (23). Dubem invokes this Convention in *The Battle of Love* to protest his ill-treatment by Bako but is bluntly informed by him that "The Geneva Convention does not hold here." Subsequently, Dubem is brutally tortured. Secondly, in the attack on Christopher's family the Hausa mob displays its insensitivity to human life by eagerly asking "Akashe su?" ("Should we kill them?") Meanwhile, Dubem's own killing of the Hausa is rationalized as occurring in self-defense and even then he agonizes over what he sees as an act of cruelty regrettably brought about by the war. In *Laraba*, the audience is given the impression that Christopher's father, faced with the ultimate appeal of the lovers, eventually consents to their marriage. This is because in the final scene both Laraba and Christopher appeal to Laraba's father who shouts the emphatic "No! You cannot marry him!" Thus the Igbo is presented as not absolutely insensitive to reconciliation and "brotherhood" while the Hausa is. Here the real obstacle to nationalism is therefore clearly presented here as Hausa.

It is significant that both films end with the text of the most nationalist portion of the old Nigeria National Anthem: "Though tribe and tongue may differ in brotherhood we stand." Similar statements abound in both films in the form of dialogue: "After all we are one country"; "Put aside all tribal and religious differences"; " . . . we are one country, one people and one destiny." It is obvious that the narratives are foregrounded on a dislocation of some sort. Thus they stress the nation's oneness and recommend the stitching of all differences with the thread of brotherhood, and the construction of a bridge across the geographies of ethnic and religious stratifications. They appear to advocate a mending of the fractures of "tribe and tongue" with the thread of common imagined brotherhood. However, a closer look at the narratives reveals an articulated questioning and deconstruction of the nation construct. Wherever the nation encounters individual differences and personal interests it loses. The films relate challenges and measured successes in familial and individual relationships amidst a total collapse of the nation

as an entity. The ethnic animosity which unsettles the nation remains unresolved. Dubem makes it to his "motherland" with his wife, Habiba, but this union is not replicated in the national domain. When Bako is confronted with a choice between nationalism and personal interest, he chooses to subvert that of the former. His deputy, who chooses to defend the nation by thwarting Dubem's escape, is villainized and killed while Bako is memorialized and his nationally treacherous action described as "A rare feat of heroism." When confronted with the choice of subordinating ethnicity and religion and propagating nationalism, Laraba's father's choice is emphatically subversive. The individual identities or interests that intersect the wholeness of the nation triumph over loyalty to it. In the end, *The Battle of Love* proffers no visible end to the divisive conflict. In spite of the re-union of husband and wife, the heroism of Bako, and Dubem's obvious success in his quest for reconciliation with his motherland, the war rages on. *Laraba* similarly portends no end to the subversive animosity in spite of the death of the two lovers who are presented as the bridge to ethnic reconciliation. The sub-title, "The Broken Bridge," encapsulates the theme of futility even in the future construction of nationalism. This theme is symbolized in the death of the young lovers, the only highway for trans-ethnic dialogue.

V. Conclusion

In both *The Battle of Love* and *Laraba* an ugly past functions as a screen for the narration of victimization and the difficulties of forgetting and reconciliation. The films also illustrate the difficulties of constructing a nation identity out of restive and mutually antagonistic ethnic alignments. By particularly foregrounding the ethnic animosity which launched the Nigeria/Biafra civil war, the films seem to insist that, as long as this divisive mindset is nourished, a national identity will continue to elude the imagined community known as Nigeria.

Clearly these films do not directly engage the re-writing of history in the manner recommended by Sullivan as "the way to draw a nation's diverse peoples together." That is, by "diminishing if not effacing ethnic differences, replacing them with conflated pasts and new, imagined, unifying experiences" (71). Rather than focus on imagined common identities and unifying experiences in the pool of individual disparities, these films orchestrate divisive ethnic affiliation and present it as the major factor which stymies the dream of a national identity; the way to pull a nation's diverse peoples apart. Thus, *The Battle of Love* and *Laraba* posit ethno-nationalism as the inevitable, even if undesirable, option for those ethnic nationalities who, like the Igbo, find their rights violated in the imagined community constructed out of disparate and restive fragments.

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