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10 A rebel youth? Social media, charismatic leadership, and ‘radicalized’ youth in the 2015 Biafra protests

Abstract: Through ethnographic observations, using online as well as offline sources, we focus on the new Biafra protests between 2014 and 2016. This period was a peak in the quest for the rebirth of the autonomous Republic of Biafra, a concept which had lived on among a part of the Igbo population since the end of the Nigerian civil war in 1970 when Biafra was lost. In 2015 a series of events, including the arrest of Biafra activist Nnamdi Kanu, led to a massive on-line mobilization of Igbo youth frustrated with their marginal position within Nigerian society. Digital protests turned into regional meet-ups and street demonstrations across the globe. In subsequent months, bloody encounters between the Nigerian military and protesting Igbo youth left at least 150 protesters killed across the south-east of Nigeria. The chapter draws on personal observations and conversations of the two authors, who were present in Enugu in 2014 and at the end of 2015, respectively. It presents the stories of people they encountered and highlights the rapidly changing discourse and stance on Biafra in Enugu, nourished by social media and stirred by several key activists. These changes formed the background to the sudden rise of and support for radical pro-Biafra movements (MASSOB, IPOB) that had been in existence long before the time of the protests.

‘The Igbo culture says no condition is permanent.
There is constant change in the world.’

Chinua Achebe, *There Was A Country*

Introduction

‘How long have you been in *Biafra land*?’ an auto-rickshaw driver in Enugu asked, referring to the secessionist state in Nigeria that gave rise to the Nigerian civil war between 1967 and 1970. In October 2015, conversations about Biafra had become so common that we often did not have to bring up the topic ourselves, unlike what we had experienced during our fieldwork in the same city a year be-

fore.¹ Upon our return to Nigeria on 19 October 2015, we encountered a particularly important moment for the ‘Biafran’ movement. A day earlier, Nnamdi Kanu, director of the London-based Radio Biafra and leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), had been arrested and imprisoned by the Nigerian State Security Service in Lagos upon his arrival in Nigeria.² His arrest prompted a period of violent protests which should be understood in the context of an already lingering agitation for (re)sovereignty of Biafra (see Onuoha 2013). For many, the arrest of Kanu demonstrated what they regarded to be the repression of the Igbo people by the Nigerian government—and by President Buhari, in particular, who had been elected president earlier that year. The two months of fieldwork that followed were full of references to Biafra, unlike a year earlier when people in the city barely spoke about it unless they were specifically asked. The agitation and protests, however, did not come as a surprise. Movements advocating, sometimes violently, for Biafra have existed ever since Nigeria reclaimed the state in 1970 (see Adekson 2004; Onuoha 2013). In 2014, two major incidents occurred in the city of Enugu—the hoisting of the Biafran flag at the government house, and the occupation of a local radio station³—but this did not evoke much discussion at the time. Conversations on the street then were mostly about the upcoming 2015 presidential elections, without much reference to Biafra; however, people did express feelings of Igbo marginalization. After the arrest of Nnamdi Kanu, discussions about Biafra became commonplace for agitators as well as for opponents of a new Republic of Biafra, and both were eager to engage in conversations, both online and offline.

Although discussions about marginalization and the aspiration for the sovereignty of Biafra have been part of Igbo society since the end of the civil war (Smith 2014), the particular discourse of resistance in 2015 and the scale of the protests that followed were exceptional in the history of post-civil war Nigeria. Years of Boko Haram terrorism and abductions, the election of a northern, Muslim president, and the arrest of Nnamdi Kanu culminated in increased

1 This research was carried out by the two authors in different periods of time. For legibility, we have chosen to refer to ‘we’ when talking about observations and interviews, even when it was just one of the authors present in the field. Where necessary we will explicitly refer to each of the authors’ data sets in the footnotes.

2 ‘Radio Biafra Director, Nnamdi Kanu reportedly arrested’, Vanguard 18 October 2015: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/10/breaking-radio-biafra-director-nnamdi-kanu-reportedly-arrested/> [Accessed 8 February 2017].

3 ‘We seized Enugu Govt House for 4 hours, says Onwuka, BZM leader’, Vanguard 13 March 2014: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/03/seized-enugu-govt-house-4-hours-says-onwuka-bzm-leader> [Accessed 2 February 2017].

anger among the predominantly Christian Igbo population—anger rooted in the memory of Biafra and the civil war (Onuoha 2013: 435). Moreover, the use of social media by different pro-Biafra movements this time around intensified, further feeding the already existing discourse and making the agitation for sovereignty mainstream. Memories of the civil war, feelings of Igbo marginalization within Nigeria, and the inciting effect of social media led to a particular moment of socio-political positioning and decision-making, a vital conjuncture (Johnson-Hanks 2002) for all youth in south-east Nigeria. Online activism in 2014 and 2015, prompted mainly by Radio Biafra London, the diaspora organization led by director Nnamdi Kanu, turned into street demonstrations in October 2015 and bloody clashes with Nigerian military in the months thereafter. Many young Igbo people, mostly men, seemed to have quickly radicalized in their mission to reinstate Biafra during this period of time, to the extent that the Nigerian government responded with the use of extreme (military) force. The protesting youth were labelled agitators or rebels by the government and (inter)national media, their mission labelled ‘the agitation for sovereignty’ or a ‘separatist rebellion’. However, we question to what extent these young men actually did radicalize or whether they adopted a temporary ‘radical’ position, being roused by the charismatic leaders of radicalized organizations such as Kanu’s IPOB. In this chapter, we will analyse the 2015 pro-Biafra protests and the particular moment of socio-political positioning of these youth, by focusing on the role of social media, predominantly Facebook and WhatsApp. We try to understand why the seemingly massive online participation of Igbo youth was not reflected in the off-line reality of the urban protests that took place. Why were so many young men verbal in the struggle on social media but did not take part in the protests in Nigeria’s south-eastern cities? Why did they not move beyond the virtual world, and what does this say about the supposed radicalization of Igbo youth at that time?

Methodological reflections

This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Enugu and in online communities by both authors in different periods before, during, and after the peak of the demonstrations in 2015. Loes Oudenhuijsen was in Enugu from October until December 2015 to conduct a survey on social media and political engagement, and while there she collected ethnographic data on the ongoing pro-Biafran protests. Inge Ligtoet undertook field research in Enugu

throughout 2014 for her PhD project⁴ and discussed Biafra and the civil war whenever it would come up in informal conversations or interviews. Both authors became members of Facebook and WhatsApp groups of regional and local IPOB chapters and as such were able to collect stories and arguments, images (sometimes gruesome), and sentiments that could often be found only online. Although this research was conducted by two separate authors in two different periods of time, both authors share a friendship with Azu, a young Igbo man in Enugu whom this chapter is centred around. This friendship enabled us to combine our individual data and to analyze the 2015 uprising in a broader context. Through a biographical analysis of Azu's life and his (dis)involvement in the online 'agitation' for Biafra, we aim to get a better understanding of the youth behind the protests, their motivations and practices, and the extent to which they have or have not 'radicalized'.

A brief biography of Azu

Azu (b. 1984) is a young entrepreneurial designer of shoes and bags and a student in civil engineering in Enugu. He found his way to Enugu in his twenties when a reverend at his church in Delta State, where he lived with his mother and sisters, asked him to join his family as a laundry boy at their new post in Enugu. Azu's youth had not been easy. After his parents divorced early in his life, Azu was sent to an uncle in Ikom (Cross River State) to work. His uncle paid for the education Azu's mother was unable to afford, but he was maltreated in dire working circumstances and never finished his school. Upon returning to Delta State, he started a laundry business with which he made enough money to support his mother and pay for his own secondary school fees. A few years later, he joined the reverend's family in Enugu, where he believed he would eventually find more business opportunities. While working as a laundry boy, he taught himself how to design and make shoes. With the money he earned as a laundry boy and the first sales of his products, he was able to rent a room on the University of Enugu campus. He also started studying civil engineering at the Institute of Management and Technology. In 2014 he opened a workshop on the premises of his school, where he successfully designed and sold his products, all the while

⁴ Both research studies were conducted within the context of the project 'Connecting in Times of Duress'. For more information, see www.connecting-in-times-of-duress.nl

studying to obtain a degree in civil engineering (‘because what Nigerians believe in is certificate, not [...] skill’).⁵

Even though Azu made enough money to sustain himself and a part of his family, he was very much frustrated by the Nigeria he lives in. Everyday confrontations with corruption, the lack of electricity and other basic infrastructure, and a general sense of not being cared for by the government have made him cynical and angry. But however frustrated Azu was, in 2014 he barely spoke about Biafra in informal conversations or interviews. The only time he became very vocal about it was when we had breakfast with him and his cousin, a political science student and Biafran activist, who enticed Azu into saying that ‘we [the youth] should finish what our fathers started’.⁶ Biafra was central to Azu’s family history, as his father actually fought during the civil war and returned from the battlefield as a Biafran war hero. His father was said to have returned home carrying a deceased Biafran soldier on his shoulders for over 30 km while being heavily injured for life himself. Azu’s frustrations with Nigeria were closely linked to the precarious relationship with his father, who due to injuries and—but this is our interpretation—trauma from his participation in the war had never been able to take care of his family and eventually left them in poverty.

The online discourse that erupted after Nnamdi Kanu’s arrest in 2015 stirred Azu’s already existing frustration with Nigeria and made him more vocal about Biafra and his apparent hopes for the sovereign republic to be reinstated. Where he had been making shoes and bags with tags ‘Made in Enugu’, proudly proclaiming the fact that his product was of Nigerian origin as opposed to all the Chinese products on the market, Azu now produced Biafra-themed products, such as a card in the shape of a Biafran flag that was sent to one of the authors of this chapter. He was also part of the local IPOB WhatsApp group and adopted its discourse, calling Nigeria ‘the zoo’ and non-Biafrans ‘baboons’. But like many young Igbo, Azu never took part in meetings or protests. Busy fending for himself and his family, he could not afford to be out on the street demanding sovereignty and the release of Nnamdi Kanu. A year after the protests, the morning after the 2016 US presidential elections, Azu’s passion for an independent Biafra had been replaced by a more general critique of the Nigerian government and the West, and an acquiescing sigh of faith.

⁵ Interview with Azu, 11 December 2014, Inge Ligtvoet.

⁶ Informal conversation with Azu and his cousin, 19 June 2014, Inge Ligtvoet. This was the only time that Inge heard Azu speaking about Biafra in such strong words during her fieldwork in 2014. Although his anger with the Nigerian government would often come up in conversations, he never referred in any way to Biafra being the (only) solution to the perceived marginalization.

Azu: gud morning, pls do u have any idea about the US elections, who is winning at the moment?

Inge: they say Trump is likely to win

Azu: a very big AMEN, my prayers are working and answered

Azu: the romance with the White House and the Nigerian president has to stop, the injustices in Nigeria today has the backup of the white of today, u are not in Nigeria u would have understood better

Inge: do you believe that now Trump became president, there is also a chance for Biafra?

Azu: for Biafra God will work his will out for us⁷

Many movements, one discourse of marginalization

To understand the position of Azu and youth who took part in the protests in 2015 online and/or offline, we have to understand the Biafra movement in more general terms. The agitation for Biafra is not organized and united in one movement but is dispersed over various movements, of which not all are explicitly or primarily Biafra movements. One of the explicitly pro-Biafra groups is Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). Established in 1999 in Lagos, MASSOB has promoted the interests of the Igbo people (Onuoha 2011). Having lost confidence in the Nigerian state to accommodate a place for Igbos in the political sphere, MASSOB seeks self-determination for Igbos in an independent Biafran homeland (*ibid.*). Its leader, Ralph Uwazuruike, claimed it is a non-violent movement, inspired by Gandhi.⁸ Interestingly, MASSOB was declared an extremist group and one of the three fundamental security threats to Nigeria along with Boko Haram and the O'odua People's Congress by then President Goodluck Jonathan in 2013 (ICG 2015). Uwazuruike himself, however, said that MASSOB stands for absolute non-violence and that they would realize the independence of Biafra through political dialogue. IPOB, in his eyes, were the real troublemakers (*ibid.*).⁹

IPOB is the second explicitly pro-Biafra group and currently the most active on social media and in protests. Founded in 2012 by Nnamdi Kanu, it is much

⁷ WhatsApp conversation with Azu, 9 November 2016, 08:03 AM, Inge Ligetvoet (spelling slightly adjusted for legibility)

⁸ Interview with Ralph Uwazuruike, 9 December 2015, Loes Oudenhuijsen.

⁹ Interview with Ralph Uwazuruike, 9 December 2015, Loes Oudenhuijsen.

younger than Ralph Uwazuruike’s MASSOB, but it has quickly grown to be the most active movement in the agitation for Biafra, using Radio Biafra¹⁰ as a medium to disseminate their message in the diaspora and in south-east Nigeria. With diaspora and local WhatsApp groups and local branches that have been organizing street protests since the arrest of Nnamdi Kanu, IPOB activism has dominated the news concerning the agitation for Biafra lately.¹¹ Due to its recent emergence and growth, there is no literature on the movement thus far. However, based on our meetings with the family of Nnamdi Kanu in 2015¹² and the various manifestations of IPOB online as well as in offline meetings, we can briefly describe the movement as one that is strongly associated with Radio Biafra, the London-based radio station that is also run by Nnamdi Kanu. The sudden growth of the movement can possibly be attributed to the fact that Nnamdi Kanu, who had become popular among Igbo with his work at Radio Biafra, is also the leader of IPOB. The message that is disseminated from Radio Biafra in London to Nigeria—about the marginalization of Igbo and the need for an independent state of Biafra to solve the problems of marginalization and under-representation—is embraced by Igbo in Nigeria as well as in the diaspora, who have aligned themselves in the movement that is called IPOB. IPOB has consequently reiterated this message on various social media channels and has translated the message into concrete acts of Biafra activism in the form of organized street protests and regional meetings with IPOB members and has established links with human rights organizations such as Amnesty International to get recognition for their struggle.

MASSOB and IPOB, alongside other, smaller, Biafran organizations, have their own charismatic leaders and have adopted particular strategies to gain support among Igbo living in Nigeria and the diaspora. Although in their use of words these organizations might differ, they all adopt a very similar message of Igbo marginalization, on which they build their arguments and activities. Conversations about Igbo marginalization are very common in south-east Nigeria: it is a discourse carried by both advocates of a secession of Biafra and its sceptics, and by those who are part of Biafra movements and those who are not. There is a widely accepted belief in south-east Nigeria that the Igbo are marginalized in Nigeria, as they have historically held fewer political positions and are generally understood to be under-represented in the government and the Nigerian public sphere. Many Igbo believe their political representation and power is purpose-

10 Nnamdi Kanu is the director of Radio Biafra, a diaspora radio station broadcasting to the world from their headquarters in London since 2009.

11 See for example <https://www.naij.com/tag/biafra-news.html> or <http://www.vanguardngr.com/?s=biafra> or <https://www.today.ng/tag/biafra> for news on the Biafra agitation.

12 Loes met with the family of Nnamdi Kanu shortly after his arrest in 2015.

ly reduced through census-taking that is designed to undercount Igbo citizens, and through rules for the appointment to civil service positions that are weighted against the Igbo, which is evident in the absence of Igbo officers in the highest offices of government (Smith 2014). Whether or not people are in favour of a second Republic of Biafra, the sentiment of Igbo marginalization is thus widespread.

We experienced this, for example, on a bus ride from Lagos to Enugu in October 2015 when our bus got stuck in the mud and a neighbour commented: 'You see, this is why we started this whole civil war in the first place—because of neglect.' Complaints about the pot-holed roads in the south-east of the country were common. Azu would also often express similar frustrations with infrastructure—for example, when the electricity was cut while he had to electronically sand down shoes he made earlier or when he was watching television. Although the everyday confrontation with the malfunctioning of the state is experienced everywhere in the country, among the Igbo in the south-east these experiences would sometimes be a trigger for conversations about Igbo marginalization. More particular instances that people would often mention to 'prove' the marginalization of the Igbo related to the quota system for admission into secondary and tertiary education, which according to many Igbo unfairly favours the Hausa population.

This common discourse of marginalization has been solidified in the political pro-Biafra movements. According to Dr. Elliot Uko, one of the driving forces behind the Igbo Youth Movement,¹³ groups such as IPOB and MASSOB have successfully used the emotions of frustrated Igbo youth for the Biafran cause.¹⁴ Through social media the discourse was spread to a much larger audience in Nigeria's south-east, very willing to listen after their disappointment with the newly elected president and in the context of increased tensions within the country. Because of social media and its opportunities for global connectivity, Nnamdi Kanu was able to share the ideology of the IPOB through Radio Biafra and its social media channels. Many followers shared their ideology and its particular, inciting vocabulary (e.g. referring to Nigeria as 'the zoo') with their friends and followers and quickly the movement took off. Through the medium of Radio Biafra and its social media platforms, IPOB offered the youth a political vocabulary to channel their grievances and frustrations. Some youth started joining local IPOB groups, and many considered Kanu to be their leader in the fight against the Nigerian oppressor. After his arrest, their loyalty was expressed through an explosive protest

13 The Igbo Youth Movement is a movement that does not aim at the re-secession of Biafra but says it aims at restoring Igbo culture and identity and educating Igbo youth about the importance of education. However, most of its youth members are pro-Biafra and involved in other Biafran movements (Interview with Elliot Uko, 25 November 2015, Loes Oudenhuijsen).

14 Interview with Elliot Uko, 25 November 2015, Loes Oudenhuijsen.

response on social media and in several cities across Nigeria’s south-east. In 2015, Azu was one of the young Igbo that adopted the discourse provided by Radio Biafra and IPOB in his day-to-day frustrations with the government, and he also joined IPOB groups online. This was a change from how he would usually speak (more often not speak) about Biafra during earlier fieldwork in 2014.

‘Unless there will be a leader like Ojukwu, no one will fight for Biafra again.’

One morning in June 2014, Azu asked us to bring *okpa* for breakfast at his place. *Okpa* is a bright orange bean cake and a product local to Enugu, a pride of the region. Food is very important in Igbo culture, and our conversation about the *okpa* and its meaning for the people of Enugu quickly turned into a much more political discussion about Igbo pride and the marginalization of the Igbo by the Nigerian government. The discussion was very much accelerated by Azu’s cousin, a political science student who stayed in Azu’s house temporarily. He spoke eloquently about the situation of the youth in Nigeria, especially in the south-east, and he argued why Biafra should be reinstated in order to stop the suffering of the Igbo. Azu was attentively listening to his cousin, agreeing with him every so often, and he was clearly enticed by the words spoken. As the minutes passed by, the conversation became more and more energetic, and the words Azu’s cousin used became more agitated. He mentioned the need for protest and even claimed that a new war might be necessary to regain freedom from the Nigerian oppressor. Azu, whom we had known for a few months then and who had never expressed any clear pro-Biafra sentiment to us, suddenly shouted: ‘If they decide to go to war again, I will join them!’ And further provoked by his cousin, he exclaimed: ‘We will finish what our fathers started!’ All of a sudden, he seemed ready to fight for the Biafran cause, whereas before he seemed rather to have acquiesced to his fate, despite often jokingly expressing his frustrations with the Nigerian system. The role of his cousin in the conversation that morning should not be underestimated. His eloquence and well-thought-through arguments for Biafra, and even for a new war, were well received by Azu, a rather naïve young man upset by the inability to progress due to the insecurity of the state. What we saw happening that morning in the setting of Azu’s house in Enugu was what effectively happened on a regional (even global) scale more than a year later: an eloquent leader, Kanu, was followed by a large group of young, frustrated Igbo youth (mostly men) who became increasingly vocal and willing to fight for the cause of Biafra.

What greatly spurred the Biafra movement, in addition to the spread on- and offline of a new discourse of Igbo marginalization, was the nascence of a leader. Nnamdi Kanu, as leader of the IPOB, proposed a solution to people's long-term grievances over the loss of Biafra in 1970 and the experienced continuation of Igbo repression in Nigeria: a second Republic of Biafra. His arrest in October 2015, on charges of terrorism, proved that the Nigerian government took his plans and his leadership seriously, but they underestimated his following, which took to the streets immediately afterward. A year earlier, Eze, a taxi driver in Enugu who was a child during the civil war, told us that Biafra was very unlikely to ever become a reality again. He said, 'Unless there will be a new leader like Ojukwu [charismatic, with a large following], no one will fight for Biafra again.'¹⁵ A year later, probably also much to the surprise of Eze, Nnamdi Kanu rose as the leader of the global Biafra movement and turned the agitation for the sovereignty of Biafra into street protests and violent clashes with the Nigerian authorities, which led to the death of about 150 protesters (Amnesty International 2016).

Prince Emmanuel Kanu, the brother of Nnamdi Kanu and the executive director of IPOB after Kanu's arrest, carried on the discourse that his brother popularized. He was confident that Biafra would become a reality again: 'We are a very capable people, and through dialogue and any legal means possible we will achieve Biafra. But if dialogue is not enough, we have no other choice.'¹⁶ Prince Emmanuel Kanu had been acting as an ambassador for Biafra. He evangelized in churches and speaks about Biafra upon invitation. With regard to the appraised leadership of his brother Nnamdi Kanu, Prince Emmanuel Kanu said the following: 'Every promise the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra has made, he has fulfilled [...] Biafra is a movement of the mind. When you hear the gospel, you'll join.'¹⁷ For Azu and many others, especially young men, this was true to an extent. The nascence of Nnamdi Kanu as a new leader for Biafra created a momentum that triggered them to align themselves, albeit temporarily or predominantly online, with the struggle for the sovereignty of Biafra. The arrest of Nnamdi Kanu, who had quickly risen to the position of the new leader of Biafra, amplified the call for an independent Biafra. What we observed in south-east Nigeria in October 2015 was a crucial moment for youth, a vital conjuncture in which they were forced to (re)position themselves politically. Azu, as well as other supporters of Biafra, were captured by the vigour of the movement in

¹⁵ Informal conversation with Eze, October 2014, Inge Ligtvoet.

¹⁶ Interview with Prince Emmanuel Kanu, 26 November 2015, Loes Oudenhuijsen.

¹⁷ Interview with Prince Emmanuel Kanu, 26 November 2015, Loes Oudenhuijsen.

the particular socio-political environment of Nigeria at that time, and they adopted a radical political stance toward Nigeria and Biafra.

Social media and the Biafra movement

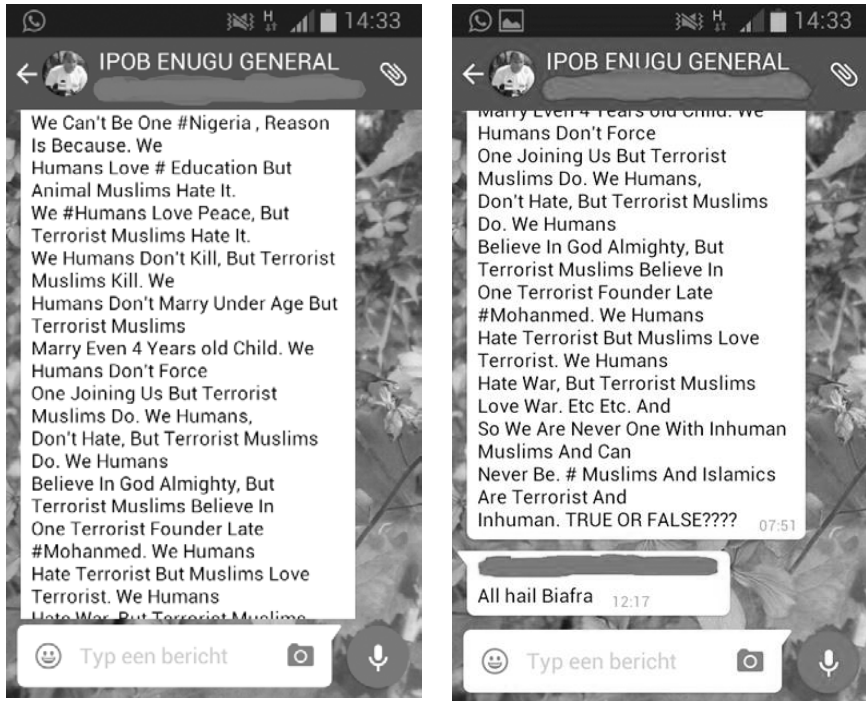


Fig. 1 and 2: Screenshots 1 & 2

A crucial element for the consolidation of the Biafra movement has been the use of social media. The Biafra movements owe much to social media as an enabling component for the organization of rallies. The WhatsApp group ‘IPOB ENUGU GENERAL’ was created on 19 August 2015. Azu had become a member of the group and added Loes in November 2015. The group name suggests a regional focus of the IPOB movement in Enugu and was intended to play an important role in mobilizing local IPOB supporters for protests and other activities taking place specifically in Enugu. However, the group seemed to have taken a different turn, feeding the Biafra supporters with news about Nnamdi Kanu’s court case, Buhari’s conduct concerning the Biafran agitation, and foreign support for Biafra, related to the efforts Biafran supporters have taken in the diaspora and with

human rights NGOs such as Amnesty International. In addition to operating as a propaganda platform, the group has largely acted as a place where the argument for an independent Republic of Biafra has been echoed, in the vocabulary provided by Radio Biafra and the global IPOB movement: Nigeria is referred to as ‘the zoo’ and Nigerians as ‘baboons’. Muslims are synonymous with terrorists, and Christians are contrasted as peaceful (figures 1 & 2).

In addition to WhatsApp, Facebook has been a prime source for information. It serves as a far-reaching platform where the particular discourse (violent or otherwise) of Igbo marginalization is dispersed. Facebook groups such as ‘BIAFRANS WITH AVENGERS UNDER NNAMDI KANU (IPOB)’,¹⁸ ‘BIAFRA LIBERATION FRONT (B.L.F => Freedom!!!) under MASSOB’,¹⁹ and the Facebook page of Radio Biafra itself²⁰ carried the same aggressive discourse with regard to Nigeria and its government that we saw on WhatsApp. In between hate messages and the latest news on Nnamdi Kanu’s court hearings, these Facebook groups and pages seemed to be fuelled by the diaspora, who posted pictures of Biafra demonstrations in—mainly—the UK. Pictures of Nigerians as well as other nationals posing with Biafra T-shirts, flags, or shawls are posted, and photos at such events were shared. What these posts show is that the diaspora played an important role in the Biafra movements. Not only that; it also shows how the movements sought to convey the message that there was worldwide attention for their cause, as well as attempting to mirror other political movements for self-determination elsewhere. Some of the Facebook posts have been referring to indigenous groups that are fighting for their self-determination, sharing updates on meetings such groups have had with the parliaments of their countries, or at the UN level. Interestingly, the Facebook groups seemed to address more than just the political issue of self-determination of the Igbos and Biafra. A fair share of the Facebook posts were about dating and sex, and sometimes they were accompanied by sexually explicit photographs. More often than not, such posts explicitly and proudly mentioned that the woman or man in question is an Igbo. These posts suggest that the Facebook groups function as communities where people find both political engagement and entertainment, as well as a place of belonging to an Igbo community. Through the variety of posts on Igbo identity, its importance was emphasized beyond the realm of politics.

An important aspect of the online activity of Biafra groups is their strong international character. Many diaspora Nigerians (Igbos) have been very vocal in

18 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/532221920317849/>

19 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1496094427301447/>

20 <https://www.facebook.com/radiobiafra/?fref=ts>

their agitation for Biafra, and they have helped reiterate and intensify the discourse.

From online to offline meetings

Although less widespread than online activism, regional meetings have been an important aspect of the Biafra movements. In addition to social media, offline events have been central to the creation of a sense of belonging for many Igbo. Regular meetings have been organized since 2015 in various neighbourhoods where IPOB has support. In November and December, we attended two such meetings of the Trans-Ekulu offshoot of IPOB, a neighbourhood in Enugu city. They were organized at St. Theresa’s Parish, a Catholic church where one of the founding fathers of the Trans-Ekulu branch of IPOB, ‘Old Soldier’ or ‘BA4442’—his number as a soldier in the Biafra war in the 1960s—serves as a catechist.

He has taken up the role of the leader of the group. His popular name ‘Old Soldier’ says a lot about the way people look at him. He is the absolute expert on Biafra, having fought in the war as a young lad in the 1960s. With his stories about the frontline, he provokes many young men to the idea of a Biafra that is literally worth fighting for. Moreover, his perseverance in the struggle for Biafra attracts a considerable amount of respect from the group. The meetings that he chairs appear to serve two purposes. First, they were organized to discuss practical matters related to the organization of protests against Nnamdi Kanu’s detention and for a Biafran secession in general. The first meeting Loes attended was on 29 November, two days before one of Nnamdi Kanu’s court hearings. IPOB sub-groups such as the one in Trans-Ekulu prepared to join the protest that was organized in front of the court in Abuja. As a result, the meeting she attended revolved around a briefing of members on the situation at the court in Abuja during a day of protests. Some of the safety measures that they could expect to be taken by the Nigerian police were explained, and a warning about police blockades, based on prior experience, was issued.

The second purpose of meetings was that they convey a strong sense of belonging and confidence in the bright future that an independent Biafra holds. Both meetings started with a prayer: ‘We fight for humanity, because God said that to be enslaved is the worst thing that can happen to a human being.’²¹ Subsequently, everyone rose to their feet, removed shoes and hats, and professed, with one hand on their chest and the other up in the air, the oath, ‘never insub-

21 Observation at the IPOB Trans-Ekulu meeting, 29 November 2015, Loes Oudenhuisen.

ordinating [...] or jeopardizing [...] the IPOB struggle'.²² Throughout the meeting, anyone who stands up to say something, starts by shouting 'IPOB!'. The response was 'Great Biafra!' The continuous repetition of the cause for meeting creates a strong sense of a shared purpose and a shared future. The oath-taking features in IPOB right from the start. Before anyone could join IPOB, they had to take the oath to remain loyal to IPOB at all times.²³ All in all, around 60 people (only one woman) were present at the meeting—a low turn-out we were told, with attendance figures of 200 members not infrequent. The second IPOB meeting in Trans-Ekulu that we joined, on 6 December, again had about 60 attendees. With three women present, their attendance had tripled, but we were inclined to think that 200 attendants at these meetings was an exaggerated figure.

Mass street protests have also been important moments in the expression of the Biafran ideology. Where in 2014 we read about the first recent hoisting of the Biafran flag,²⁴ in 2015 we witnessed one in a series of protests organized by movements such as IPOB. On 1 December 2015, we travelled to Aba for a meeting that had nothing to do with the Biafra protests, not realizing that a court hearing of Nnamdi Kanu was scheduled in Abuja on that day. As a result, protests had been organized in various cities across the south-east and we could not reach our destination in Aba. We were not the only ones who were obstructed from conducting our own affairs. We joined a group of men who were watching the protesters march past from a distance. Some of them were auto-rickshaw drivers whose routes were blocked by the demonstration; others were shopkeepers who had decided to keep their shops locked, fearing looting by protesters. Having to wait for the protesters to leave behind the major junction that would enable us to continue the journey in Aba, we witnessed a festive atmosphere, almost as if the crowd were a bunch of football supporters after a match that had been won. To us, the atmosphere during this protest resembled the general mood of Biafra supporters whenever we spoke with them. Many at the time were very optimistic about the size and strength of the movement. In Aba, someone said that 'millions, maybe 100 million have taken to the streets today'.²⁵ That seemed exaggerated, considering Nigeria's total population of 186 million inhabitants as a non-official estimate in 2016 based on the US Census Bureau (CIA 2016). Nevertheless, the idea of a massive popular movement that would soon really bring about change

²² Observation at the IPOB Trans-Ekulu meeting, 29 November 2015, Loes Oudenhuisen.

²³ Interview with 'Old Soldier', 2 December 2015, Loes Oudenhuisen.

²⁴ 'We seized Enugu Govt House for 4 hours, says Onwuka, BZM leader', Vanguard 13 March 2014: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/03/seized-enugu-govt-house-4-hours-says-onwuka-bzm-leader> [Accessed 2 February 2017].

²⁵ Informal conversation with a protester in Aba, 1 December 2015, Loes Oudenhuisen.

was shared by many. We are not so interested in the actual figures, but more in the message that is conveyed through such expressions—because an exaggeration of the number of IPOB supporters and protesters reflects the optimism that has been spread successfully by Nnamdi Kanu and his Radio Biafra. The provocative messages of the movements’ leaders that have been directed to the Igbo population in general, and have been taken up strongly by Igbo in the diaspora, have encouraged people to think that the cause is unanimously supported by all Igbo.



Fig. 3: Protesters in Aba

Figure 3 shows protesters in Aba with Biafra pounds, the currency of the Republic of Biafra between 1967 and 1970, which was reintroduced in 2006 by MASSOB. Owen (2009) has argued that the Biafra pound is ‘socially nourishing’ and creating a ‘moral community, as opposed to the corrupt, violent and depraved condition of the public sphere as currently experienced’ (2009: 580–581). The Biafra pound, in addition to the widespread presence of the Biafran half of a yellow sun²⁶ and the colours on flags, hats, t-shirts, shawls, and stickers, has consolidated the political movement of Biafra and has materialized belonging to the movement for whoever presents him-/herself with such attributes. Material objects had

²⁶ The image of a rising yellow sun is present on the flag of Biafra.

become important bearers of Biafran pride and identity at this height of agitation for a Biafran secession. Azu was drawn to these material representations of Biafra and, rather than joining the street protests, he decided to apply the symbolism in his own creations as his own way of contributing to the rallies. The postcard in Figure 4 that was sent to Inge in December 2015 seemed to be the turning point. It was a clear opportunity for Azu to show his commitment to Biafra. The way he worked on the postcard design resembled the way he meticulously worked on his shoes and bags. He did not leave it at this postcard and started using his shop as a place from where he could act out his political ideas, through the craft of shoes and bags with the Biafran flag, as he became more drawn into the Biafran struggle. His small workshop transformed from a business to sustain himself financially to a place to show his pride in being a true Igbo and confessing loyalty to pro-Biafran groups such as IPOB. The characterization of the Igbos as an industrious people was repeatedly mentioned by Azu, and it had become his way to identify himself as part of the struggle for Biafra.

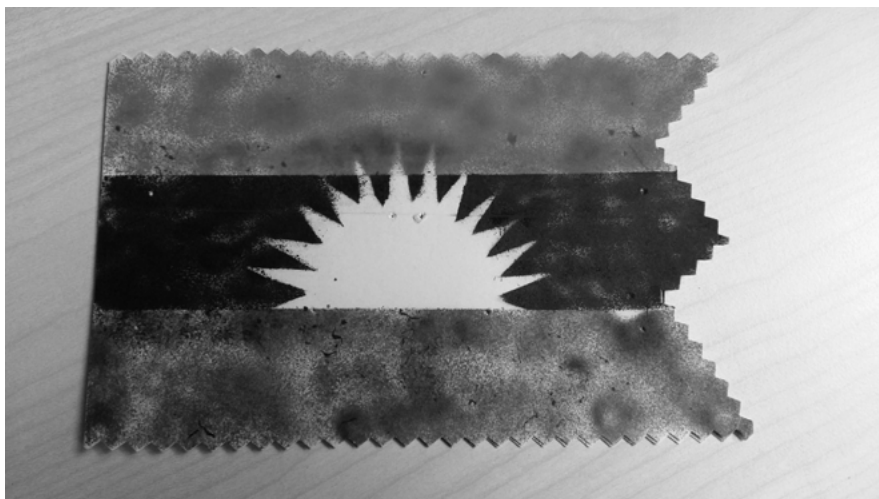


Fig. 4: *The Biafra Flag*

But at the time of writing, Azu is no longer involved in any group on social media, nor is he using his workshop to produce Biafra-themed products. He withdrew from the IPOB Enugu WhatsApp group, and he was not the only one. The group now consists of only 26 men from Enugu.²⁷ Where Azu introduced Loes

²⁷ Members in June 2016.

to the group enthusiastically in November 2015, he left the group himself a year later. During the time he had been a member, he had asked only two short questions for clarification about news items that had been shared in the group, but he did follow the messages and news shared by others. His membership of the group was rather passive; however, the group did influence him and made him more vocal about Biafra in everyday life. But despite his joining groups on social media and using Biafra as a theme in his designs, Azu was never a radical for the cause. He never joined street protests; and even though he once mentioned that the youth should finish what their fathers had started during the civil war, he never put those words into action. Many of the youth that took part in the online pro-Biafra protests were like Azu. Although incited by a charismatic leader and the opportunities social media provided to join the cause at a distance, only few (in the relative sense) actually materialized their online activities. They were digital rebels, not offline rebels. For Azu, leaving the WhatsApp group and his other online 'activities' related to Biafra was inevitable. His initial eagerness to join the Biafra movement vanished as his dreams of an independent Biafra made way for the reality of managing his shop and preparing financially for his next training in tailoring and design.

Conclusion

Youth like Azu have been susceptible to the fierce discourse that has been repeated time and again on various social media, especially through the channels of Radio Biafra.²⁸ The strong media campaign of Radio Biafra and the IPOB, with its specific discourse of Igbo marginalization and its charismatic leadership, has led many young Igbo to align themselves with the struggle for Biafra. However, after several months of protests that were time-consuming and that had forced many shop owners to close their shops for days or even weeks, people seem to have gone back to the order of the day. Azu is a telling example. Where he spoke uncompromisingly about the need for Biafra whenever we visited him in his own shop in Enugu in 2015, his last mention of Biafra was that it would come to pass in God's time.²⁹ For youth like Azu, for whom life is a constant struggle, what counts at the end of the day is that they have mouths to feed. Many realized that the protests did not immediately help them in their individual

²⁸ 593,020 Facebook page 'likes' as of 16 June 2017

²⁹ WhatsApp conversation with Azu, 9 November 2016, 08:03 AM, Inge Ligtoet (spelling slightly adjusted for legibility)

needs. Confronted with a vital conjuncture, provided with a new discourse of marginalization and forced to take a position, many Igbo men radically chose to take part in the struggle in the safe environment of Facebook and WhatsApp. They were rebels online; but for the sake of their livelihoods, they remained good citizens in their everyday interactions with the state. For many in the diaspora, it is much easier to reiterate the agitation for Biafra, because they do not put at risk their daily income when they protest online; hence they continue to nourish the Biafra activism online and make the movement seem as alive as ever. When you ask Nigerians in the south-east, however, they will admit that things have cooled down: ‘No, it hasn’t been hot ever since the leader of IPOB went to jail [...] lesser than when u were here’.³⁰ In short, the discourse of Igbo marginalization and the call for an independent Biafra have not vanished, but they are only marginally pursued on the streets. Online, due to the major influence of the diaspora community, the activism remains vibrant.

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30 WhatsApp conversation with Divine, 16 January 2017, Loes Oudenhuijsen.