

ESRC Report Insa Nolte

THE RISE OF YORUBA NATIONALISM: EXCLUSION, IDENTITY AND YOUTH IN NIGERIA

Project No RES-000-22-0374

1. Background

This empirical and exploratory research examines the violent political nationalism of the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria as a focal point of social and political exclusion, which goes beyond the politicisation of ethnic cleavage. Since the aborted elections of 1993, Yoruba nationalism has become increasingly violent. This has usually been interpreted simply as the result of the exclusion of Yoruba leaders from government. However, in many respects, Yoruba ethnic nationalism exposes a wider crisis of legitimacy of the Nigerian state. Successive governments searching for legitimacy have stimulated the recent heating-up of ethnic nationalist activity by the incorporation of traditional rulers and other members of the regional elite into state patrimonial networks. At the same time, adverse world market developments, corruption and several IMF-style adjustment programmes have contributed to an economic decline and to a decrease of most people's life chances. While the 1999 return to democratic rule has prevented a further privatisation of the state by the military and its supporters, economic and educational opportunities have not improved tangibly, and the expectations of Nigeria's younger generation of democracy were particularly disappointed. This has particularly angered the urban disadvantaged youth who constitute the majority of the radical nationalists.

2. Objectives

2.1. Temporal and financial management of project

As a result of a range of circumstances, the project was extended both temporally and financially. Due to my own 10-month maternity leave (November 2003- September 2004) and another 6-month extension of the project granted at no cost to the ESRC – to include the Cadbury workshop and conference (see below, Activities, Outputs) – the project spanned more than two years (September 2003-December 2005). While only 6 months of the extension were actual ‘working time’ on the project, and while having a young child makes neither research nor reflection easier, the longer overall duration of the project enabled me to follow up more leads – both intellectually and personally – than would otherwise have been possible.

The volume of research done for this project was increased because I was able to negotiate two sets of additional financial and infrastructural inputs to the project. After my return from maternity leave in 2004, I was given a permanent contract at the School of Historical Studies, University of Birmingham. The School kindly agreed to pass on some of the resulting salary savings and eventually made the additional sum of £4,134.96 available to the project for a Nigerian research assistant. The Centre of West African Studies (CWAS), where I became a permanent member of staff in 2004, kindly allowed me to organise and run its 2005 Cadbury workshop and conference on the topic of *Cultural nationalism and social critique*. The 2005 Cadbury programme

was designed as an extension of the original project. As part of the CWAS annual programme, it was carried out at no cost to the ESRC. To accommodate this work within the project, the ESRC granted a 6-month extension. The support by the School of Historical Studies and the Centre of West African Studies had a positive impact on other aspects of the project, including the quality and quantity of methods employed, the range of results, activities, and outputs undertaken as well as the impact of the project and my own and colleagues' future research.

2.2. Methodological and research objectives

As an empirical and exploratory research project, the project proposed to draw on a range of qualitative research methods, including library and archival research, fieldwork and 25 in-depth interviews. The project planned to focus on the Yoruba militant organisation OPC (Oodua Peoples Congress) and the social backgrounds, personal motivations and cultural repertoires of the mostly male urban youth who support the OPC. It intended to consider the cultural constructions of Yoruba politics as well as state patrimonialism, the social construction of youth and the formation of political identities within this group. The overall focus of the original research proposal was on the OPC's representation of regional Yoruba interests, and the question whether these contained a wider critique of state and regional elites. Thanks to the generous support of the project by my School and department, over 60 in-depth interviews and qualitative and quantitative research data of a much higher quantity than originally envisaged have been produced at the end of the project (see also Methods, Results, Finances).

The data suggests that the OPC's representation of Yoruba regional interests often overlaps with a general critique of the state based on economic, political and social exclusion within Nigeria. It confirms that the OPC undermines and challenges the federal state through its control of local security, which is supported through forms of traditional practice re-legitimized by the OPC as part of its cultural revalidation. At the same time, the OPC has redefined Yoruba ethnic politics, which have been dominated by opposition to the state since 1960. Confirming that state's legitimacy through involvement in political debates and electoral politics that implicitly criticised the regional elite, the OPC has consequently redefined the ethnic nation as a potentially consenting part of the state.

Beyond the negotiation of relations between the ethnic nation and the state, the OPC has also redefined the interests of the ethnic nation through its contribution to perceptions of youth, social and gender inequality. Through a range of practices, the OPC has been engaged in the creation of a moral community, which reflect the interests of the majority of its supporters, who are urban and disenfranchised young men, often with little education. Expanding on these interests, OPC and other Yoruba leaders have formulated a more general critique of social exclusion in Nigeria, which draws on international human rights discourses and constitutes the ethnic nation as a potential locus of a social reform of the state.

Due to the additional resources mobilised for the project, it was also able to address or begin to address emerging new research questions related to gender relations in the OPC, its impact of cultural standardization, the OPC's negotiation of traditional practice vis-à-vis Islam and Christianity and the OPC's relationship towards Western education (see Outcomes for more detail).

2.3. Output/ dissemination objectives

In the original project proposal, discussions with other academics and NGO workers were envisaged, and the planned output was an article in an international peer-reviewed journal. These project objectives will be fulfilled and surpassed. The intensive co-operation and dissemination of ideas in the academic world and beyond has resulted in a forthcoming output of two articles in refereed journals (both in topical special issues, one in the context of another ESRC research programme) as well as the edition of another special issue of a refereed journal. Networking and mentoring has also resulted in a successful project application to the British Academy for a joint project with Dr Aderemi Ajala, and in support for the international research careers of Dr Charles Ukeje and Mr Omobolaji Olarinmoye; all three are Nigerian colleagues with whom I have collaborated during the course of the project.

3. Methods

3.1. Personal research

A research trip to the Africana Library at Northwestern University in May/June 2005 allowed me to access a wealth of Nigerian-published local material no longer available in Nigeria, especially local histories and official pamphlets. During research trips to Nigeria in February and August/September 2005, I was able to carry out intensive qualitative research in several Yoruba-speaking states of Nigeria. As I had assistance in the sourcing of local published material in Nigeria (see below), my own research focused on field observation and over 45 in-depth, qualitative interviews with OPC supporters at different levels of authority and others involved in OPC politics in the widest sense in localities including Lagos, Sagamu, Abeokuta, Ago-Iwoye, Ijebu-Ode, Ile-Ife, and Osogbo.

3.2. Research Assistant

Following two negotiations of outside support for the project at no cost to the ESRC, the amount of qualitative research for this project was greatly increased, and quantitative research could also be included. Financial support to the project provided by the School of Historical Studies enabled me to employ a Nigerian research assistant. Colleagues at the University of Ibadan directed me towards Mr Omobolaji Olarinmoye, then a graduate student at the University of Ibadan, because his PhD focused on the OPC in Yoruba regional politics.

On the basis that shared access to his research material would benefit both the project and Mr Olarinmoye's own research, I engaged Mr Olarinmoye as a research assistant for six months. From January to June 2005, the project paid for his subsistence costs as well as his research expenses – including travel and communication costs, plus book and photocopying expenses – in Nigeria. Mr Olarinmoye contributed an additional 15 in-depth interviews, life histories and field notes of his research with both male and female OPC supporters in several Nigerian states to the project. Mr Olarinmoye also followed Nigerian newspaper reports on the OPC and researched libraries and archives in Lagos, Ibadan and Kano. During the project, I supervised his research by email and telephone contact, and also in personal meetings during my own research trips to Nigeria.

As a result of the expansion of project research time in Nigeria, the data available to the project includes over sixty (instead of the originally planned twenty-

five) in-depth interviews and life histories with both male and female OPC members and sympathisers in different localities. Also, the quality and quantity of printed material – ranging from colonial intelligence reports to recently published pamphlets – is much better than originally envisaged. As a result of this, comparative detailed case studies of OPC activities in different localities have been made possible, and a focus on gender has also emerged (see Results).

3.3. Access to comparative material through the Cadbury programme

Personal and financial support to the project provided by the Centre of West African Studies (CWAS) enabled me to run the 2005 annual Cadbury workshop and conference programme under the theme *Cultural nationalism and social critique*. The title reflected the project's argument that Yoruba nationalism reflected forms of social and political exclusion beyond the politicisation of ethnic cleavage. Contributions to the programme provided material for the critical comparison of the project's research with other socially critical nationalist movements in Africa.

3.4. Acquisition of survey material from Dr Ajala

My involvement in the 2005 annual Cadbury workshop and conference programme allowed me to invite the Nigerian academic Dr Aderemi Ajala from the University of Ibadan to Birmingham. Dr Ajala had collected 591 randomly administered questionnaires on Yoruba political beliefs – including attitudes towards the OPC – in 2003 and 2004. During his stay, Dr Ajala very kindly offered me access to his questionnaires. As a result, the project also had access to a (paper-based) quantitative database of Yoruba political opinion. Questionnaire responses were frequently in free sentences or paragraphs and had for that reason not been entered into a meaningful electronic database. However, the simple addition of responses to selected questions so far supports and allows the expansion of general statements derived from the qualitative research originally planned, especially with regard to the importance of religious background for OPC support and Yoruba ethnogenesis.

4. Results

4.1. Results of original research focus

Research for the project has successfully addressed the relationship between Yoruba ethnic politics and the critique of both state and ethnic nation. The rise of ethno-national movements during the 1990s reflected not only the Nigerian state's failure to provide security to its citizens, but an even wider crisis of state legitimacy which implicated the state in the acceptance and fabrication of harsh patterns of social, political and economic exclusion. After the annulment of the 1993 presidential election of Yoruba speaker Moshood Abiola, the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) was founded in the southwest of Nigeria with the explicit aim of safeguarding ethno-nationalist interests. After the return to civilian rule in 1999, the OPC established itself as a representative and monitor of Yoruba interests vis-à-vis the state. Legitimated by widespread popular support for their fight against crime and corrupt state institutions, the OPC's vigilante and warrior groups policed the state on behalf of the Yoruba community.

While the OPC confirmed the existence of a Yoruba ethnic nation independently of the state, it also supported a partial reintegration of ethno-national

politics into the corridors of power. Yoruba ethno-national politics have been defined by popular opposition to the state since independence in 1960, but with the help of the OPC, the 2003 elections heralded a change in Yoruba political attitudes. Disappointed with the performance of regional elites, the OPC refused to support a continuance of a regional politics of opposition. The widespread popular acceptance of the distorted election results implied that the OPC had successfully altered Yoruba self-perceptions, and that it was able to frame social critique beyond the level of immediate ethno-national interest. Despite its continued policing especially of the state's police and military institutions, the OPC has redefined the ethnic nation as a potentially consenting part of the state. Representing the state as both weak and strong, the OPC has undermined the state's control of security but legitimized and strengthened the state as a mechanism of political decision-making.

Beyond the policing of relations between the ethnic nation and the state, the OPC has also redefined the interests of the ethnic nation through its intervention in issues of local concern relating to youth, social and gender inequality as well as historical and religious rivalry. Thus, OPC policing is not only engaged with the significance and status of the Yoruba community within the nation and beyond, it is also engaged with the creation of a moral Yoruba community. Often, the OPC reflects its origins among young men with little education and appears to favor the interests of underprivileged and local young men over those of students, young women and immigrants. Yet while the reversal of young men's social, political and economic exclusion remains an immediate aim of most OPC members, the OPC leadership has used their organization's experience and positionality to formulate a more general critique of social exclusion in Nigeria. Drawing on wider discourses of human rights, democratic reform and anti-colonial struggle, they have constituted the ethnic nation as a potential locus of a social reform of the state (see Objectives). A publication on this topic is forthcoming (see Publications).

4.2. Additional results

Thanks to the expansion of the research available to the study, significant data in other areas has also emerged. Field research and printed sources from Nigeria suggest that the OPC's critique of the state and regional elites is gendered. Despite the existence of very different gendered local political and ritual economies in different local OPC groups, women are understood as being of great importance to the Yoruba national project. A publication on this topic is forthcoming (see Publications).

Second, the OPC is an active agent of cultural homogenization. Although the OPC relies strongly on local institutions, often embedded in local forms of 'traditional' or cultural practice, its revalidation of the cultural contributes to a more generalized pan-Yoruba practice. A joint publication project, which will include research on this topic by Dr Ajala and myself, has been funded by the British Academy (see Future Research Priorities).

Third, the OPC's success reflects a shift in the factors that influence Yoruba ethnogenesis. Despite a long tradition of Christian prominence in the revalidation of Yoruba cultural practice and national identity, the OPC has strong Muslim support while opposition to the OPC is strongest among Pentecostal Christians. A joint publication project, which will include research on this topic by Dr Ajala and myself, has been funded by the British Academy (see Future Research Priorities).

Fourth, the OPC's relationship to the Nigerian educated elite is highly ambivalent. Although formal education – long an essential part of Yoruba self-perception and political mobilisation – and is highly valued in some contexts, students are banned from joining the OPC. An application to a funding body for further research on this topic is planned for 2007 (see Future Research Priorities).

Finally, comparative material from other African countries produced for the 2005 Cadbury workshop and conference programme on *Cultural nationalism and social critique* suggests that the use of cultural symbols and repertoires to stake social claims is an important phenomenon in many African states. However, the close connection of ethnic nationalism and social critique found in Yoruba politics appears to be less frequent. The relative dearth of contemporary comparative material from Africa suggests that Yoruba nationalism reflects important historical and political particularities. I am not sure at present whether this is in itself a topic I could explore further, but plan to look towards cross-temporal and international studies of other ethnic or 'cultural' nationalisms to see whether this might be a valuable line of inquiry in the future.

5. Activities

I have built up a broad network of colleagues interested in aspects of this research project. This has resulted in a number of dissemination activities including co-operation with another ESRC project, which is part of the ESRC's *New Security Challenges Programme*.

5.1. Conferences and seminars

11-13 September 2004. ASAUK biennial conference, London

Convener of panel on *Ethnicity, Youth and Violence in Southern Nigeria*

- Presentation of paper on "The End of the Awolowo Era? The 2003 PDP victory and its implications for pan-Yorubaism."
- Panel members: Charles Ukeje (Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife), Kathryn Nwajaku (University of Oxford), Insa Nolte (University of Birmingham).

March-May 2005. Cadbury Fellows Workshop, Birmingham

Workshop theme: *Cultural nationalism and social critique*

- Convener of a range of weekly and biweekly events for three visiting African scholars elected as Cadbury fellows. Events included the reading and discussion of planned conference contributions and publications, meetings of the CWAS reading group and a methodology workshop.

13-14 May 2005. Cadbury Conference, Birmingham

Conference theme: *Cultural nationalism and social critique*

- Conference convener and organizer.
- Conference contributors included Aderemi Ajala (University of Ibadan), David Pratten (University of Sussex), Deborah James (LSE, London), Heloise Finch (University of Michigan), John Peel (SOAS, London), Joyce Nyairo (Moi University), Karin Barber (CWAS), Keith Shear (CWAS), Kemi Adesina (University of Ibadan), Lawrence Flint (CWAS), Lyn Schumaker (University of Manchester), Lynne Brydon (CWAS), Martin Chanock, Paulo de Moraes Farias (CWAS), Ranka Primorac, Reginald Cline-Cole (CWAS),

Reuben Chirambo (University of Malawi), Ruth Watson (Birkbeck, London), Stephanie Newell (Sussex), Stewart Brown (CWAS), Terence Ranger (University of Oxford), Tiro Sebina (University of Botswana), Tobias Green (CWAS), Tom McCaskie (CWAS).

11 January 2006. SOAS History Seminar, London

Seminar on: "Yoruba women and the struggle for power: Cultural practice, social change and gender in the Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC)"

5.2. Forthcoming conferences

19-21 April 2006. Conference on *Security Beyond the State? The Privatisation and Globalisation of Security in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Wales

- Presentation of paper on "Policing state and ethnic nation: OPC vigilantism, Yoruba politics and social exclusion in Nigeria"
- Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams are holding this conference as part of another ESRC project on the *Globalization of Private Security*, which is being funded as part of the ESRC's *New Security Challenges Programme*.

5.3. Other contacts

I have remained in good contact with workers at a number of NGOs and development agencies based in Abuja, including USAID and Winrock. The current director of the *Heinrich Böll Foundation* in Lagos, Dr Axel Harneit-Sievers, has been particularly interested in the topic of youth and ethnic violence. The Foundation is a not-for-profit organization striving to promote democracy, civil society, human rights, international understanding and a healthy environment internationally and is affiliated with the German Green Party. It has supported the publication in 2003 of the volume *Ethnic Militias and the Future of Democracy in Nigeria*¹, and is planning a further relevant publication on the under the title "*(Un)civil society"? State failure and the contradictions of self-organisation in Nigeria* later this year.

Beyond the policy-oriented interests of the *HB Foundation*, I believe that Dr Harneit-Sievers has been particularly supportive of my work because he is himself an outstanding academic with a strong research interest in the topics touched upon by my research. I had a number of very fruitful discussions both with Dr Harneit-Sievers and with some of the academics involved in the book projects supported by his foundation. I continue to work closely especially with Dr Charles Ukeje, one of the co-editors of the *HB Foundation's* 2003 publication and one of the senior staff at the Centre for Development and Conflict Management Studies at the University of Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

6. Outputs

At present, the project output includes two forthcoming articles in refereed journals and the edition of a special issue of a journal.

¹ Amadu Sesay, Charles Ukeje, Olabisi Aina & Adetanwa Odebiyi / Centre for Development and Conflict Management Studies (eds.), 2003. *Ethnic Militias and the Future of Democracy in Nigeria*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press.

6.1. Forthcoming articles in refereed journals

Reflecting my own as well as others' academic networking, two articles produced as outputs of the research project will appear in special issues of refereed journals:

1. Nolte, I. (forthcoming), "Policing state and ethnic nation: OPC vigilantism, Yoruba politics and social exclusion in Nigeria", to be included in submission to *International Relations* for a special issue.

Comment: A first draft of this article will be presented at a conference on *Security Beyond the State? The Privatisation and Globalisation of Security in Sub-Saharan Africa*, at the University of Wales on 19-21 April, 2006. Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams are holding this conference as part of another ESRC project on *The Globalization of Private Security*, which is being funded as part of the ESRC's *New Security Challenges Programme*. They have informed me that they plan to include my contribution in their submission to *International Relations*.

2. Nolte, I. (forthcoming 2007), "'Without women, nothing can succeed': Yoruba women, violence and vigilantism in the Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC), Nigeria", included in submission to *Africa* for a special issue.

Comment: A first draft of this article has been presented at the SOAS history seminar (London) on 11 January 2006. A second draft is in the process of being sent out to external referees by David Pratten and Charles Gore, the editors of a special issue on *Vigilantes in Nigeria in Africa*.

6.2. Forthcoming editions

- Nolte, I. (ed.), *Beyond ethnic nationalism: The cultural work of social contestation* (based on contributions to 2005 Cadbury conference), special issue to be submitted to *Journal of Modern African Studies*.

Comment: In 2005, I ran the annual Cadbury workshop and conference programme under the theme *Cultural nationalism and social critique*. The title reflected the project's argument that Yoruba nationalism reflected forms of social and political exclusion beyond the politicization of ethnic cleavage. One aim of the Fellowship scheme is to assist young scholars to bring a research paper to publication, and it was expected that the conference papers would form the basis of an edited book or a special issue of a journal in which studies of ethnic nationalisms in Africa would be comparatively examined for their critical social content.

However, comparative material from other African countries produced for the Cadbury workshop and conference programme suggested that while the use of cultural symbols and repertoires to stake social claims is an extensive phenomenon in many African states, this form of social critique does not always represent a form of ethnic nationalism. As a result, I am currently editing the most suitable conference papers to be submitted for the production of a special issue to the *Journal of Modern African Studies* under the title *Beyond ethnic nationalism: The cultural work of social contestation*.

7. Impacts

Support and career development for African academics associated with the project:

- Mr. Olarinmoye (project research assistant) has been elected as a 2006 Cadbury fellow in Birmingham on the basis of an application developed from his work for the project.
- Dr Aderemi Ajala (academic colleague) and I have successfully applied for funding for joint work on Yoruba ethnogenesis to the British Academy's Visiting Fellowship Scheme for African Scholars under the title *Public aspirations, private views: Popular perceptions of Yoruba cultural nationalism and political ethnicity in western Nigeria* (Award No VF2006/42569).
- Dr Charles Ukeje (academic colleague, contact through NGO) was the Royal African Society's Mary Kingsley Zochonis Lecturer in 2004, for which I had nominated him. Dr Ukeje used his award to present his work at various UK universities and has since won another UK-based fellowship.

8. Future Research Priorities

During our co-operation for this project, Dr Ajala and I have developed the idea for a joint publication project on Yoruba ethnogenesis (see Results). We have successfully applied for funding for our joint work on this theme to the British Academy's Visiting Fellowship Scheme for African Scholars under the title *Public aspirations, private views: Popular perceptions of Yoruba cultural nationalism and political ethnicity in western Nigeria* (Award No VF2006/42569). To produce this joint publication with me, Dr Ajala plans to work in Birmingham from May to August 2006.

I also plan to apply for funding for further research into the complex relationship between the OPC and the Nigerian and Yoruba educated elite in 2007 (see Results).

Project Finances:

There was an overspend on the project, which arose due to two reasons. Firstly salary indexation over and above initial projections and deferral of salary costs being charged to the account due to maternity leave, resulting in an overspend on staff and indirect costs of £3,461 against the original budget.

Secondly due to changes in circumstances, a Nigerian research assistant, Mr Olarinmoye, was employed to undertake some of the field research (see above). This was not included in the original application, and this change was agreed with the ESRC, with the University of Birmingham agreeing to absorb the additional cost in advance of the work being undertaken. The resulting overspend on non-staff costs against the original budget was £4,134.96.

The transaction listing provided by the University of Birmingham's Finance Department confirms that the University of Birmingham has absorbed these additional costs in support of this research project.