

ETHNICITY, NATIONALISM AND URBAN VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

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Warri City & British Colonial Rule in Western Niger Delta. Edited by PETER P. EKEH. Lagos: Urhobo Historical Society, 2004. Pp. xxx + 295. £19.95/\$29.95 (ISBN 978-064-925-5).

KEY WORDS: Nigeria, colonial, ethnicity, nationalism, urban, violence.

In the months before and after the Nigerian elections of 2003, the city of Warri in the western part of the Niger Delta erupted in ethnic conflict. In May, 12,000 people fled their homes in and around Warri and during August there was intense fighting in the city itself. A night-time curfew was imposed after five days of gun battles between rival Itsekiri, and Ijaw militias turned some parts of Warri into no-go areas. Many of the chapters in *Warri City & British Colonial Rule in Western Niger Delta* were originally written in response to these events and what subsequently became known as the 'Warri Crisis'. The contributors, all members of the Urhobo Historical Society (UHS), state that they seek 'to tell the historical truth about Warri and the Western Niger Delta' (p. xxi). In particular, the book aims to challenge what it terms 'a major false assumption' in many accounts of the history of Warri, which emphasize Urhobo oppression of the minority Itsekiri (p. xxiv). Another objective is to document aspects of Urhobo culture 'that unite us together into one cultural and historical entity' (p. vi).

These explicit ethnic nationalist intentions are sustained throughout this book. There is no attempt to conceal the objective of constructing a functional historical narrative of ethnic identity so as to claim political authority and rights over valuable urban land. As such, the book gives us some insight into the role of historical accounts in the construction of ideologies of urban citizenship. Chapter 6 (by the UHS editorial and management committee), for example, examines the 'ownership' of Warri in relation to the competing claims of Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw ethnic groups and argues for a need to 'democratize our history' (p. 141). The Itsekiri are criticized for being 'absolutist', by declaring that 'all of it [Warri] is the King's land'. This view of history has implications for contemporary Warri politics, they contend: 'Sometimes, sadly, the dispute is headed in that Medieval direction' (p. 140). By contrast, the UHS emphasizes, claims of ownership from Urhobo and Ijaw communities are limited, and they do not exclude rights to portions of Warri by other communities.

The most historically illuminating chapter is Peter Ekeh's introduction, which attempts to situate the history of the Niger Delta in the context of the making of the Atlantic world. He makes the familiar historical point that the rise of the Atlantic world introduced new features in the organization of states and societies, particularly a distinction between coastal peoples (such as the Ijaw) and inland peoples (like the Urhobo). But, for Ekeh, the most important feature of Portuguese contact was that it 'marked the beginning of Itsekiri nationality' (p. 12). Recounting Itsekiri descent from a renegade Benin prince called Ginuwa who sought refuge on an island called Ode Itsekiri, he contends that it was the Portuguese who protected Ginuwa's descendants from the Benin authorities, adopted them as trading partners and helped bring them together under a central authority. Subsequently, the Itsekiri were known as 'people of Benin River' (p. 16). Centuries later, the British defined Warri District in the 1890s through a series of treaties and were apparently clear in its designation as 'home of the Urhobo'. But in 1901, Benin River District and Warri District were amalgamated. An Itsekiri chieftain, Dore Numa, was appointed as the British political agent for both districts after the death

of his Urhobo counterpart. It was thus to Dore Numa that the British turned for assistance with acquiring land in Warri during the early twentieth century. In Ekeh's view, 'that act of convenience on the part of the British instigated a dispute that drags on until this day' (p. 23).

Following this historical account, most chapters in the book present extensive analyses of treaties signed between the British and the Itsekiri and the British and the Urhobo in the late nineteenth century, arguing that these treaties prove that the Agbassa, 'a fraction of Urhobo ethnic nationality' (p. xxiv), are the indigenous people of Warri city. This makes for a great deal of repetition, in that Urhobo claims, Itsekiri counter-claims and Urhobo rebuttals are simply reprinted over and over in great detail in Chapters 2, 3 and 5 as well as through Chapters 7 to 10.

The theme of 'overlordship' is addressed in Chapters 4 and 12. Chapter 4 presents an article originally written by T. E. A. Salubi in 1952, arguing that the change in the title 'Olu Itsekiri' to 'Olu of Warri' at that time was historically unjustified. The change was spearheaded by Obafemi Awolowo and the Action Group in the context of nationalist politics, against the protests of the Urhobo and Western Ijaw. For Peter Ekeh, this event 'haunts the peace of the Western Niger Delta' and marks the beginning of attempts by the Itsekiri to 'substitute Warri as its ethnicity'. The intention behind this, he alleges, 'appears to be to claim the city of Warri' (p. 27). Developing this theme, Onoawarie Edevbie argues in Chapter 12 that the 'alien doctrine of over-lordship' has its origins in British colonial policy which 'granted privileges for the Itsekiri to the detriment of the Ijaw and Urhobo' (p. 270). This is a very wide-ranging and eclectic chapter which combines a historical discussion of land law disputes in Warri with an analysis of English feudalism and the Magna Carta! The synthesis is not entirely convincing, but it is certainly intellectually stimulating.

Warri City & British Colonial Rule in Western Niger Delta is an interesting intervention into an ongoing political debate about ethnicity, nationalism and urban violence in postcolonial Nigeria. But its attempt to assert a definitive historical truth is problematic. Above all, through its detailed and perhaps unintentional exploration of the interrelated nature of political conflict and contested accounts of the past, the book reveals how plural historical truth can be.

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A SUBTLE EXPLORATION OF STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONSHIPS IN NIGERIA

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Constructions of Belonging. Igbo Communities and the Nigerian State in the Twentieth Century. By AXEL HARNEIT-SIEVERS. Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006. Pp. x + 388. £45 (ISBN 1-58046-167-0).

KEY WORDS: Nigeria, colonial, ethnicity, identity, local history, postcolonial, state.

How have African local communities responded to the modern state? *Constructions of Belonging* compares changing definitions of belonging in three Igbo communities in Southeast Nigeria over the course of the twentieth century. The book offers an approach that is constructivist, which regards postcolonial communal belonging as inextricably intertwined with the modern territorial state, and which privileges political and administrative aspects. The three case studies show diverse responses to the same policies implemented by the colonial and