The rise of Yoruba nationalism: Exclusion, identity and youth in Nigeria

Non-Technical Summary

• Background
This was an exploratory an empirical project, which examined the violent political nationalism of the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria as a focal point of social and political exclusion, which goes beyond the politicisation of ethnic cleavage. Since the aborted elections of 1993, Yoruba nationalism has become increasingly violent. This has usually been interpreted simply as the result of the exclusion of Yoruba leaders from government. However, Yoruba ethnic nationalism also exposes a wider crisis of legitimacy of the Nigerian state and its political elites.

• Objectives
As a result of a range of circumstances, the project was extended both temporally and financially. This had a positive impact on the project methodology, results, activities and outputs.

  o The project originally proposed the collection of data based on a range of qualitative research methods, including 25 in-depth interviews. At the end of the project, over 60 in-depth interviews and qualitative and quantitative research data of a much higher quantity than originally envisaged have been produced.
  o The overall question of the original research proposal was whether the representation of Yoruba interests by the youth-dominated Oodua Peoples’ Congress (OPC) included a wider social critique of state and regional elites. This was confirmed by the data, and the project was also able to address emerging new research questions.
  o The planned project output included discussions with other academics and NGO professionals and one journal article. An intensive dissemination of ideas resulted in a forthcoming output of two refereed articles and the edition of a special issue. Networking and mentoring also contributed to the research careers of three Nigerian collaborators of the project.

• Methods
A research trip to the Africana Library at Northwestern University in May/June 2005 enabled me to collect relevant material not available elsewhere. During research trips to Nigeria in February and August/September 2005, I was able to carry out intensive qualitative research in several Yoruba-speaking states of Nigeria, focusing on field observation and over 45 in-depth, qualitative interviews with mostly young male and female OPC supporters.

Financial support to the project provided by the School of Historical Studies enabled me to engage Mr Olarinmoye as a research assistant for six months in 2005. As a result of his
work, the data available to the project includes an additional 15 in-depth interviews, life histories and field notes of his research with young OPC supporters, and a very strong collection of archival, newspaper-based and other printed material from Nigeria.

Personal and financial support to the project provided by the Centre of West African Studies (CWAS) enabled me to run the 2005 annual Cadbury workshop and conference programme as an extension of the project. Contributions to the programme provided comparative material for the project research. Moreover, one of the conference attendants, Nigerian academic Dr Ajala, offered me access to his quantitative database of Yoruba political opinion based on 591 randomly administered questionnaires.

• **Results**

The study confirms that the OPC’s representation of Yoruba interests reflects the interests of youth and has both challenged and supported state and regional elites. Redefining the interests of the ethnic nation through its intervention in local conflicts relating to youth, social and gender inequality, the OPC presents a general critique of state and society based on social exclusion (publication forthcoming).

Thanks to the expansion of the project research, very interesting data in other areas has also emerged.

- The OPC’s critique of the state is gendered. Despite the existence of very different gendered local political and ritual economies in different local OPC groups, women are of great importance to the Yoruba national project (publication forthcoming).
- The OPC is an active agent of cultural homogenisation. Although the OPC relies strongly on local institutions, its revalidation of the cultural contributes to a more generalized pan-Yoruba practice (further research funded by British Academy).
- The OPC’s success reflects a shift in the factors that influence Yoruba ethnogenesis. Despite a long tradition of Christian prominence in the validation of Yoruba national identity, Muslims support the OPC more strongly than especially Pentecostal Christians (further research funded by British Academy).
- The OPC’s relationship to Western education and the Nigerian educated elite is highly ambivalent. Although formal education, long an essential part of Yoruba self-perception, is highly valued in some contexts, students are banned from joining the OPC (future research planned).

• **Activities**

Conferences and seminars:

- **11-13 September 2004. ASAUK biennial conference, London**
  Convenor of panel on *Ethnicity, Youth and Violence in Southern Nigeria*

- **13-14 May 2005. Cadbury Conference, Birmingham**
  Conference theme: *Cultural nationalism and social critique*
  Convenor

- **11 January 2006. SOAS History Seminar, London**
  Seminar on: “Yoruba women and the struggle for power: Cultural practice, social change and gender in the Oodua Peoples’ Congress (OPC)”
Other contacts:
The current director of the Heinrich Boell Foundation in Lagos, Dr Harneit-Sievers, has been very supportive of my research. He also put me in contact with his Nigerian academic collaborator Dr Ukeje.

- **Outputs**
  Conference and seminar papers (see Activities).

  Forthcoming articles in refereed journals:
  - Nolte, I forthcoming. “Policing state and ethnic nation: OPC vigilantism, Yoruba politics and social exclusion in Nigeria,” to be submitted to *International Relations*.
  - Nolte, I forthcoming. “‘Without women, nothing can succeed’: Yoruba women, violence and vigilantism in the Oodua Peoples’ Congress (OPC), Nigeria,” submitted to *Africa*.

  Forthcoming editions:
  - Special issue on *Beyond ethnic nationalism: The cultural work of social contestation*, to be submitted to *Journal of Modern African Studies*.

- **Impacts**
  Support and mentoring resulting in career development for three African scholars associated with the project (Dr Ajala, Mr Olarinmoye, Dr Ukeje).

- **Future Research Priorities**
  - Planned joint research deriving from this project by Dr Ajala and myself is funded by the British Academy under the award no. VF2006/42569.
  - I plan to apply for funding for further research into the complex relationship between the OPC and the educated elite in 2007.