

‘RESOURCEFUL AND PROGRESSIVE
BLACKMEN’: MODERNITY AND RACE
IN BIAFRA, 1967–70*

BY DOUGLAS ANTHONY
Franklin & Marshall College

ABSTRACT: Propaganda from Biafra and pro-Biafran rhetoric generated by its supporters drew heavily on ideas of modernity. This continued a pattern of associations rooted in colonial-era policies and ethnic stereotypes, and also represented a deliberate rhetorical strategy aimed at both internal and external audiences. During the second half of the Nigeria–Biafra War, the concept of race assumed an increasingly prominent role in both Biafran and pro-Biafran discourse, in part because of the diminished persuasiveness of Biafran claims about Nigeria’s genocidal intentions. Arguments about race dovetailed with established claims about modernity in ways that persist today.

KEY WORDS: Nigeria, African modernities, civil wars, ethnicity, nationalism, race.

INTRODUCTION: MODERNITY, RACE, AND PROPAGANDA

IT should not surprise us to find visions of modernity entwined with ethnicity, regionalism, religion, and ultimately race in propaganda and other materials generated by Biafra and its supporters during the Nigeria–Biafra War (or Nigerian Civil War) of 1967–70.¹ In colonial Nigeria, Western notions of modernity and modernization cohabited with discourses of ethnic rivalry, religious difference, and regional competition. As in other colonial settings, ideas about modernity and tradition filtered through the racial ideologies that were the bedrock of colonialism. When independence demanded a re-examination of what modernity would mean for Nigeria, colonial frames of reference did not disappear. Rather, they remained central to conversations about nationhood, political and economic development, and the place of Western ideas and practices.

Jowett and O’Donnell define propaganda as ‘the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior

* I gratefully acknowledge the support of Franklin & Marshall College and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the assistance of the staff of Northwestern University Library’s Africana collection.

¹ The issue of how to refer to this conflict remains politicized. Calling it the ‘Nigerian Civil War’ – as is conventional – invites the critique of denying Biafra equal rhetorical footing with Nigeria and reinscribing Federal claims that Biafra was little more than a rebellious region of Nigeria. Even the decision of whether to use the term ‘Biafra’ and its derivatives without quotation marks is sometimes read as an indication of political sympathies. While I have forgone quotation marks, I have done so to enhance readability. In referring to the Igbo ethnic group I have used the current preferred spelling, except in direct quotations, where I have reproduced original usage.

to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist'.² Many pro-Biafran messages fall outside this definition by failing to share a systematic connection to other such messages. This was inevitable, given the conditions under which pro-Biafran arguments emerged, with advocates for Biafra dispersed globally, connected by lines of communication that were often intermittent. I have therefore interpreted 'propaganda' cautiously, and foreground the distinction between messages generated by Biafrans speaking for themselves and their community and those generated by non-Biafrans acting as outside advocates for the Biafran cause.³

The narratives and representations that appear in wartime propaganda tell us little about the lived experience of the conflict. In his study of Igbo communities, Harneit-Sievers has written that 'There are few wartime tales about togetherness and solidarity, but many about conflict and social or moral decay', and rightly concludes that 'Tales of suffering and survival, rather than any emphatic notion of Igbo or Biafran identity, predominate in most oral and published Igbo narratives about the war'.⁴ Embedded in wartime propaganda, however, are important cues to the penetration, appropriation, and interpretation of key historical ideas that both predate and survive the conflict.

Biafra's propaganda differed significantly from Nigeria's. During the conflict, Nigerian propaganda was rife with essentialisms and stereotypes of Biafra's ethnic Igbo majority but said little about Nigeria itself.⁵ In contrast, Biafra and its advocates had the burden both of vilifying Biafra's enemy (later enemies) and also of proactively crafting an identity for the new state and its citizens. In producing a public identity for Biafra, its thinkers drew liberally on established discourses of modernity. They had help in this project from Western journalists, many of whom embraced and reproduced ideas pervasive in Biafran propaganda. As the pressure points available to Biafra's advocates changed, the idea of race assumed a prominent place in their writings, as they folded a racial critique into arguments that continued to foreground Biafran modernity.

CONSTRUCTING 'MODERN' BIAFRA

The Biafran state began its brief existence in 1967, when Nigeria's Eastern Region declared its independence from the former British colony. According to Harneit-Sievers, 'Biafra came into existence with an administrative machinery that was, by African standards of the time, highly developed and integrated, at least in the densely settled, urbanized core areas' of the

² G. Jowett and V. O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (2nd edn, London, 1992), 4.

³ The best scholarly treatment of propaganda in the war operates from a narrower definition, limiting its frame, by and large, to official communications by Biafra and its state allies. See J. Stremmlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970* (Princeton, 1977), 110-41.

⁴ A. Harneit-Sievers, *Constructions of Belonging: Igbo Communities and the Nigerian State in the Twentieth Century* (Rochester, 2006), 127.

⁵ D. Anthony, *Poison and Medicine: Ethnicity, Power, and Violence in a Nigerian City, 1966 to 1986* (Portsmouth, NH, 2002), 129-33.

Region.⁶ The new state inherited from the Eastern Region its Ministry of Information, which, in its Biafran incarnation generated most of Biafra's propaganda, often with input from Biafran intellectuals under the aegis of the Directorate for Propaganda.⁷ The radio was the most important wartime propaganda tool for both sides; in Biafra the 'credibility of the radio seems to have been rarely in doubt' among those who listened, despite a steady stream of positive news amid deteriorating conditions: 'As long as Radio Biafra was operating at all, it transmitted a sense of security in a situation full of rumours and unfamiliar events.'⁸ Unfortunately for the historian, Radio Biafra left behind few traces. A relative abundance of print media, however, has survived, and includes material directed at both internal and foreign audiences.

The Directorate of Propaganda's most important international partner was the Swiss firm Markpress News Feature Service, which operated the Biafran Overseas Press Division. The government and Markpress shared the task of spreading Biafra's message with a variety of allies, including expatriate Biafrans, local activists abroad (particularly in the United Kingdom and North America), and the governments of Tanzania and the Ivory Coast.⁹ Sympathetic reporters, such as BBC correspondent-turned-print journalist Fredrick Forsyth, were also important voices. The image they presented to the world was of a new nation that confidently and unapologetically embodied key characteristics of modernity. Even before the war began, Biafra had appropriated modernity as a weapon.

Debates about the meanings of modernity (often modernities) have proliferated in recent years. I follow the advice of Cooper, who challenges scholars to forgo arguing for particular definitions of modernity and 'instead listen to what is being said in the world. If modernity is what they hear, they should ask how it is being used and why.'¹⁰ The modernity that appears in Biafran and pro-Biafran writing is less a self-conscious theoretical construction than a pragmatic appropriation of ideas already in circulation. This instrumental approach served Biafra's immediate interests well by providing a ready-made lens through which potential supporters could see the new state as an African manifestation of what Ferguson calls modernization theory's 'optimistic teleologies' of 'emergence and development'.¹¹ If, as one might argue, Biafra's arguments about its own exceptionalism risked reinscribing universalistic ideas about 'Europe's essential modernizing

⁶ A. Harneit-Sievers, 'The people, the soldiers, and the state', in A. Harneit-Sievers, J. O. Ahazuem, and S. Emezue (eds.), *A Social History of the Nigerian Civil War: Perspectives from Below* (Enugu, 1997), 51.

⁷ R. Chijioke Njoku, 'An endless cycle of secessionism: intellectuals and separatist movements in Nigeria', in B. Coppieters and M. Huysseune (eds.), *Secession, History and the Social Sciences* (Brussels, 2002), 257–8. ⁸ Harneit-Sievers, 'People', 59–60.

⁹ Zambia, Gabon, and Haiti also recognized Biafra.

¹⁰ Cooper continues, 'otherwise, shoehorning a political discourse into modern, anti-modern, or postmodern discourses, or into "their" modernity or "ours" is more distorting than revealing': F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005), 115.

¹¹ J. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, 1999), 13, 17.

capacity compared to Africa's inherent backwardness', Biafra used that presumptive 'backwardness' as a weapon pointed squarely at Nigeria.¹²

Any analysis, though, demands working definitions. Giddens argues that modernity is characterized by 'the idea of the world as open to transformation by human intervention', participation in 'a complex of economic institutions, especially market economies and industrial production', and the presence of 'a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy'.¹³ While the umbrella of Biafran modernity extended to the new state's institutions, it appears most clearly as a package of shared attitudes and practices. The economic, social, and political dynamism of Biafrans are core themes of Biafran and pro-Biafran writings, as is the vigorous assertion of a common national identity based both on the trauma of recent experiences and on shared cultural and historical roots. Even mass democracy, by conventional measures absent under military government, became part of the Biafran narrative through assertions about longstanding, fundamentally democratic impulses in Biafra's constituent societies, particularly the Igbo.

Indeed, the only idea more foundational to Biafra's vision of itself than modernity was the assertion of Nigeria's genocidal intentions toward Biafrans. While an analysis of genocide discourse in this conflict is well beyond the scope of this article, arguments about modernity and race worked against a backdrop of claims about genocide. Like modernity, the problem of genocide has received a great deal of attention from scholars, particularly after the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the ongoing crisis in Sudan. Alexander Hinton, following the lead of Leo Kuper and others, has written that genocide is 'the dark side of modernity', in the sense that genocide demands as a precondition 'modernity's essentializing impulses', even if genocide itself 'emerges only within certain historical contexts, usually involving socioeconomic upheaval, polarized social divisions, extreme dehumanization, and a centralized initiative to engage in mass killing'.¹⁴ At the operational level, as with their manipulation of modernity, there was little attempt in Biafran and pro-Biafran discourse to theorize genocide. Rather, the idea of genocide, like modernity, was for Biafra and its supporters less an intellectual hurdle than an established discourse to be leveraged. For example, in a mid-1968 press conference, Biafra's head of state invoked the Jewish Holocaust and the post-Second-World-War international codification of genocide before posing a series of rhetorical questions about Biafra.

Has the massacre of 30,000 Biafran men, women and children in May, 1966, satisfied the criteria? Could the slaughter of 50,000 Biafrans in September–October 1966 and the flight of two million maimed and destitute others be accepted as the necessary criteria? What about the fate of 100,000 Biafran civilians who have lost

¹² Cooper, *Colonialism*, 115.

¹³ A. Giddens and C. Pierson, *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity* (Palo Alto, 1998), 94.

¹⁴ A. L. Hinton, 'The dark side of modernity: toward an anthropology of genocide', in A. L. Hinton (ed.), *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (Berkeley, 2002), 27. See also L. Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, 1981).

their lives through aerial bombing, strafing and shelling? And the 4.5 million refugees who are fast starving to death?

In short, when will the world statesmen awaken to the fact that the Biafran race is being systematically wiped out? Can they, being responsible and honourable men, sit back and wait till genocide is completed before they realise that it is actually being committed with impunity?¹⁵

The ideas of genocide and modernity were rhetorically complementary in key ways. Where the accusation of genocide cast Biafra in a reactive stance, modernity framed Biafra as proactive. Put differently, claims of genocide constructed Biafrans as victims defending themselves against an existential threat; within a frame of modernity, however, they were self-authoring subjects forging a progressive future. The narratives combined to present the war as simultaneously a desperate battle for Biafra's survival and an occasion for the emergence of a visionary society threatened precisely because it dared to move boldly forward. Propagandists adeptly linked the two ideas by positioning Biafran modernity as one cause of Nigerians' purported hatred, and in the process molded elements of Nigeria's history in support of this simplified narrative.

This vision of a modern Biafra offered several advantages. To other Africans it presented Biafra as the vanguard of a progressive, postcolonial Africa. And when directed at potential supporters in the West, representations of Biafrans' modernity helped to make them less exotic and more sympathetic for a public whose understanding of Africa was generally unsophisticated – and often tainted by racism. A glance at North American and British press accounts indicates the success of this strategy: while the accounts describe the suffering of Biafrans from many backgrounds, those who appear most prominently are English-speaking professionals, a tiny minority even in Biafra. These elites appear with almost uncritical sympathy. A presumably modern, progressive Biafra also attracted support based not only on sympathetic or paternalistic impulses but on the pragmatic promise of future dividends. A Biafran pamphlet declared that

Biafra has not been a burden to anyone in war time. Indeed she promises to be an asset to the world in peace time. The greatest economic asset of Biafra is her human resources. Biafrans have long been famed for their industry, initiative, self-reliance and an almost insatiable thirst for learning – qualities that have stood them in good stead in prosecuting the present war.¹⁶

This promise of stability and self-sufficiency provided a foundation upon which other ideas could rest.

The war lasted from mid-1967 until January 1970, and notions of modernity were central to Biafran and pro-Biafran messages throughout, even as other aspects of their arguments changed. By the war's final year, accusations of genocide had lost much of their persuasive power beyond what remained

¹⁵ Republic of Biafra, Ministry of Information, 'An address by His Excellency, Lt. Col. C. Odumegwu Ojukwu, Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Biafra Armed Forces, to an International Press Conference, Thursday, 18th July, 1968'.

¹⁶ Republic of Biafra, Ministry of Information, *Biafra Deserves Open World Support* (n.p., n.d.), 5.

of Biafra. While Biafra maintained its accusations of Nigeria's genocidal motives, its propaganda increasingly argued that international racism fueled the war. In this expanding discourse, white neo-imperialists (represented by the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union – Nigeria's primary military suppliers) feared the appearance of a modern, self-reliant, and politically unfettered black state. Accordingly, Biafra's primary enemy was no longer a Muslim-dominated Nigeria resentful of and resistant to Biafran modernity, but rather an uneasy alliance of archetypically 'modern' states setting aside their differences to quash a rival whose emergence signaled a potentially contagious challenge to white supremacy.

OPPOSITIONAL IDENTITIES: REGIONALISM, ETHNICITY,
AND MODERNITY IN COLONIAL NIGERIA

Early Biafran material established the convention of asserting an oppositional identity that acquired its meaning in contradistinction to Nigeria in general and the Muslim emirates of the country's far north in particular. For a variety of reasons, the north offered a more politically appealing and rhetorically vulnerable target than other parts of the country, particularly the Yoruba-speaking Western Region, which included the commercial and political capital and the country's largest university. Moreover, most (but not all) of the violence that easterners had experienced in the months leading up to Biafra's declaration of independence had unfolded in the north.¹⁷

A judicious assessment of the events prefacing the Eastern Region's secession demands attention to dynamic, often paradoxical interactions of many elements: the religious, ethnic, and political affiliations of Nigerians; socioeconomic class; geographical origin; and place of residence; as well as gender and even generational factors. Such thoughtful analysis was elusive during Nigeria's crisis years. Most contemporaneous analysis bypassed complexity in favor of simple, established rhetorical bundles that privileged region and ethnicity and linked them to religion. This is not surprising, since these were precisely the categories that colonial rule exploited – and that the political class of Nigeria's First Republic leveraged.¹⁸

The political impasse of 1967 was vulnerable to such reductionism. Some observers, including many Biafra supporters abroad, collapsed the east into a monolithic version of its Igbo majority, minimizing or even erasing the complexity introduced by the non-Igbo third of its population, and failing to grapple with the range of positions and loyalties among the Igbo. Similarly, many commentators lost sight of the Northern Region's Christians and other non-Muslims in favor of the presumptive homogeneity of the emirates. This narrowing of vision reflected widespread perceptions that political power at the national level resided within conservative political and religious elites from the emirates, concentrated in the remnants of the formally defunct Northern People's Congress (NPC). According to this view, during and after the country's second coup in July 1966, elements of the NPC reasserted

¹⁷ See Anthony, *Poison and Medicine*, chs. 2–3.

¹⁸ O. Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria* (Enugu, 1978), 140–58, 277–84.

dominance from behind the scenes despite the ban on political parties, leaving the Western Region politically marginal.¹⁹

Such views tied region, ethnicity, and religious affiliation to a core that dichotomized modernity and tradition. Other scholars have noted how, during the colonial period, regional differences in economic development, missionary activity, and educational policy contributed to faster penetration of Western institutions and ideas in the Eastern and Western Regions of southern Nigeria than in the Northern Region.²⁰ One consequence of this very real ‘development’ gap was a sense that the ‘dynamic’ south was more ‘modern’ than the ‘traditional’, even ‘feudal’, north, which, in this model, remained resistant to change. The words of a former colonial official, written during the war about the predominant ethnic groups of the Northern and Eastern Regions, echo years of colonial discourse: ‘There is a fundamental difference in Nigeria between the Hausas who are Moslem and conservative, and the Ibos who are Christian and progressive.’²¹ Biafra repeatedly drew on these stereotypes, as when its representative in Abidjan issued a statement declaring that the result of British educational policies had been ‘that Northern Nigerians could read their Koran backwards, an accomplishment very unsuited for the challenges of a technological age’.²²

Of course, such simple characterizations are intellectually dishonest in their reduction to unsustainable binaries of realities replete with slippage, exceptions, and contradictions. Still, those familiar with Nigeria’s history will recognize in this polarization a political meme grounded in the general outline of Nigeria’s precolonial and colonial history, a meme that retains political and popular currency in Nigeria today. Reflecting the notion that propaganda ‘operates ... with many different kinds of truth – half truth, limited truth, truth out of context’, both Nigeria and Biafra aggressively exploited this unfortunate dichotomy.²³

In publications from the Eastern Region and later Biafra, references to northern political power – indeed, to formal politics in the north – zeroed in on the NPC. In many ways, the NPC functioned in these publications as

¹⁹ Indicative of the marginality that Biafran propaganda ascribed to the Yoruba is the statement in the *Biafra Newsletter* that Yoruba conscripts in Nigeria’s army ‘mutined [*sic*] against their Hausa-Fulani overlords’: *Biafra Newsletter* 13 (24 Nov. 1967). The publication also positioned the most visible Yoruba political figure of the day, the Finance Minister Obafemi Awolowo, an early opponent of the war, as a supplicant to Nigeria’s military leader, Yakubu Gowon, a northerner and, according to the *Newsletter*, Awolowo’s ‘master’. Invoking an ethnic stereotype, the authors wrote that Awolowo’s opposition to the war fell victim to ‘his inherent Yoruba opportunism and his ambition to become Prime Minister of the sinking Nigeria’: *Biafra Newsletter*, [no number] (10 Nov. 1967).

²⁰ It has become conventional to support this argument through reference to the numbers of teachers and students in each of the regions. See A. B. Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (London, 1974), 245–7.

²¹ J. L. Hornby, forward to Geoffrey Birch and Dominic St. George, *Biafra: The Case for Independence*, (London, 1968), 2. Hornby had served in the Treasury Department of Nigeria (1950–8). The document was published by the Britain-Biafra Association.

²² Special Representative, Republic of Biafra, ‘Facts about Nigeria/Biafra: the domination bogey laid to rest’, mimeograph (n.p., n.d.).

²³ K. Kellen, introduction to J. Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (New York, 1965), v.

a blanket proxy for the entire region. The authors of *The North and Constitutional Developments in Nigeria*, for example, drew on the NPC's motto of 'ONE NORTH, ONE PEOPLE – a slogan which was to be vociferously repeated in the North ever after'. This was evidence of 'the persistent disinclination of Northerners to identify themselves with the rest of the country'. The Ministry's writers made no mention of the region's other political parties (including the Bornu Youth Movement, the United Middle Belt Congress, and the Northern Progressive Elements Union, each of which stood at times in ideological and electoral opposition to the NPC). When the authors of the pamphlet argued that 'the [NPC] was living testimony to the fact that the North had never really wanted unity with the South', they both collapsed the region to a single party and glossed over inter-regional alliances by the NPC and other northern parties.²⁴

In developing the idea that 'Northern' outlooks were unfailingly provincial, the policy of 'Northernization' provided an inviting target. Launched in 1954, Northernization aimed to reduce the region's reliance on southern civil servants and professionals by expanding educational opportunities for northerners and curtailing employment of southerners, often by replacing them with more expensive expatriates while northerners received training. The policy became a major issue in inter-regional relations, and remained an open wound well beyond Nigerian independence. Attacks on Northernization reveal both the appeal and dangers of an oversimplified north-south dichotomy: on the surface, Northernization was an admission by the Northern Region that it had indeed fallen behind the south in key areas; a closer look reveals that it was also a declaration that the NPC would modernize its bureaucratic and economic infrastructure, but on its own terms. In the hands of the Biafran authors Nwankwo and Ifejika, however, Northernization was evidence that the region was not equal to the political demands of modernity. Writing during the war, in a book published in Britain, they seized the language of merit to attack northern competence and reinforce southern claims to modernity and national citizenship. Northernization, they argued,

is a kind of nationalization, except that the 'nationals' excluded Southern Nigerians. The latter were systematically removed from the Northern civil service and replaced by Northern Nigerians without the least regard for qualification or experience. Third-class clerks of Northern origin were given accelerated promotion in order to displace Southerners in positions of higher responsibility ... they displaced people, mainly Southerners, who had been in the service for decades and who had lived in the Region for more than half their lives.²⁵

Such arguments played into regional essentialisms that had become commonplace in Nigeria. Popular discourse tended to treat southeastern Nigeria – the Eastern Region of the colonial and early independence periods – as the region where Western ideas and values penetrated most deeply. By the 1950s it was common to associate things 'modern' with the

²⁴ Eastern Region of Nigeria, Ministry of Information, *The North and Constitutional Developments in Nigeria* [*Nigerian Crisis 1966, volume 5*] (Enugu, 1966), 3, 6.

²⁵ A. A. Nwankwo and S. U. Ifejika, *The Making of a Nation: Biafra* (London, 1969), 101. Earlier in the war, Nwankwo had published in the Enugu-based *Biafra Newsletter*.

south, and particularly with members of the Igbo ethnic group. The relationship between the Igbo and modernity has generated a great deal of scholarly and popular interest. In the most recent study to illuminate this point, van den Bersselaar shows, for the colonial period, ‘not only that Igbos operating in the modern sector developed notions about Igbo culture in relation to concepts such as “modernity”, but also that these ideas contained a lot of relatively new notions that came to be accepted as “Igbo”’.²⁶ In this context, to be Igbo was to bear important ties to modernity.

After secession, these perceptions thrived, in part because of the tendency of many inside and outside Nigeria to reduce Biafra to its Igbo majority. For observers who rejected the Biafra-equals-Igbo equation, such ideas instead attached to Biafra as a whole. A *New Yorker* correspondent repeated what had become conventional wisdom in many quarters when she wrote that ‘by secession in 1967 Biafra had more doctors, lawyers, and engineers than any other country in black Africa. Of six hundred Nigerian doctors before the war began, five hundred were Biafrans’.²⁷ Claims such as this probably originated in a short statement printed by the Biafran government near the start of the war, which pointed out that Biafra’s population of 14 million was the fourth largest on the continent, of whom 700 were lawyers, 600 engineers, and 3,000 university students.²⁸ Such figures contributed to the belief – plausible enough for Nigeria not to challenge it – that Biafra was ‘the most highly developed and educated black country there is’.²⁹

It is worth noting that Biafra’s own rhetoric invites scrutiny of claims that the Eastern Region had been ‘highly developed’ in its industrial or economic infrastructure. In a 1968 address to the Organization of African Unity, Biafra’s head of state argued: ‘Economically, down to the 1950s, our territory was relegated to the backwaters as a destitute area. National institutions, projects and utilities were deliberately sited outside our territory. Nevertheless, we invested confidently in the development of the whole of Nigeria.’³⁰ Despite such underinvestment, the association of the Igbo and eastern Nigeria with modernity persisted, in large part because easterners themselves asserted it.³¹ The claim was strong even in northern Nigeria, where, by the 1950s, the face of southern Nigeria – and European institutions – was often Igbo. Igbo resident in the Northern Region, like those who migrated throughout the south, tended to reflect characteristics that in colonial Nigeria suggested modernity. These included Western dress, Western education, use of English, Christianity, and skilled niches in Nigeria’s formal economy, where Igbo migrants had made significant inroads during the 1930s and 1940s. Further, in cases where southerners were not actually Igbo, in

²⁶ D. van den Bersselaar, *In Search of Igbo Identity: Language, Culture and Politics in Nigeria, 1900–1966* (Leiden, 1998), 224; see also 308–9.

²⁷ R. Adler, ‘Letter from Biafra’, *New Yorker*, 4 Oct. 1969.

²⁸ Republic of Biafra, Ministry of Information, ‘Memorandum on future association between Biafra and the rest of the former Federation of Nigeria (Enugu, n.d.).’

²⁹ Adler, ‘Letter from Biafra’.

³⁰ Republic of Biafra, Ministry of Information, ‘Address by His Excellency Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu to the Organization of African Unity Consultative Assembly at Addis Ababa on Monday Fifth August, 1968’, 4.

³¹ van den Bersselaar, *Igbo Identity*, 308–11.

northern hands the label often adhered to other Christian southerners, in spite of their actual ethnic affiliations.

Christianity played a significant role in painting the Igbo and other southerners with the brush of modernity. As van den Bersselaar reminds us, 'mission Christianity and colonial rule used the claim that they introduced modernity and development to justify their mission'.³² Without disregarding arguments to the contrary, it is clear from the timbre of their references to Christianity that many Biafrans and their supporters viewed their faith as better suited to the modern world than Islam.³³ While Christianity had a strong presence in much of southern and central Nigeria, large numbers of Yoruba-speaking Muslims in the Western Region reinforced claims that the southeast was the most thoroughly Christianized section of the country.

Nationalism, that most modern of forces, also adhered most easily to the Eastern Region. While Nigeria's first major nationalist movement (the Nigerian Youth Movement) and the political party that it spawned during the 1940s (the National Congress of Nigerian Citizens, or NCNC) arose in cosmopolitan Lagos, the latter was led by an Igbo, Nnamdi Azikiwe. Each initially drew support from other southern groups, but it was among the Igbo that the NCNC was strongest. Igbo support for the party's nationalist platform was, for foreign and Nigerian observers alike, evidence of Igbo 'receptivity to change', confirmation that they were unusually prepared to meet the challenges of the modern world.³⁴ In this view, Igbo were pre-disposed to meet those challenges in part because of longstanding cultural patterns that were particularly suited to modernity. As far back as 1937, the anthropologist C. K. Meek famously floated the claim that the Igbo were 'the most progressive of all African peoples'. Meek and other scholars wrote of the 'democratic' character of Igbo society, historically evidenced by the absence of autocratic authority and chieftaincy in most Igbo groups, by governance practices that emphasized public debate and consensus-building, and by the limited heritability of social status.³⁵ These patterns, the arguments went, nurtured a merit-based dynamism in Igbo society that was difficult or impossible in groups with more rigid social or religious hierarchies.

These and other claims of an easy relationship between tradition and change reappeared in new, sharpened form in the work of Biafran thinkers. Their arguments rarely used ethnically specific language but rather referenced Biafran identity. In contrast, supporters outside the new state were

³² *Ibid.* 309.

³³ There is here an interesting irony. One strand of thought originating from the early years of colonial rule and embraced even today by many there, holds that the large, formally organized emirates of northern Nigeria, with their ties to transnational Islamic civilization with its literacy, legal sophistication, bureaucracy, and formal taxation represented a significantly more advanced way of life than those found among the smaller, less centralized societies of southeastern Nigeria.

³⁴ The phrase originates with S. Ottenberg, 'Ibo receptivity to change', in W. J. Bascom and M. J. Herskovits (eds.), *Continuity and Change in African Cultures* (Chicago, 1962), 142.

³⁵ C. K. Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe: A Study in Indirect Rule* (Oxford, 1937; reprinted 1957), xvi. See also M. Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria* (Oxford, 1937); and V. C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York, 1965), 20.

more likely to write about 'Ibos'.³⁶ In both cases, assertions of Biafra's modernity buttressed the emergent state's claims to legitimacy by stressing continuity with a shared past.

BIAFRA'S DECLARATION

Following its declaration of independence in May 1967, Biafra announced itself to the world with the pamphlet *Introducing Biafra*. The document is a primer on the discourses that later Biafran and pro-Biafran rhetoric would use. On its first page its authors distinguish Biafrans in specifically national terms, pushing the identity backward through history onto eastern Nigerians, and into precolonial times. This retro-fitted, transhistorical Biafran identity did not directly contradict claims that Biafrans had been a major engine of Nigerian unity: 'More than any other people in the former Federation, Biafrans contributed their human and material resources to the cause of national unity', the authors wrote. In doing so, Biafrans 'came to acquire a real stake in the progress and well-being of ALL parts of the country. They regarded themselves as citizens of Nigeria to an extent that no other group in the country ever did'. Other Nigerians, particularly far northern Muslims, appear in sharp contrast.

Wherever Biafrans journeyed, their industry, resourcefulness and drive marked them out from their neighbours. In the North, particularly, the distinction was enhanced by religion; for while the majority of the Fulani-Hausa population were Muslims the Biafrans were and still remain mostly Christians. In addition, the progress and dynamism of Biafrans contrasted with the tardiness and conservatism of their neighbours who were generally unable to achieve the same standards of efficiency and prosperity.³⁷

Further,

While Biafrans abroad were thrusting ahead and setting the pace for the economic development of Nigeria, those in Biafra itself were diligently exploiting the human and material resources of their homeland. Their ready acceptance of modern ideas and techniques brought them to the forefront of economic and political activities. Democratic by tradition, they championed democratic ideals and at the same time advocated the concept of a unified country. They resolutely opposed the reactionary ideas of the Fulani-Hausa ruling elite, which controlled the North and dominated the Federal Government. They also resisted the vicious and unscrupulous methods by which the Northerners sought to perpetuate their hold on the political strings of Nigeria. It was largely this confrontation between the forces of progress, represented by Biafrans, and those of reaction, represented by Fulani-Hausa[,] which culminated in the Nigerian census crisis of 1963–64, the

³⁶ In part this is explained by the ease with which many Western observers turned to ethnic or 'tribal' frames of reference to understand African affairs. Another important factor was Biafra's loss of most of its non-Igbo population, often by choice, to the Nigerian side during the war's early phases. By the time many of Biafra's foreign advocates began to weigh in, Biafra had an overwhelmingly Igbo population.

³⁷ Republic of Biafra, *Introducing Biafra* (reprint, London, 1967), 1. The original document, printed in Biafra, appeared under the title *Introducing the Republic of Biafra*, and contains other minor discrepancies with the more widely circulated reprint.

Federal election crisis of 1964 and the Western Nigeria election crisis of 1965 which brought the military to power in 1966.³⁸

Northern Muslims were a frequent target in other Biafran publications as well. *The Biafra Newsletter* was printed in Biafra and circulated in and outside its territory. A story under the headline ‘Biafra will be modern welfare state’ extolled previous ‘efforts made by Biafrans to enlighten the backward and indolent Northern Nigerians, but regretted that these ungrateful Northerners, led by the overbearing Emirs, later “turned around to bite the fingers that fed them”’.³⁹ Early in 1968, the same newsletter conflated modernity with virtue as it set Biafran modernity and northern conservatism sharply at odds. It accused Nigeria of ‘striving to promote backwardness’, a charge the authors laced not only with ethnic essentialism but also with reference to genocide.

The Hausas and Fulanis believe that once Biafrans are exterminated, everyone will be equal. There will be no educated men, no progressive people with new ideas. Those so-called Nigerians who will be left can then settle down to an easy life of indolence in which [regional] population will be the basis of merit. Everything in the ‘national cake’ will then be shared out to those idiots from the most populous parts of that imagined country.

Also, the one element which inspires progress – namely challenge – will have been eliminated and with it the roots of democracy. In short, the fear of progress will have been removed forever.⁴⁰

Biafran rhetoric also depicted Islam as an impediment to progress. A 1968 pamphlet slipped in a thinly veiled dig at northern Muslims as it extended to all Biafrans the colonial-era stereotype of the progressive Igbo:

Where others would accept an inferior position in life or communal backwardness with apathy or even as the divine will of the Almighty, the Biafran would see them as a challenge to his God-given talent and initiative. He would thus strive relentlessly to improve his lot and raise the general level of his community. He has the will to transform his society into a modern progressive community. In this process of rapid transformation he will retain and cherish the best elements of his culture, drawing sustenance as well as moral and psychological stability from them. But being a Biafran he will never be afraid to adapt what needs to be adapted or change what has to be changed.⁴¹

This ‘will to transform’ – for Giddens, faith in human agency – was, for the authors, only part of what distinguished Biafrans.

As a matter of fact, Biafrans are different in a fundamental sense from Nigerians. Biafrans believe in progress. The Biafran society is open and progressive. The people of Biafra have always striven to achieve a workable balance between the claims of tradition and the demand for change and betterment.⁴²

³⁸ *Ibid.* 1–2.

³⁹ ‘Biafra will be modern welfare state’, *Biafra Newsletter*, 24 Nov. 1967.

⁴⁰ ‘39 accusations against Nigeria’, *Biafra Newsletter*, 16 Feb. 1968.

⁴¹ Republic of Biafra, Ministry of Information, *The Case for Biafra: First Independence Anniversary Edition* (12 June 1968), 1.

⁴² *Ibid.* 1. See also Giddens and Pierson, *Conversations*, 94.

Often Nigeria appeared as the historical beneficiary of these progressive impulses. In an August 1968 address, the Biafran leader Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu leveraged eastern Nigerians' Christianity when he positioned colonial and postcolonial easterners as missionaries of progress, driven by altruistic zeal.

After the fashion of Christian missionaries, we built schools and colleges and supplied teachers and lecturers for general education throughout the country. In the same manner, we established hospitals and nursing homes and provided doctors and nurses for healing and tending the sick.⁴³

Representations of the Igbo as a driving force in national development even made it into Nigerian rhetoric. One example among many comes from the *New Nigerian*, a newspaper that had historically functioned as the quasi-official voice of the Northern Regional government. Shortly after the war began, a special issue depicted Nigerian troops capturing the Igbo town of Nsukka, home of the University of Nigeria. The paper accused Ojukwu of having 'intoxicated the innocent Ibo people with the idea of rebellion against a country they had contributed to building'.⁴⁴

EXTERNAL VOICES

Biafran supporters abroad also tapped into established ideas and stock representations to make their cases. Like Biafran propagandists, they conflated religion and ethnicity with attitudes toward social and technological change. The idea that the accomplishments of eastern Nigerians represented a successful implantation of Western culture ran deep among many of Biafra's supporters, as when a group in the United Kingdom, many of them former colonial officials, wrote in a memo to a British undersecretary that 'Britain is being party to the destruction of an able, dynamic and industrious people, who were her friends and pupils'.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, in North America, the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive circulated the pamphlet 'Biafra: the Biafran possibility', written by the anthropologist Stanley Diamond. In centering progressive/conservative and modern/traditional dichotomies, Diamond's message synched with Biafran rhetoric, except that Diamond spoke not of Biafrans but rather of 'Ibos'. According to Diamond, antagonism between the Igbo and northern Muslims was an inevitable consequence of fundamentally different social, political, and religious outlooks.

As one reflects on the confrontation between Ibo-speaking peoples, other Easterners and the Northern establishment, one gains a sense of inevitable progression across a cultural interface. For the basic clash in Nigeria has very deep cultural roots. The Ibos are egalitarian in ethics, behavior, and organization. They modernized themselves: education is almost a fetish with them. They are

⁴³ Biafra, 'Address by Odumegwu Ojukwu on Fifth August, 1968', 4.

⁴⁴ Y. Abdulazeez, 'Foreign influence in the civil war', *War Chronicle* 11 (n.d., probably July 1967), 38; the *War Chronicle* was published and distributed by the New Nigerian Newspapers organization. For more on Nigerian propaganda see Anthony, *Poison and Medicine*, 119–36.

⁴⁵ The National Archives, (NA) FCO 65/249, letter, Britain-Biafra Association to Maurice Foley MP, 6 Feb. 1969.

essentially Christian in faith though secular in temperament, and they hold to the idea of individual conscience and responsibility. They are upwardly mobile, eagerly becoming traders, civil servants, technicians, dispensers of modern ideas, leaders in social action and social amelioration. They transformed native structures into the idea of Nigeria as a modern polity.

A similar characterization of the cultural style of the North yields a series of polar oppositions. Northern society is hierarchically structured and, at least in the upper echelons, conservatively Islamic. Paradise awaits the true believer, and fatalism blunts social action in depth; the goal is the protection of the received structure. Islam embraces the principle of collective responsibility in which any person stands for his group, class, or family. Viewed from the North, Nigeria was conceived as a theocracy. The inevitably resulting Ibo–Northern opposition was further sharpened by the economic threat the Ibos posed to the routinely corrupt and nepotistic Northern hierarchy. This profound cultural antipathy – which the British may have understood, but which they did not accommodate in their policy of imposing Nigerian unity – held the seeds of the tragedy.⁴⁶

Others in North America drew on Biafran modernity to make their cases for supporting Biafra. The activist Paul O'Dwyer, in an open letter to President Nixon, wrote that

Biafra, depending on the efforts of its own resourceful citizens, is making its own rockets, mortars, beer, whiskey, farm tools, etc. Biafrans are refining their own oil. Telephones work. Thousands of cars are still on the roads. The government functions.

For O'Dwyer, though, what was most inspiring was Biafrans' common, progressive vision:

Examples of Biafran resourcefulness and participation in government could be multiplied many times. Indeed, 'participation in government' is one of the most striking characteristics of Biafra. All observers who have visited Biafra are struck by what Biafra has come to mean to the Biafrans. The Biafrans are involved in creating a society in which the voices of all its members will be heard, where all people can participate in building a progressive, virile nation.⁴⁷

Like O'Dwyer, the US Senator Charles Godell was struck by Biafran self-sufficiency, in particular the 60-octane gasoline and 'low grade diesel fuel' produced at a 'modest Biafran industrial installation'. According to Godell, who led a Congressional study tour of Biafra in 1969 and whose findings were published in *Congressional Report*, 'the very existence and operation of these indigenously designed and constructed refineries is a manifestation of determination and ingenuity that we regard as remarkable'. He added, plausibly, that 'most of the Biafran engineers who have contrived the refineries and similar installations were trained in America'.⁴⁸

A year earlier, Peter Wood, writing for a group of Biafra supporters in the United Kingdom, mostly former colonial officials, suggested that war had

⁴⁶ S. Diamond, 'Biafra: the Biafran possibility' (probably 1969), circulated by the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive.

⁴⁷ Northwestern University Library Africana Studies collection, open letter to President Richard Nixon by Paul O'Dwyer, 25 July 1969.

⁴⁸ 'Godell report on the Biafran study mission', *Congressional Report*, 11533 (25 Feb. 1969), S1986, reprinted in an undated insert to *Africa Today*.

short-circuited the emergence of an efficient, modern Eastern Nigeria under Ojukwu's leadership. Woods declared that

Ojukwu, once he had found his feet as Governor and had learned to distinguish between constructive men and self-seekers, had already before the outbreak of war gone far towards improving the efficiency of government and its services, eliminating corruption in the police, the civil service, and the public corporations, removing corrupt and inefficient local government bodies, and cleaning up public life generally. If this pace could have been kept up for another few years ... there is every possibility that the East might have achieved a 'break-through' which would have carried it beyond those initial political, social and economics impediments which constitute the basic problems of the under-developed countries.⁴⁹

A letter to the *Daily Times* of Lagos shows how visions of a self-sufficient, communitarian Biafra had currency even inside wartime Nigeria. The letter, penned by members of the University of Lagos community, was reproduced in whole or in part by pro-Biafran groups abroad, as well as by Biafra's Overseas Press Division.

One important thing that comes to light from rebel propaganda and other reports is that the leadership in that jungle actively seeks knowledge and utilizes ALL available talent.

Their musicians were encouraged to sing about their rebellion ... Their physicists were encouraged to use their knowledge in operating their pirate radio and to advantage.

The authors went on:

Their remaining university lecturers are regularly put over their radio to give reasoned and analytical answers to pressing problems. Their news talks are given by their intelligentsia.

Their engineers, chemists and other scientific people are making their home-made bombs used against us. We discovered their oil refinery when we captured Ovim. There is hardly a branch of their knowledge that they do not utilize.

Despite Ojukwu's education, there is no doubt that all the historians, political scientists, the English specialists and a host of other intellectuals co-operate in producing the final speeches that are regularly blast[ed] over the pirate radio.

In our view, the most important thing about the relationship between the rebel regime and their intellectuals is that the intellectuals are not hated, suspected and despised in the rebel regime. In return, the intellectuals have given their best to the society.

The authors concluded by indicting Nigeria for lacking Biafra's racial confidence: 'Our universities contain enough Nigerians to advise our government on anything in the world. But they are never consulted by anyone because they are not experts – which in Nigeria means whites!'⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Peter Wood, *et al.*, 'The Nigerian/Biafra War: historical background', memorandum, 14 Nov. 1968, reproduced in *Biafra Review* 1 (Jan. 1970).

⁵⁰ Letter to the Editor, *Daily Times* (Lagos), 22 July 1969. The authors were Bayo Akereke, Akin Ojo, and Elias Omotosho. Reproduced in 'Current news from and about Biafra: a review of current Biafran news compiled from the international and domestic press and reports from informed sources', no. 33 (12 Aug. 1969).

The Irish academic and journalist Conor Cruise O'Brien, writing in the British *Observer*, also saw racial overtones to Biafra's self-reliance. For him, the failure of more than a handful of African states to recognize Biafra was tragic, since

in all of tropical Africa, Biafra is probably the clearest case of a country where Africans, and only Africans, are in charge. It is strange and sad that people who are sincerely and passionately devoted to the cause of Africa should ... deny recognition to a genuinely heroic African independence struggle occurring in Biafra.⁵¹

THE RHETORIC OF RACE

The willingness to talk about race reflected in these and other comments mirrored a shift in Biafran propaganda during the last weeks of 1968. Increasing attention to race and racism made sense in a rhetorical landscape in which claims of genocide had lost traction in the outside world. A report by a team of international observers late in 1968 declared, unequivocally, that there was no evidence of genocide.⁵² While fear of genocide persisted inside Biafra and among supporters abroad, in practice Biafra had lost that aspect of the external propaganda war.

Prior to the report, the use of race as a propaganda tool had been limited and rarely constituted a main thread of argumentation. Attention to race had been largely the preserve of non-Biafrans, as in a 1968 pamphlet published by the Britain-Biafra Association. The author, George Knapp, detailed British racism toward 'arrogant' and 'uppity' Igbo.⁵³ Others had invoked race as a tool of sensationalism, such as the pro-Biafran reporter Frederick Forsyth's declaration in *The Sunday Times* that 'There are forces let loose in Biafra that white men cannot understand'.⁵⁴

Before the *No Genocide* report, Biafran references to race had been limited in scope. A statement by an official in the *Biafra Sun* in June 1968 drew on racist notions but did not depict Biafrans as the victims of racism. Rather, it attacked northern Nigerian conservatism, whose 'feudal god-heads' – the emirs – conspired 'to wipe out a whole section of our people'.

Shame that even in the 20th Century there can be found Africans in the persons of Nigerian leaders who unwittingly act to confirm the 19th Century white stereotypes of Africans as being incapable of abstract analysis and whose education is superficial – a tool only to ape the white man.

Both reflecting nationalist Africans and some non-Africans have long challenged these stereotypes as the machinations of rabid racialists. And the actions of Nigeria cannot but leave a sour taste in Africans' mouths.⁵⁵

⁵¹ 'What more must Biafrans do?' *The Observer*, 11 May 1969.

⁵² Organization of African Unity, *No Genocide: Final Report of the First Phase from 5th October to 10th December by the Organization of African Unity Observers in Nigeria* (December 1968). See also Brigadier Sir B. Fergusson, 'Tragic facts of Nigeria deny genocide story', *The Times*, 12 Dec. 1968.

⁵³ G. Knapp, *Aspects of the Biafran Affair: A Study of British Attitudes and Policy Towards the Nigerian-Biafran Conflict* (London, 1968), 17.

⁵⁴ F. Forsyth, 'Gutted hamlets, rotting corpses: this is genocide', *The Sunday Times*, 12 May 1968.

⁵⁵ 'Nigeria: Britain's ally in crime', statement by the Commissioner for Agriculture, Prof. E. B. E. Ndem, *Biafra Sun*, 15 June 1968.

Later the same month, the *Biafra Sun* quoted Dr Ifegwu Eke, Biafra's Commissioner for Information in Great Britain, who questioned if American support for Britain's pro-Nigerian policies reflected racial animus.

We know that far too many people place very little value on our lives because we are black. The most reactionary whites will kill blacks or encourage blacks to kill blacks just to show how much they despise us.

Let America's support for the mass slaughter of Biafrans not be motivated by hatred for free blackmen, especially resourceful and progressive blackmen.⁵⁶

Eke's statement foreshadowed an expanded role for race in Biafran propaganda. An October 1968 interview, published in the *Toronto Daily Star*, shows an increasingly racial bent to Ojukwu's thinking.

[W]ith the interview obviously drawing to a close, Colonel Ojukwu leaned forward with sudden animation:

'When you come right down to it, this is what it is all about,' and he pointed to his hand. The reference was obvious.

'If Biafra was white, we would be the hero of every western school-boy, they would emulate our every act. But we are black. And blacks are not allowed to achieve what the white man has achieved.

'We are asking that the African be accepted as a man – we ask no more than that.'⁵⁷

The new line of argumentation delineated in the *Sun* and *Toronto Daily Star* articles was center-stage by the time that *The Principles of the Biafran Revolution* appeared the following year. A sweeping, 15,000-word manifesto, better remembered as the *Ahiara Declaration*, the speech was named for the town in which Ojukwu delivered it on 1 June 1969, on the second anniversary of Biafra's declaration of independence, at a time when Biafra's military and economic outlooks were bleak. Unabridged text appeared in various publications and circulated as a pamphlet. It included familiar meditations on genocide and assertions that the war reflected 'Arab-Muslim expansionism'. The *Declaration* also laid out a racial critique of the conflict that, like most Biafran appeals to race, preferred phenotypic labels ('black' or 'Negro' on the one hand, 'white' on the other) to geographical ones. Doing so positioned Biafra's war as an extension of anti-colonial struggles in Africa and elsewhere, while at the same time inviting comparisons with the US civil rights movement. Where the *Declaration* drew on conventional critiques of imperialism and white supremacy, Ojukwu presented them in dialogue with earlier arguments about modernity.

The *Declaration* promised a 'Negro Renaissance', with ramifications not only in West Africa but around the black world. For Ojukwu, Biafran independence represented a historical reckoning: 'Our struggle, in an even more fundamental sense, is the culmination of the confrontation between Negro

⁵⁶ 'America should disown Palmer's concept of self-determination', statement by Dr Ifegwu Eke, *Biafra Sun*, 27 June 1968.

⁵⁷ Stephen Lewis, *Journey to Biafra* (Don Mills, Ontario, 1968), 16; the booklet reproduced articles from the *Toronto Daily Star*. Lewis was a member of the Canadian Parliament.

nationalism and white imperialism'.⁵⁸ According to the *Declaration*, 'the Negro's white oppressors' were

not prepared to admit that the Negro is a man and a brother. This is why we in Biafra are convinced that the Negro can never come to his own until he is able to build modern states (whether national or multi-national) based on a compelling African ideology, enjoying real rather than sham independence, able to give scope to the full development of the human spirit in the arts and sciences, able to engage in dialogue with the white states on a basis of transparent equality and able to introduce a new dimension into international statecraft.

In the world context, this is Biafra – the plight of the black struggling to be man.⁵⁹

Here, couched in language as evocative of Fanon or Malcolm X as Nkrumah or Nyerere, was the Biafra of earlier rhetoric: modern and independent, but standing toe to toe not with 'feudal', tradition-bound northern Nigeria but with dynamic, global white supremacy. Unlike the northern Nigerian antagonist, whose resistance to Biafran progress was the by-product of social and religious conservatism, this foe feared the emergence of a rival unencumbered by presumptions of racial inferiority and eager to undermine historical patterns of political and economic domination.

Early in the *Declaration*, Ojukwu argued that Biafrans had 'fought in the highest traditions of [C]hristian civilization', despite opposition from 'the very custodians of this civilization and our one-time mentors'.⁶⁰ Moral high ground thus claimed, he laid out the core argument of the *Declaration*:

The more I think about it the more I am convinced that our disability is racial. The root cause of our problem lies in the fact that we are black. If all the things that had happened to us had happened to another people who are not black, if other people who are not black had reacted in the way our people have reacted these two long years, the world's response would surely have been different.⁶¹

As evidence Ojukwu pointed to international acquiescence to Nigeria's total blockade of Biafra. 'At no stage in' either World War 'did the white belligerents carry out a total blockade of their fellow whites'. He also leveraged international interest in the deaths of white mercenaries: 'For 18 white men, Europe is aroused. What have they said about our millions?' With uncharacteristic informality he asked, 'How many black dead make one missing white? Mathematicians, please answer me. Is it infinity?'⁶²

Race and modernity overlapped in the speech. Ojukwu argued that 'a modern Negro African government worth the trust placed in it by its people, must build a progressive state'.⁶³ What he called the 'Hausa-Fulani feudal aristocracy' presented just one impediment to achieving such an ideal. The more significant obstacles to the development of that progressive state, however, had white faces:

Since in the thinking of many white powers a good, progressive and efficient government is good only for whites, our view was considered dangerous and

⁵⁸ C. O. Ojukwu, *Ahiara Declaration: Principles of the Biafran Revolution* (Geneva, 1969), 14. ⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 19–20. ⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 5. ⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.* 5–6. An account in the *Christian Science Monitor* described Ojukwu's delivery of these lines as sarcastic: M. Reik, 'Biafra's unifying goal: an independent, democratic black state', *Christian Science Monitor*, 7 Aug. 1969. ⁶³ *Ahiara Declaration*, 9.

pernicious: a point of view which explains but does not justify the blind support which these powers have given to uphold the Nigerian ideal of a corrupt, decadent and putrefying society. To them genocide is an appropriate response to any group of black people who have the temerity to attempt to evolve their own social system.⁶⁴

A few lines later he concluded that 'we have learnt that the right to self-determination is inalienable, but only to the white man'.⁶⁵

A *Christian Science Monitor* reporter present at the address downplayed Ojukwu's racial arguments. She described his vision of Biafra as 'essentially Christian in outlook, and free of neocolonialist influence'. After opining that 'Ojukwu is probably overestimating the racist factor' she also noted that

focusing on the race issue has helped Biafrans define more clearly what their role might be in a broader context. They now see their conflict with Nigeria as more than a war for independence and their homeland. They are now ready to believe that they can become the first truly independent, black nation in Africa.⁶⁶

Such independence, of course, did not come.

THE END OF THE WAR

If any doubt about the eventual outcome of the war remained at the time of the *Declaration*, it was short-lived. Biafra surrendered barely six months later, in January 1970. But even military and economic collapse did not blunt the bundling of race and modernity. A few days before surrender, the Biafran Overseas Press Service released a statement describing the doomed state as 'a gauntlet thrown at the feet of Africa and the negro world': 'Biafra has the largest concentration of intellectuals and manpower in Black Africa. Biafran drive and enterprise, which are considered a threat to the white man's industrial and commercial monopoly in Africa, are an inspiration to the black man.'⁶⁷

Others pursued the same, now-familiar thread. Diamond wrote about Biafra's bearing on questions of race, modernity, and resistance to white supremacy in language sentimental but insightful. Significantly, the northern Muslims so prominent in his early discourse were all but absent. Instead his focus was on Biafrans as black revolutionaries: 'They were the opposite of what the West wished them to be'.⁶⁸ In language reminiscent of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, Diamond wrote:

Every servant comes to know the habits of his master, but the Biafran knowledge of us was even more comprehensive, more to the point, because it was the understanding of the servant in ultimate revolt, the servant who demands the right to free himself, the servant who is not afraid of breaking laws. Facing Europe as an equal, Biafra unmasked not only the duplicity of the master but the treachery of his contracts ... He had to rid himself of European domination by building a society that resonated with his own history, a society that obliterated the forms of

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 10.

⁶⁶ Reik, 'Biafra's unifying goal'.

⁶⁷ Press Release, Biafran Overseas Press Division/Markpress News Feature Service, 7 Jan. 1970.

⁶⁸ S. Diamond, preface to B. Nickerson, *Chi: Letters from Biafra* (Toronto, 1970), v.

exploitation that had been imposed upon him. To nullify Europe he had to go beyond Europe.⁶⁹

In doing this, Biafra exposed ‘the racism that is reconstituted in the western world when blacks in particular insist upon determining themselves’. For Diamond it was ‘perfectly clear that the anachronistic industrial societies, which call themselves modern, will try to stifle all cultures that do not reinforce their sovereignty, or their images of themselves’.⁷⁰ Biafra’s claims on modernity, he argued, guaranteed its destruction. In the same volume, Betty Nickerson wrote, ‘Never before in the history of black men has such technological progress been made. It must have terrified the imperialists, for in the face of Biafra’s demonstrated technological achievements, how can the myth of western technological exclusiveness be maintained?’⁷¹

Present-day conversations with former Biafrans make clear that notions of Biafran modernity penetrated the Biafran psyche – or at minimum have done so in retrospect. And, at least within the intelligentsia, the themes of the *Ahiara Declaration* remained close to the surface. Writing two years after the war, Arthur Nwankwo argued that Biafra had served a fundamentally racial mission. What had begun as a war for survival had become ‘an opportunity to revolutionize the Black African from his stupor of psychological bondage and his pathological feeling of inferiority’. Biafra was ‘the best vehicle for shattering the myth of racism: the first black nation to be taken seriously in a world dominated by white people’.⁷²

Biafra had the myth of the inevitability of Biafra – the belief that Biafra was the Christ of the black world, conceived by God to change the lot of the Negro race. It was a myth that was expressed, though belatedly and incoherently, in the *Ahiara Declaration*.

He continued:

We have hitherto occupied our time hibernating in the cyst of ‘Black is Beautiful’ or protesting desperately that the black man is as good as the white man. The experience of Biafra offers a new approach: the confident use of the white man’s skill and experience in the development of our own situation.⁷³

More than a generation after the war, the idea of Biafra remains subject to a range of historical, moral, and symbolic claims. On the one hand, in most Nigerian media and scholarship the term ‘Biafra’ rarely appears without punctuation that insulates the author and readers from the ideas that the word invokes. On the other hand, a trip through the message boards and other postings at websites such as ‘Biafra Nigeria World’, ‘Biafraland’, or ‘Biafranet’ shows that, for others, the ideas embedded in the label remain powerful, relevant, and attractive.⁷⁴ In recent years, many of the more robust exchanges invoking Biafra in electronic and print media – as well as in Nigeria’s courts – have dealt with the Movement for the Realisation of a Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), which has drawn liberally on rhetoric

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* v–vi.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* vii.

⁷¹ Nickerson, *Chi*, 113.

⁷² A. A. Nwankwo, *Nigeria: The Challenge of Biafra* (Enugu, 1972), 80–1.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 84–5.

⁷⁴ <http://www.biafranigeriaworld.com>; <http://www.biafraland.com>; <http://www.biafranet.com/> (all consulted 23 Feb. 2010).

and symbols from the 1967–70 period. While many observers would assign MASSOB and its arguments for Igbo self-determination to a cynical political fringe, its existence is a reminder of the power of Biafra as a vital, polyvalent symbol.

Notions of modernity and self-sufficiency, so central to pre-war and war-time discourses, also remain intertwined with present-day expressions of Igbo ethnicity. This is not surprising for two reasons: first, post-war federal rhetoric emphasized the importance of the Igbo (sometimes called ‘former rebels’ and almost never ‘Biafrans’) and their education and skills in post-war Nigeria; second, the post-war strategies of former Biafrans relied not only on those attributes but also on other Nigerians’ belief that they were intrinsic to Igbo character.⁷⁵ Re-absorption into Nigeria muted the question of race, as Britain and the Soviet Union became less salient in the day-to-day dynamics that shaped relations between former Biafrans and other Nigerians. Still, as an article posted to an Igbo-interest website demonstrates, the idea that Biafra represented a bridge to a distinctly black modernity has survived.

The generation of those veterans and scientific doyens ... is dying out gradually without passing such life-saving and potent tools of freedom and emancipation to the young ones. In this, lies the defeat of Biafra and in fact, the defeat of Nigeria and the entire black race in general.⁷⁶

It seems unlikely that the inevitable passing of the generation that fought the war will end associations so demonstrably resilient. Ideas of modernity and race so deeply embedded in Biafran rhetoric appear destined to remain part of Nigeria’s national conversation.

⁷⁵ See Anthony, *Poison and Medicine*, chs. 4 and 6.

⁷⁶ Tobe Nnamani, ‘Biafra in retrospect: still counting the losses’, 17 March 2004, http://www.kwenu.com/publications/nnamani/biafra_retrospect1.htm (consulted 23 Feb. 2010).