Identity and violence: the politics of youth in Ijebu-Remo, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the politics of youth in Ijebu-Remo (henceforth Remo) from the 1950s to the present. The emergence of the politics of youth in the 1950s and 1960s drew on precolonial discourse and was closely associated with the emergence of Remo’s anti-federal postcolonial political identity. Since Nigeria’s political and economic decline in the mid-1980s, strong feelings of exclusion – strengthened further by the political sidelining of Yoruba-speaking politicians in national politics between 1993 and 1999 – have contributed to a strengthening of nationalist sentiment in Remo youth politics. This is enacted through secrecy, a reinvention and utilisation of ‘traditional’ cultural practice, and the increasing definition of local identity through ethnic discourse. Traditionally, Remo youth and elite politics have legitimised and supported each other, but the cohesion between these groups has declined since the return to democracy in 1999. Rivalry and conflict over local and national resources have led to bitter intergroup fighting, and young men’s strategies to combat social exclusion remain mostly individual.

INTRODUCTION

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In Nigeria, an increasing number of violent communal conflicts have challenged the legitimacy of the state on different levels. Many of these clashes involve large numbers of young men, who are mobilised along lines of shared origin, residence or religious identity. This phenomenon is closely associated with the economic and political marginalisation of what Maier (2000: xxii) calls Nigeria’s ‘lost generation’ of area boys, youth associations, vigilantes, ethnic nationalist movements and cults since the 1980s. Although Nigerian state governors and local leaders have manipulated vigilante groups and other youth associations to further their own agendas vis-à-vis the federal government (Babawale 2002: 3-5; Nolte 2002a: 186), such groups often continue to act independently of their political patrons (Baker 2002: 242; Ukiwo 2002: 48).

As pointed out in several studies of Nigerian political youth (Gore & Pratten 2003; Last 2003), ‘youth’ is defined in opposition to those who are established as adults and ‘elders’. Thus, it is not so much circumscribed by biological age as by status and behaviour: the group includes all those who do not (yet) have the material means and the recognition to establish themselves as providers for others. Moreover, youth status affects men more than women; first because men are more visible in the public domain, and second because an overwhelmingly polygamous society makes it easier for women to establish themselves as ‘adults’ through their husbands. In this context, the politics of youth appear as a political and social category which is related to questions about intergenerational and gender relations as well as political agency in Nigeria (Durham 2001: 113).

The emergence of groups of political youth not only establishes youth as a category of state dysfunctionality but also points to the importance of discourses of locality, tradition and identity within the Nigerian state. Many youth organisations are linked directly and indirectly to religious or ethno-nationalist movements (cf. Babawale 2002; Harnischfeger
2003; Ukiwo 2003), and most of them rely on secrecy and traditional practices. This has prompted the suggestion that they reflect a ‘retrationalisation’ of African societies (Chabal & Daloz 1999: 45). Although youth organisations throughout Nigeria share these features to a remarkable extent, their embeddedness in cultural repertoires makes a local approach necessary in order to avoid a functionalist or presentist view of culture and tradition in the postcolonial state (cf. Peel 1989).

While tradition can legitimate particular interests, it only does so convincingly when it invokes established trajectories of cultural practice and power. Youth politics in Western Nigeria are very much a politics of identity, straddling a number of popular and traditional, religious, historical and political discourses. They navigate the continuing impact of 19th century politics as well as colonial and postcolonial instrumentalisations of local relations of power. Influenced by and part of an ethno-nationalist discourse, they are also part of crosscutting struggles to ‘make’ local identities in various degrees of support for and opposition to it.

In many analyses of the social, political and economic dimensions of African postcolonial politics, re-emerging or re-empowered tradition appears as a local challenge to or defence against the state (Chabal 1992: 75-89; Herbst 2000: 173-97). However, the association of traditional or cultural practice and violent youth politics has been closely linked to the emergence of the Nigerian postcolonial state. The traditional is one of several resources through which groups and individuals have accessed and appropriated the state since decolonisation (Bayart 1993; Sklar 1993). As part of wider repertoires of domination and difference, secret and traditional practices are part of established discourses on rival versions of legitimacy and ethnicity (Igwara 2001). Embedded in local and national discourses, they are trajectories of routine, which contribute to the constitution of youth as a relational category (Gore & Pratten 2003: 239).
This article focuses on youth conflicts in Sagamu, the capital of the Ijebu-Remo (henceforth Remo) in the Yoruba-speaking southwest of Nigeria, and examines the politics of youth in Remo from the 1950s to 2003. It argues that the emergence of the politics of youth in the 1950s and 1960s drew on precolonial discourse. It was closely associated with the development of Remo’s anti-federal postcolonial political identity, which was increasingly represented by the section of the Yoruba elite associated with Obafemi Awolowo’s Action Group and its successor parties. This local political and social elite was both controlled and legitimated through youth politics, and youth politics served as a point of entry into formal political, administrative and business careers for many young men.

However, since Nigeria’s economic and political decline in the mid-1980s, such upward social mobility has become more difficult. Strong feelings of economic exclusion – reinforced by the political sidelining of Yoruba speaking politicians associated with the Awolowo legacy in national politics between 1993 and 1999 – have contributed to a strengthening of nationalist sentiment, which is enacted through secrecy, a reinvention and utilisation of traditional cultural practice, and the increasing definition of local identity through ethnic discourse. Yet youth strategies to combat social exclusion remain mostly individual, and rivalry and conflict over local and national resources have led to bitter intergroup fighting.

The local politics of youth are closely associated with the conflicting interests of the Yoruba regional elite, which consists of a close but often volatile personal network of politicians, traditional rulers and other entrepreneurs. While Remo local politics have been dominated by Obafemi Awolowo and his anti-federal political legacy, other factions of the ethno-regional elite have co-operated more closely with federal interests. In Remo, both youth and elite politics have traditionally supported and legitimised each other, although the political cohesion between and within these groups has declined since the 1999 return
to democracy. The implications of this process are not yet clear but appear to be closely tied to the future of Yoruba ethno-nationalism in general.

Apart from archival and library research, this article is based on field work and interviews carried out in Remo and Ogun state between 1996 and 2002. In the course of my most recent research trip in 2002, Chief Lateef A. Sodeinde, a Remo Orò and vigilante leader and chairman of the majority faction of the OPC, was of invaluable help. I was able to speak to some of his opponents during the course of my research, but the last two sections of this paper invariably represents a point of view much more strongly influenced by Sodeinde and his supporters than by his opponents. As the sections attempt to analyse the forces behind the local rivalry and violence, I nevertheless consider them a valuable contribution to this article.

THE MAKING OF A POLITICS OF YOUTH

A hilly region dotted by medium-sized and small rural towns and situated between the major cities of Lagos and Ibadan, Remo is the former westernmost district of the precolonial Ijebu kingdom. As in many Yoruba-speaking areas, in the 19th century each Remo town was ruled by a traditional ruler or òba, whose position of power was later strengthened through integration into the local administration by the British. Through a further, informal, integration of traditional and party politics during decolonisation, the Action Group (AG), led by Remo-born politician Obafemi Awolowo, became ‘the’ Remo political party in the 1950s.² This new political identity was closely entwined with
increased local support for the òba of Ofin (the dominant quarter in the capital Sagamu), the Akàrìgbò (cf. Nolte 2003).

Locally, the decolonisation of Nigerian politics was often represented as a conflict between educated youth and traditional elders. However, this representation obscures not only the close bonds between and similar educational backgrounds of traditional and party political elites, and the fact that Remo òbas, legitimated by tradition, popularised party politics, while politicians influenced the selection of òbas and chiefs. Similar processes occurred elsewhere in Western and Northern Nigeria where traditional authorities had played important pre-colonial or colonial roles (cf. Sklar 1963). Through a reciprocal assimilation of elites in Remo, its traditional and political elite were united behind Awolowo’s AG by the 1950s.

The continuing presence of traditional rulers in Remo politics in itself was not only due to the assimilation of traditional and party political elites, which occurred in several parts of Nigeria, but also a result of Obafemi Awolowo’s vision of creating a political Yoruba nation. As Yoruba òbas trace the establishment of their crowns to the mythical founding hero Oduduwa, they could play an important role in creating the modern Yoruba nation as possible tenants of an ‘imagined community’ (cf. Anderson 1983). While this project was not successful in establishing lasting unity among the historically divided Yoruba localities and their elites, it expanded the cultural and political role of òbaship in an emergent, though heavily factionalised, Yoruba ethno-regional bloc.

In Remo, the inclusion of local traditional elites into party politics also contributed to a reworking of older relational categories of youth as moral guardians of the community. As òbas’ ex-officio authority was reduced and many of them decided to stand for political office, òbas and chiefs in Remo encouraged the revival of some of the civic associations
which had flourished in the immediate precolonial period in order to mobilise political support. Most prominent among these associations was the *Orò*, a male-only civic association which acted as the ‘junior’ of two town organisations that would execute the criminals of the town.\(^7\)

Representing the communal voice of the ancestors, *Orò* beheaded its victims, and was also responsible for protecting the community against witchcraft. Women were forbidden to set eyes on *Orò*, and the leadership of the association was confined to men from a number of local families. However, all townsmen could participate in the outings and the annual festival. Within the town, the *Orò* festival acted as a leveller of male status and a source of male solidarity and unity (Ogunba 1967: 150). While celebrating male solidarity, *Orò* also had a tradition of abusing and punishing those who were seen to challenge town unity. As the role of party politics expanded during the 1940s and 1950s, *Orò*’s tradition of mockery, exposure and even abuse for one’s opponents were revived and converted into pressure on political rivals and opponents of the AG. In many towns, men were both AG supporters and members of *Orò* (Sodeinde 2002 int.). Thus, widening political participation during the 1950s established the politics of youth as those of nationalist fervour and educational aspirations as well as the voice of political and moral authority through the ancestors of the *Orò* association.\(^8\)

YOUTH AND ELITE POLITICS IN REMO

At independence in 1960, the AG, then led by Obafemi Awolowo, remained in opposition at the federal level and Remo’s politics became increasingly suspicious of the federal
agenda. This suspicion was confirmed in 1962, when the AG split and Obafemi Awolowo was ousted by his rival Ladoke Akintola, who had the support of the federal government. In the 1964 Federal elections, the Akintola group campaigned as the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) while the opposition formed the United People’s Grand Alliance (UPGA).

In this split of Yoruba politics, Remo elites and youth groups remained firmly attached to Awolowo. UPGA supporters throughout Remo started to carry palm fronds in allusion to the symbol of the Action Group, the palm tree. As a cultural symbol, this referred to the creation of sacred spaces for the worship of Òrìṣà (traditional Yoruba deities) and to the demarcation of the groves of Orò and other town associations or masquerades. Cultural and traditional practice became a defining feature of youth politics. Awolowo’s party became –at least in the Remo popular imagination – a local spiritual force. The close personal association between AG/UPGA and Orò membership was reflected in the fact that many Orò groups supported and secured nightly political outings (A. Adekoya 2002 int.). Battle songs written in anticipation of the 1965 Western Regional elections drew on the image of the palm tree:

Egbé ọlọpẹ l’awa ọ sẹ o, We are the palm tree association,

egbẹ ọlọpẹ l’awa ọ sẹ o, We are the palm tree association,

àyà wa ọ já, we are not afraid,

àyà wa ọ já, we are not afraid,

egbẹ ọlọpẹ l’awa ọ sẹ o! we are the palm tree association!
This song in particular not only illustrated the assimilation of party politics into the local political universe, but also alluded textually to the emerging political will to use violence. The line ًٌَُخَ١َْٚ (we are not afraid) not only stated the singers’ readiness for battle, it alluded to battle through the use of an expression which rhymed – with contrasting tone-marks – with the word ٌٚ (to fight).⁹

The elections of 1965 were of particular importance because the 1964 Federal elections had been boycotted by the UPGA. When the government falsely proclaimed the UPGA the loser of this election, the mounting tension came to a head. In the following days and weeks, the politicised youth became leaders of a popular uprising, in which they were joined by members of both sexes and from different socio-economic backgrounds (Anifowose 1982: 230-1).

An incensed crowd burnt state infrastructure, houses and the property of NNDP party members. Violence was directed at anyone seen to have co-operated with the NNDP, and NNDP leaders were killed in the Remo towns of Iperu, Ikenne and Sagamu. Qba Abimbolu of Ode Remo, who had joined the NNDP out of personal ambition, was chased out of his town (Nigerian Tribune 29.11.1965). The violence was planned by the UPGA, and because of the use of petrol in the destruction of people and property, the attacks were code-named ‘Operation Wetie (Wet It)’. Throughout the crisis, party supporters and traditional associations co-operated closely. Many of those killed were beheaded, a traditional sign of Orò executions.

As the political situation deteriorated, people began to fear that Ijebu and Remo would be bombed by the federal government, which was associated locally only with northern Nigerian interests. Thus, apart from NNDP members, northern Nigerian migrants in Sagamu were suspected of being fifth columnists. This suspicion was strengthened by the
fact that the leaders of the migrants’ quarter Sabo, situated in Sagamu and under the Akàrígbor’s authority, had begun to lobby the NNDP to establish Sabo as an independent town. This was perceived as a threat to Remo unity and identity (Adedoyin 2002 int.).

In a strike against Sabo’s political aspirations, AG/UPGA youth and Orò associations in Sagamu planned and code-named ‘Operation Salvation’: from early December 1965 onwards, houses owned by Northerners in Sabo were destroyed, and some migrants were burnt to death, while others were beheaded by Orò. The attacks on Sabo both mark and signify the end of the First Republic. Before the anti-NNDP military coup of January 1966, the police and judiciary were incapable of ending the crisis, and a large number of Northerners fled Remo for fear of death (Nigerian Tribune 17.12.1965).

Thus, in the 1950s and 1960s, youth politics underwent a process in which cultural practice and the traditional were identified with the party political and vice versa. In a modern interpretation of precolonial sensibilities, Orò was closely associated with defending the moral-political unity of the community. Orò activities also reflected the community’s changing view of itself. Apart from the colonial institutions, there had been no institutionalised political co-operation between all the Remo towns since the 19th century. Orò activities remained confined to individual towns until 1965, when they united against a common enemy. After 1965, however, Orò co-operation became a feature of institutionalised politics in Remo, and from 1972 onwards, the 37 Remo Orò groups met regularly in the palace of Akàrígbo Moses Awolesi in Ofin (Sodeinde 2002 int.). As a prominent AG member, the paramount Remo ruler and a member of the powerful Liyangu ruling family, to which Hannah Awolowo also belonged, Awolesi represented and focused the local political identity.
The development of *Orò* into an institution of Remo popular politics not only reflected the growing political cohesion of Remo, it also illustrated that this cohesion was based on the perception of ethno-regional and religious difference. The political support for Awolowo also carried a strong note of grievance over exclusion from the federal government and the section of the regional elite perceived to have been subsumed under federal interests. Through *Orò* activities, this exclusion was re-created locally, albeit with reversed relations of power. Remo ‘natives’ – defined by their potential access to and participation in *Orò* – perceived themselves as the ‘owners’ of Remo politics, while Remo’s northern migrants were excluded from it. Consequently, in 1972, Sabo became Remo’s only quarter which had no representative at the *Orò* meetings in the *Akàrígbò’s* palace. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, regular visits by the regional *Orò* associations, led by the *Orò* of Ofin, reminded Sabo that *Orò* expressed local relations of power and control.10

As political parties were banned during most years of military rule, local rivalries often continued to be expressed through traditional performance. However, as *Orò* became increasingly associated with Remo identity and the exclusion of migrants after 1966, competitive youth politics between different towns or political parties often took on different forms, such as the *Egúngún* masquerade.11 An ‘AG’ *Egúngún*, an individual ancestral masquerade decked out in cloth printed with Obafemi Awolowo’s face, palm trees and party slogans, emerged in many towns during these years.

During the Second Republic (1979-83), Remo was again strongly united behind the Awolowo-led Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN).12 Everyday politics were characterised by disputes over UPN candidatures and other forms of personal politics. In this context, *Egúngún* was associated with party politics, and clashes between *Egúngún* masqueraders often accompanied political rallies and primaries. In fact, before the 1983 elections,
Egúngún outings had become so disruptive that all parties agreed to abstain from sending masquerades to the rallies of their political opponents (Daily Times 30.7.1983).

In terms of personal politics, the Second Republic was characterised by strong personal continuities and the rehabilitation of the pro-Awolowo faction within Yoruba politics which had already begun under military rule. As Awolowo has come to personally represent pan-Yoruba politics to many Yoruba speakers since the 1960s, his involvement bestowed, at least retrospectively, the ultimate kind of legitimisation on Remo youth politics and their leaders. Many of the youth leaders of this period were able to mobilise their political connections during the following decades and, helped by their regard for and access to education, successfully established themselves as either businessmen or local politicians. For example, Dipo Odujinrin, a Remo youth leader who had become a lawyer in the 1960s and spent the 1970s working for several business joint ventures close to Awolowo, was elected to the state senate in 1983. Thus, from 1950 to the mid-1980s, the politics of youth in Remo served as an entry point for many ambitious young men to promising careers as administrators, businessmen and politicians.

Conversely, youth politics legitimised local traditional and party elites. Current Sagamu youth and Orò leader Chief Lateef A. Sodeinde (2002 int.) argues that Obafemi Awolowo himself was the man ‘behind’ the activities of UPGA and Orò youth at the time. Thus, youth violence served the beneficiaries of the new local political landscape, making party youths and Orò groups a powerful tool in the hand of the political elite in Remo. As the aggression against Remo NNDP supporters in 1965 and 1966 illustrates, youth violence was directed against those local elites who were perceived to challenge Remo unity and – implicitly – the existing traditional and political hierarchy. In support of Awolowo’s increasingly ethnically oriented party politics, youth politics not only supported traditional elite politics but also drew on precolonial non-elite discourse in the form of Orò and
Egúngún. Orò in particular became associated with a growing definition of local identity through ethnic discourse and the making of outsiders of non-Yoruba speaking migrants.

In this sense, the making of a pan-Yoruba identity became a local project shared between Remo youths and elites. However, despite its greater purpose, this process remained distinctly local, as Orò is not a pan-Yoruba institution. Indeed, the importance of Orò in Remo politics reflects that political pan-Yorubaism was not implemented in a uniform manner throughout Western Nigeria. Its close association with local leaders, too, points to the internal divisions of the regional elite potentially involved in the leadership of the project.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC MARGINALISATION: THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL PRACTICE AND SECRECY

Following the return of military rule in 1983 and the introduction of Structural Adjustment policies in 1986, the use of tradition and cultural practice for youth mobilisation gained even wider local significance. A move towards cultural and secret knowledge and practice reflected a changing clientele: as the economy contracted and military governments increasingly perceived as anti-Yoruba ruled throughout the 1980s and 1990s, youth politics increasingly became a refuge for those who felt excluded from educational, political and economic opportunities, who shared a sense of suffering and being under threat, and who came together to defend their communities as the police increasingly failed to control local criminal activity.
As in many parts of Nigeria where vigilante movements successfully established themselves (cf. Gore & Pratten 2003: 211; Harnischfeger 2003: 24, 28-30; Ukiwo 2002: 40), the federal police in Remo had long been perceived as corrupt and unable to provide security by local residents. When economic opportunities narrowed and crime rates in Ogun state – and especially along the Lagos-Ibadan highway in Remo – soared, many communities expressed outrage at their victimisation. In response to complaints, the federal government encouraged local government by-laws which legalised vigilante groups under the control of the ôbas (Daily Times 12.9.1986). From 1986 onwards, vigilante groups were established in all Remo towns. In the mid-1990s, Remo vigilante groups began to kill those found guilty (The Guardian 17.9.1996). The bodies of those executed were usually beheaded and later burnt, and left lying by the roadside to act as a deterrent.

Due to widespread public support, the police was not able to prevent the empowerment of the vigilante groups, even though at first they were only organised locally and limited their activities to certain quarters of individual towns. A complaint about vigilante activities in 1996 by the local police commissioner was dismissed by the Remo Traditional Council with the argument that unlike the vigilante, the police routinely accept bribes to let criminals escape (Ikenne 1996). Also, in the aftermath of public outrage over the murder of a mother and child by armed robbers in Sagamu in 1997,¹⁴ the police were increasingly perceived as unwilling to protect local residents. As a federal institution, the police were seen as part of Abacha’s state apparatus of control and discrimination, and its mostly non-Yoruba speaking members were increasingly accused of ethnic bias. As the murder story spread, local businesses and better-placed households began to support the vigilantes financially,¹⁵ and the groups began to co-ordinate their activities throughout Remo.

While many of the vigilante called themselves ôde or hunters, evoking traditional notions of community safety, they were often motor-park touts and unemployed young
men who had grown up as the quality of schooling declined, and education was re-
privatised throughout the former Western Region of Nigeria. Even for those young men
who had obtained a secondary and even tertiary education, opportunities in the private and
in the public sector contracted due to a fall in oil prices, the internal mismanagement of
revenues and the imposition of neo-liberal structural adjustment policies. However, thanks
to public support and the relatively cheap availability of small arms on the international
market (Amusan 2001: 65), those youth who joined the increasingly well-equipped
vigilante force began to systematically exclude the police from the Remo towns at night.

Local support for the vigilantes was also based on the belief that they had at their
disposal magical forms of detection and protection which would protect the innocent, a
sentiment shared by other Nigerian communities (Harnischfeger 2003: 30-5; Gore &
Pratten 2003). In Remo, this magical protection was attained through the vigilantes’ close
coop-eration with Orò. While vigilante and Orò groups did not become identical, many
young men were either members of both organisations or were content to co-operate with
the other group. Thus, many of the young men involved in vigilante activities used charms
of Orò origin for their spiritual protection. The vigilante also adopted cultural techniques
associated with Orò and other masquerades for spiritual protection: they began to wear
special – black – clothing and spoke in a secret language, which was unintelligible to those
who were not initiated (Sodeinde 2002 int.). Like Orò, the vigilante groups were endorsed
and supported by local politicians and traditional rulers.

After the annulment of Abiola’s election to the Nigerian Presidency in 1993, anti-
federalism again became an important political rallying point. And just as during the
1960s, frustration about the exclusion of Yoruba interests from power was expressed in the
intimidation of those associated with the federal government through the secret Orò
association. Frequent Orò outings were made to Sabo during 1993, which resulted in at
least one violent clash with young Northerners. In 1994, after the arrest and imprisonment of Abiola by the government of (northern Nigerian) Sani Abacha, Lagos-based businessman and general practitioner Dr Frederick Faseun founded the Oodua Peoples’ Congress (OPC) to safeguard Yoruba ethnic interests within the wider coalition of opposition groups. Almost immediately, OPC groups were founded in Remo. While some of the local OPC leaders came from fairly privileged backgrounds, and support for the OPC was not restricted to lower socio-economic groups, most local OPC activists were recruited from the same social background as vigilante and Orò members (cf. Maier 2000: 230).

Again, co-operation and multiple memberships among OPC, Orò and the vigilante prevailed among the young men and their leaders involved in these politics of resistance. OPC co-ordinator (Faseun faction) for Sagamu, Chief Lateef A. Sodeinde, was also a representative at the regular Orò meetings at the Akàrígbò’s palace. Personal and organisational links with the local elite were soon established, and the OPC (like the Orò and vigilante groups) operated with the knowledge and support of the new Akàrígbò, Michael Sonariwo, installed in 1990 with Hannah Awolowo’s support (Sodeinde 2002 int.).

The continuation of strong links between the Remo elites and its politicised youth during the 1980s and 1990s illustrates that the postcolonial reworking of older relational categories of youth and elders continued throughout this period. As local youth groups like the vigilantes and the OPC became permanently militarised, their leaders often assumed ‘streetnames’ drawing on the warrior culture of 19th-century Yorubaland. However, while warriors’ personal rivalry and competition had disempowered and divided Remo’s òbas throughout most of this period, the postcolonial organisation of politically active youth did not challenge local political unity but remained united against an outside threat.
The arrest and imprisonment of Abiola in 1994 was followed by a number of crippling strikes throughout Nigeria, and many towns in Remo reacted to the crisis by calling out Orò. Orò, OPC and vigilante co-operated in screening non-indigenes and dissidents. Buses and cars were stopped, and again, migrant groups, and travellers from northern Nigeria and as well as other people believed to be associated with Abacha were beaten and abused (*Daily Sketch* 20.7.1994). When Faseun was arrested in 1996, the OPC went underground and secrecy became part of the agenda of all groups of political youth. This was reflected in the refusal to discuss publicly or with outsiders group structure and membership, and also in the use of spiritual forces to ensure group solidarity among insiders.

The secrecy of Orò, vigilante and OPC also had the effect of excluding or strongly discouraging women from participation in these organisations. While there were no female Orò or vigilante members, women participated in the OPC. However, female OPC members were usually excluded from participation in physical conflicts. This development reflected the fact that reduced economic and patronage opportunities affected young men in particular, as young women often found it possible to establish themselves as lovers and wives of wealthier men who supported them or set them up. The strategic implementation of Yoruba cultural practice, then, occurred with a tendency towards an indirect masculinisation of culture and tradition. At the time of writing, their exclusion from major forms of protest was not perceived as relevant by the major women’s organisations in Remo, and it may not be a permanent feature (E. Adekoya, 2002 int.). It stood in some contrast to Hannah Awolowo’s active role in Remo politics throughout the decades, to the involvement of Yoruba women’s groups in political struggles in the past (Denzer 1994) and to women’s activities in youth and ethno-nationalist clashes elsewhere, for example the Niger Delta (*Ukeje* 2002).
While *Orò*, vigilante and OPC activities have strong references to culture and tradition, they often do not reflect the past but are modern and probably shifting adaptations of older cultural practices. Many of these practices are also distinctly non-elite, i.e. directly associated not with obaship and chiefly authority but with religious and ritual specialists and town associations. Like many of the 19th century warriors in Yorubaland, OPC members protect themselves by *jùjù* (charms), believed to make them invulnerable to bullets. Other practices include oaths, the participation in *Ifá* divination and the worship of certain *òrìsà* or traditional deities. The tattoo used for recognition among OPC members is the *Odù Ifá* (*Ifá* divination verse) Èjì Ogbè, which indicates great possibilities (A. Adekoya 2002 int.).

Throughout the years of military rule in the 1980s and 1990s, the increased use of secrecy and cultural practice reflected the development of a specific and localised form of Yoruba ethnic nationalism, in which the local cultural practice of *Orò* blended with notions of community defence and the OPC’s pan-Yoruba aspirations and politics. Secrecy was certainly part of the strategies used to ‘reverse’ the exclusion from power experienced at the federal level (cf. Gore & Pratten 2003: 239). However, unlike in the case studies from the Niger Delta and Eastern Nigeria discussed by Gore and Pratten (2003) and Harnischfeger (2003), in Remo the secret practices of youth had a further dimension: they were sanctioned and supported by a local and traditional elite under pressure to publicly support the federal government.

While traditional rulers – including the *Akàrigbò* – publicly called for the peaceful settlement of conflicts (*National Concord 17.3.1997*), they were indirectly empowered vis-à-vis the regional and federal level by youth violence. *Orò*, vigilante and OPC posed a clear threat to any local leader tempted by federal attempts at co-optation, and thus also supported the existing local hierarchies. Moreover, they demonstrated to the world outside
Remo that the Remo elites – and the pro-Awolowo legacy they represented – enjoyed robust local support and grassroots legitimacy.

The continuing importance of traditional rulers in Remo youth politics and beyond reflects the enduring attraction of the pan-Yoruba project throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The association of traditional authority with authenticity and legitimacy made it possible to represent political opposition to the federal government as a politics of resisting cultural or ethnic persecution. While part of Awolowo’s political legacy, which continued to be carefully managed after his death in 1987, support for these politics was further strengthened by the widely perceived exclusion of Yoruba interests from federal government.

The direct and indirect support of Orò, vigilante and OPC for Remo traditional authority also became part of the terminology of Nigeria’s wider political discourse. Often with fluid and contested patterns of ascription, the politics of youth allowed Yoruba politicians to recast the complex relations between Yoruba elite factions and other interest groups as conflicts between authenticity, accountability and identity – even civil society – on the one hand and state corruption, military interest and federal arrogance on the other hand. Meanwhile, the entrenchment of the categories of tradition and secrecy in the Nigerian political discourse detracted from an investigation of the historicity of different forms of traditional and secret power. Thus the very modern concerns of traditional power in youth and elite projects expressing social and political discontent were obscured.

*ORÒ, NORTHERN MIGRANTS AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE: THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY*
Since the 1990s, youth activity has been closely associated with ethnic, religious and other forms of communal violence in many parts of Nigeria (Maier 2000). This phenomenon is linked to the particular insertion of young men into the bitter contests of Nigeria’s ethno-regional alliances for influence. However, it also reflects growing economic inequality and subsequently an increasing importance even of marginal economic niches (cf. Ukiwo 2003: 134). As a result of anti-federal sentiment, relations between locals and northern migrants were strained and overshadowed by the threat of youth violence throughout the 1990s in Remo. In 1997, an economic conflict over the Remo crude oil transporting business widened the rift between the two groups further.

Under the auspices of Alhaji Wada Nas, a special advisor to General Abacha, a depot for crude oil products had been established at Mosimi (south of Sagamu). A ‘trailer’ park, where the tankers, which transported the petroleum products from Sagamu to northern Nigeria, waited their turn, was built at nearby Kara (New Nigerian 23.12.1996). However, both the Mosimi depot and the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) at the Kara trailer park were headed by northern Nigerians. Many locals felt that this reflected attempts by the Abacha government to keep control of the national oil revenue entirely in the hands of Northerners.

Allegations of favouritism towards Northerners at the Kara trailer park and at Mosimi abounded, and Yoruba speakers in the oil transport business alleged that their northern Nigerian colleagues could jump waiting queues, that they were not always charged full fees and that they were given preferential access to oil products in high demand (Sodeinde 2002 int.). This conflict in particular affected the economically marginalised men active in Orò, the vigilante groups and the OPC, because many of them worked as motor-park touts or drivers and were members of the NURTW.
The grievances caused by the northern control of the oil transport business at Kara and Mosimi resonated with more long-standing economic resentments. Although Remo is a major Kola nut producer, it has no control over the market. The local Kola trade is firmly in the hand of northern Nigerians who export the produce to the North. Kola prices and even saleability are determined by demand in northern Nigeria. The periodic refusal of Kola buyers to offer a cost price or any price at all for Kola nuts has led to conflicts in Sabo market ever since the beginnings of the trade early in the 20th century. The local agents in the Kola trade are mostly women who sell Kola nut in small quantities and also deal in other kinds of agricultural produce. While their grievances were of relatively low overall economic significance, they affected a large number of families and became more important at times of economic contraction such as the 1990s. Thus, resentments within the Kola trade gave the complaints within the oil business a wide and popular resonance within Remo (Okeowo 2002 int.).

Despite the fact that some migrant families had settled in Remo for more than a century, Northerners not only remained but also increasingly became outsiders. Their (real or imagined) ties to the federal government and their exclusion from popular politics and the traditional hierarchy, which emerged in postcolonial Nigeria, prevented their integration into Remo society. Because of their relative economic power, Northerners were perceived not only as beneficiaries of the federal government, but also as agents of oppression. All these factors contributed to the perception that in Remo, Northerners were ‘tenants’ who had, with the help of the federal government, become more powerful than the ‘owners’ (Okeowo 2002 int.).

The real isolation of Remo’s power-holders from the Abacha regime affected the traditional elite as well as the market traders and youths. Despite grassroots support for Akàrígò Sonariwo, another Remo ọba, the ruler of Ijokun (another quarter in Sagamu),
used this situation to gain additional resources and to expand his own sphere of influence. As Sabo had been established on Ijokun farmland, he attempted to increase his share in the income from Sabo market from the mid-1990s. Due to restraint on both sides and pressure from other Remo leaders to present a unified front, this conflict of interest remained low-key and did not draw in politicised youth. However, the Akàrígbô’s control of Sabo loosened slightly, and the Orò of Ofin only made very cursory visits to Sabo after 1996.

Local relations of power were affected in complex ways after the death of Sani Abacha in 1998, and when the Yoruba-speaker Olusegun Obasanjo was elected Nigerian President in February 1999. Obasanjo was an ex-military man, and most of his support came from northern and eastern Nigeria. However, by July 1999, he was widely perceived as ‘marginalising the North’ (Abuja Mirror 14-20.7.1999). Meanwhile, his reputation in Remo and the rest of western Nigeria began to improve. The changed perception of relations of power at the federal level affected the various conflicts in Remo in different ways. The Akàrígbô was able to end the dispute with Ijokun on terms favourable to himself. To confirm the re-establishment of his authority over Sabo, he announced that the Orò of Ofin would visit Sabo on 18 July. Meanwhile, local businessmen and women involved in the oil business and the Kola trade began to be more assertive in their economic demands vis-à-vis the northern migrants.

Meanwhile, several northern Nigerian states had begun to discuss the introduction of the Sharia penal code as state law. Increased Islamic piety had long served as an implicit criticism of political corruption in the North, and it now became a political challenge to the new federal government. This development, too, was taken up and transformed by local interests, and when the community in Sabo was informed to expect an Orò visit, several groups of young men felt that they should defend their quarter against this un-Islamic practice. While the Seriki Hausawa and other community leaders who had settled in Sabo
for more than one generation advised caution (Shehu 2002 int.), many more recently arrived Northerners were not aware that the absence of Orò in the previous years was connected to the dispute over Sabo. Instead, they thought that Orò had ceased to operate because it was a form of sorcery which had ‘nothing to contribute to society’ and ‘should be condemned’ (Chindo 2002 int.). In their view, a defiance of Orò would demonstrate the greater glory of Islam while helping to refute the local attempts to appropriate the economic power of the inhabitants of Sabo.

Eventually, a violent conflict was triggered by a Hausa woman who saw Orò on 18 July 1999 and who died during the same night after a beating by the Orò followers. In the morning, several young men from Sabo took to the streets carrying guns and other weapons. The men then entered the Sagamu area known as Ajegunle, where the fighting with the ‘native’ Sagamites (variously referred to as Orò, OPC, and vigilantes, and including elements of all these groups) began. The battle later moved back to Sabo and led to the loss of several scores of lives and the destruction of many houses. Between 60 and 100 people were killed (The Guardian (UK) 20.7.1999, The Guardian 23.7.1999). The police intervened only on the second day of fighting, when the battle turned back to Sabo, which confirmed local perceptions of the police as a pro-northern force of intervention.

In the 1999 conflict, both Orò practice and the politics of Sabo clearly showed the increasing association of the moral community with wider cultural practice and ethnicity. Pan-Yoruba sentiment – evident in the co-operation with the OPC – legitimised Orò activities in Sabo, while the pan-Islamic politics associated with northern Nigeria inspired Sabo’s resistance to Orò. Moreover, the conflict illustrated that ethno-religious identity was increasingly considered the basis for economic opportunities. Many Northerners left Sagamu, and after the fighting was reported in the national papers, the violence spread to several of Nigeria’s major cities, pitting northern Nigerians against Yoruba-speakers.
In Remo, the youth victory of 1999 asserted that local rights to resource access and control should be based on indigeneity. Sabo’s status was confirmed as that of a ‘tenant’, subordinate to the ‘owners’ or indigenes of Remo. In 2003, the president of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) at Kara was a Remo native, and the manager of Mosimi Depot was a Yoruba speaker. The Kola trade at Sabo market, which was exclusively under the control of northern Nigerians, had been opened in part to locals. Moreover, the subsumption of Sabo under the authority of the Akàrígbò continued along local cultural lines. While the rights of Orò to visit Sabo were no longer disputed, the Sabo representative at the Akàrígbò’s palace, the Seriki Hausawa, underwent an installation ceremony based on Yoruba cultural practice for local Muslims. In 2000, he was turbaned by the ọba after he had been ritually prepared by representatives of Ofin’s civic associations (Shehu 2002 int.).

Four days after the conflict ended, a Peace Agreement was signed in the Akàrígbò’s palace (A. Adekoya 2002 int.). The 1999 conflict and its resolution throw further light on the relationship between the politics of the Remo local elite and those of youth. The military defeat of the Northerners reconfirmed the hierarchy that some ọbas had attempted to level during the 1990s, and firmly lodged control over Sabo in the hands of the Akàrígbò. Also, by violently expressing the anti-Northern sentiments which the traditional elite could only indirectly refer to, the youths once more empowered Remo’s elite and other members of the pro-Awolowo faction of the Yoruba elite by demonstrating their grassroots legitimacy.

Moreover, by participating in the peace negotiations at the Akàrígbò’s palace, Orò and the other groups created the illusion that the local violence had nothing to do with the traditional elite. Thus, the Akàrígbò acted as the arbitrator in a conflict in which one side had greatly empowered him while the other threatened his hegemony. However, his
suggestions were acceptable to both sides because he appeared – and was widely perceived to be – a neutral and paternal observer of two warring parties dominated by ‘youth’. Thus, the Akàrígbò was established not only as the leader of the ‘indigenous’ Remo community, but also as a legitimate representative of the locality. In this case, the category of ‘youth’ obscured the association of economic and political interests with identity and ethnicity, and thereby legitimised the subsumption of Northern migrants’ interests under the Akàrígbò.17

POLITICAL FACTIONALISM AND THE SPOILS OF OFFICE: THE POLITICS OF ASPIRATION

Throughout the late 1990s, youth politics in Remo were closely associated with Chief Lateef A. Sodeinde, the OPC chairman for Remo. He was also one of the Orò leaders present at the regular meetings at the Akàrígbò’s palace and a man with close ties to the vigilantes. However, after the end of the Abacha regime, the unity of youth groups in Remo suffered and his leadership was challenged. As in other parts of Nigeria (Harnischfeger 2003: 27), struggles over leadership in the youth associations were also closely associated with conflicts over the control over financial windfalls within the community.

This struggle over access to local resources particularly influenced Remo politics after 1999. Different views on the return to democracy had already split the national OPC. The 1998-9 military-led transition programme had been rejected as undemocratic by the OPC, whose leaders demanded a broad-based constitutional conference to determine the nation’s future. However, early in 1999 Faseun openly supported Olu Falae, the presidential candidate put forward by the AD. Faseun’s implicit acceptance of the pacted electoral set-
up of two Yoruba-speakers as presidential candidates, clearly intended to superficially mollify Yoruba ethnic nationalists, infuriated many OPC members. Ganiyu Adams, Faseun’s former deputy, attempted to remove Faseun as the national co-ordinator of the OPC. After Obasanjo was elected, Faseun retaliated by expelling the Adams group for ‘hooliganism, antiparty activities and unnecessary terrorism’, because Adams had encouraged battles with the police in Isolo and Mushin areas of Lagos (Tempo 11.3.1999).

The OPC rift at the national level coincided with increased attempts by local and regional leaders and politicians to gain control over youth politics in order to reposition themselves in the new democratic dispensation. Based on the longstanding local suspicion of the federal police, the newly elected state governor Segun Osoba and other governors in the Yoruba-speaking states demanded that the police service be placed under state control, and youth activities strengthened their position in political negotiations with the federal government. The popular legitimacy of OPC and vigilante activities sanctioned the politics of national opposition adopted by the Ogun state government. Similarly, youth leaders gained access to state resources through these alliances, allowing youth and party politics to derive mutual benefit from one other. However, the potential benefits of access to the state also contributed to the continuing rivalry of different OPC and other youth factions at the local level.

By 1998, Sodeinde had close ties to the local political elite, which continued to be dominated by a Yoruba ethno-nationalist party, the Alliance for Democracy (AD), and included Osoba and local government chairmen in the then three Remo local government areas. Sodeinde benefited financially and socially from the alliance of youth and party politics, through political contacts, minor contracts and his control over the increasingly powerful vigilantes. The new political relevance of youth politics was reflected in a (modest) rise in status. While in 2002, he lived in a ‘family’ house shared by several
parties and did not own a private car, he had been able to marry a second wife. The marginal benefits of being a youth leader and the removal of the military widely perceived as a common threat meant that others increasingly challenged his position. By 2000, a rival (pro-Adams) OPC faction had emerged under the leadership of a man commonly known as ‘Irawo’ (star), who accused Sodeinde and his ‘boys’ of abusing their power.18

In 2000, this faction killed the vigilante leader ‘Sakuta’, one of Sodeinde’s ‘boys’. ‘Sakuta’s’ killing resonated with popular perceptions of the abuse of power in office, because he had rented a generator for a private occasion and later refused to pay for it because the owner had not provided fuel with it. In 2001, the two national OPC camps negotiated a cessation of hostilities and the local factions in Sagamu followed their example. In a concession to the ‘Irawo’ faction, ‘Orukotan’, a new vigilante leader, was removed peacefully and replaced by ‘Balogun’, a compromise candidate still in power in 2003 and strongly supported by the Akàrígbò. Despite this arrangement, the pro-Faseun group’s leader ‘Irawo’ was killed in May 2002 (Opayemi 2002 int.), and after his death, the division between the Sodeinde (Faseun) and ‘Irawo’ (Adams) faction of OPC and vigilante youth was fluid and tied to local competition. Several OPC members changed factions after 1999. Meanwhile, the Remo Orò association remained undivided and provided a space for contact and cooperation between members of different groups.

Some conflicts between different factions of the Sagamu youth organisations were also tied to intra-party political rivalry. During 2002 the AD continued, for the time being, to be the most powerful party in Remo, and most important political conflicts were personal rivalries over AD-controlled positions. Thus, the AD primaries for the chairmanship of the newly created Sagamu Central Local Government were contested by two candidates with different backing among the youth. Joko Adekunbi, a former member of another local government in Sagamu, found himself supported by the (pro-Faseun) OPC faction led by
Sodeinde, a section of the vigilante and Tolu Daudu, the ex-Commissioner for Health in Ogun State. His opponent Bamgbola Akinsanya was supported by the ‘Irawo’ (pro-Adams) faction of the OPC, another section of the vigilante and ‘Awo’ Awofala, a former principal of Remo Division High School (Opayemi 2002 int.). Crucially, the candidates neither represented different social groups nor stood for different political ideas or blueprints; it appears that the two groups simply consisted of rival local patronage networks.19

The patterns of competition among the Sagamu youth groups underscore that, as in the 1999 Sabo conflict, even marginal economic niches are of supreme importance for disadvantaged young men. The attempts by both OPC factions to control the vigilantes as well as the involvement of several youth factions in local primaries very clearly point to the importance of income derived from these local political economies, and, by implication, the lack of alternative economic possibilities. The extreme strategies of Sagamu youths intersect in complex ways with those of local elites, and their attempts to build up patronage and support networks in order to compete for power within the regional ethno-nationalist discourse.

Despite the foregrounding of a rhetoric of political exclusion, the lines of conflict between different youth groups since 1999 appear preoccupied with the establishment of control over political and economic niches and individual advancement. In this context, violence serves not only to demarcate the boundaries between the ethno-religiously defined groups of indigenes and strangers, it also demarcates the boundaries between local political factions who fight over economic and political resources. This further complicates relations between local youth leaders and elites by making shifting alliances of mutual support, legitimisation and control dependent on personal ambition and competition at all levels.
The fluidity of youth politics under the democratic dispensation weakens the relative position of those local elites which were strengthened by unified youth support during military rule. The fact that youth political identity is enacted through a politics aimed at control, political influence and redistribution on an individual level may also encapsulate an emerging discourse on social citizenship. However, at the same time the existence of rival youth groups illustrates that such a discourse does not contain a sustained critique of a society characterised by great social difference. At the time of writing, the politics of youth reflect the constitution of this group as a social category in itself but not for itself.

A DEFEAT OF LOCAL YOUTH AND THE 2003 ELECTION: AN END TO REMO ANTI-FEDERALISM?

The loss of political cohesion in Remo youth politics after the return to democracy also led to a political defeat of local youth and elite leaders in April 2003, when the OPC’s and the vigilantes’ control over security and policing in Remo – which ensured their value in terms of national political strategies – was thoroughly challenged. On a Sunday evening in March 2003, Kehinde Ogunjimi, a student in Abeokuta, was killed by ‘Balogun’s’ vigilante group in front of his family’s house in Sagamu. His murderers claimed that Ogunjimi could not identify himself and looked like a known member of a local robbery gang. After Ogunjimi’s execution, his body was brought to the Akàrígbò’s palace.

Both the murder and the removal of the body infuriated his family, who contacted local groups opposed to ‘Balogun’ as well as his fellow students in Abeokuta. On the following Monday, these groups descended upon the Akàrígbò’s palace and burnt it, along with at least a dozen of his cars. As the ‘Balogun’ vigilantes retaliated, a battle ensued and
the houses of another traditional ruler, several chiefs and ‘Balogun’ himself were also attacked and looted, as were local government buildings (*Vanguard* 18.3.2003, 21.3.2003).

The immediate intervention of Ogun state governor Segun Osoba, several Sagamu traditional rulers and chiefs as well as the *Aláké* of Abeokuta calmed the situation after several hours (cf. *This Day*, 25.3.2003). The *Akàrígbò* as well as other victims again blamed the police for not having intervened in time to apprehend Ogunjimi’s avengers and accused them of having encouraged the destruction. However, not least because the buildings destroyed in the battle included several public properties, the scale of this battle was so large that it attracted federal attention, and the leader of a federal government delegation imposed a dusk-till-dawn curfew on Sagamu.

Although local leaders complained about looting and pillaging by a ‘federal army of occupation’, federal government assigned the federal paramilitary mobile police force to policing the curfew in Sagamu (*This Day* 24.3.2003). The loss of control over security in Sagamu to rival and Abeokuta youth and the mobile police meant that vigilante and OPC were seen to lose political ground won over many years. This also affected those local elites most closely identified with youth politics, including *Akàrígbò* Michael Sowemimo.

At the time, the violence against the local traditional leaders was locally interpreted as one of intra-state rivalry between Egba-speaking groups and Ijebu-speakers in Ogun state. Throughout the 1990s and beyond, similar rivalries, often based on the unequal incorporation of traditional rulers into the state’s political economy, have characterised – and factionalised – Yoruba politics (cf. Nolte 2002b). However, the defeat of AD state governor Segun Osoba by the PDP candidate Gbenga Daniel in the national elections in April 2003 throws a different light on this conflict.
The growing support in Southwest Nigeria for President Obasanjo since his election in 1999 has been reflected in increasing support for his party, the PDP. In a political atmosphere where carpet-crossing even in the National Assembly is frequent, AD political aspirants outmanoeuvred by local rivals not only turned to local alternative parties but also to the PDP. Thus, in September 2001, frustrated AD politician and successful businessman Gbenga Daniel declared for the PDP. As a long-time financier of Yoruba nationalist politics, Daniel quickly won support from important Yoruba power brokers including the Yoruba Council of Elders (YCE), the Afenifere, and Obafemi Awolowo’s widow Hannah (This Day 12.10.2001), and soon became the PDP candidate for the Ogun state gubernatorial elections.

Although Lagos-based Daniel claimed family ties to Ijebu and Remo, he had more support in the western Egba and Egbado areas than in the east of Ogun state. The deep entrenchment of the AD and its anti-federal agenda in Remo politics often undermined the PDP locally, but leading factions in President Obasanjo’s hometown Abeokuta21 and in Abuja were keen to ‘deliver’ the president’s home state.

The youth attacks on the houses and property of the Remo traditional elite, followed by a federal intervention taking policing out of the hands of ‘Balogun’s’ vigilantes and passing it on to the mobile police clearly weakened the AD’s control of local affairs. The fact that the Abeokuta youth also had support within Sagamu illustrates that large numbers of youth were happy not just to undermine ‘Balogun’ but also to support the federal government, especially if the new governor had the Awolowo family’s support and continued to invoke Obafemi Awolowo’s legacy (This Day 7.4.2003). After the election, several hundred AD members in Remo joined the PDP.
Thus, Remo’s political youth are not only influenced by personal and group ambition and local economic niches and elite strategies, but are also actively involved in shifting regional alliances. As the political ground continues to move, the outcomes of such strategies seem difficult to predict. In the past, youth politics were clearly in support of the anti-federal strands of regional politics. However, the present PDP dominance in Ogun state, achieved with local (though probably not majority) youth support in Remo, is an exception to this trend. At this historical juncture, it indicates an important lack of cohesion between local leaders. In the past, disunity among the traditional elite usually emerged out of the individual strategies of obas, and tended to be short-lived due to youth intervention. However, the present lack of cohesion emerged along with divided youth politics, and therefore the local PDP victory may also illustrate a greater degree of independence from traditional elites attained by youth.

The existence of some youth support for the PDP (and its pro-federal political outlook) within Remo does not imply an emancipation of youth politics from elite concerns in general, but does demonstrate the possibility of an emancipation of youth politics from local – and in particular traditional – hierarchies. While traditional rulers continue to play an important role within ethno-regional politics, their association has very much remained with the locality and with locality-based forms of rivalry. A successful establishment of a politics of youth as a politics of regional or even federal (pro-Obasanjo) interest might contribute to a stratification of ethno-regional politics.
As this article has illustrated, Remo youth politics in its contemporary form emerged in the late colonial period, and the prominence of Orò in youth politics even points to precolonial, and in particular 19th century, antecedents. Throughout this period, the politics of youth have been characterised by their reference to cultural practice, their active participation in the making of local identities, and their complex relationship of control and legitimisation of local elites. The continuity not just of the existence of youth politics but also of its discourses speaks against the hypothesis of a ‘retraditionalisation’ of Nigeria (cf. Chabal & Daloz 1999). However, its violence and individualism also suggest that the politics of youth do not represent a sustained social critique. Instead, youth politics illustrate the particular ways in which local, regional and social identities are negotiated, and how these are – at times violently – inserted into the political discourse of the Nigerian state.

Youth politics in Remo and other areas of Nigeria, illustrated by Gore and Pratten (2003), Harnischfeger (2003) and Ukiwo (2003), reflect the state both as weak and strong. The takeover of policing and security functions by vigilante groups clearly indicates state deficits, despite its political and anti-federal implications. Local perceptions of the police’s unwillingness to risk their lives and their readiness to accept bribes reflect the stagnating salaries for police officers since the mid-1980s, and the fact that government has often been in arrears with pay. However, this financial power of the state continues to inform group strategies of protest, rebellion as well as insertion into the state through local politics and administrative budgets. The continuing lack of educational, economic and marital opportunities for young men suggests that the form of their insertion into ethno-regional political strategies reflects the outcome of complex and contradictory strategies as it includes attempts both to appropriate and to unmake the state.
As the above quoted studies of southern Nigeria have also shown, youth politics are instrumental, positively or negatively, in linking localities to Nigeria’s national and ethno-regional alliances through networks of communication, political co-operation and economic patronage. However, the nature of patronage politics in different areas of the country is distinctive and dependent on local trajectories. Due to the extremely factional nature of Yoruba politics – deriving from 19th century antecedents – youth politics in Remo have a long history of legitimising local elites vis-à-vis regional factions as well as the federal centre. At the same time, the legacy of Obafemi Awolowo’s political pan-Yorubaism has ensured an entrenchment of traditional elites in local politics. Thus, the history of youth politics in Remo is also a history of legitimisation of local traditional elites, i.e. traditional rulers, òbas and chiefs.

An increasing local acceptance of federal government in Remo since the 1999 return to democracy illustrates that the nature of the links between the locality and the state is not rigidly fixed, and that local political identities remain changeable. The weakening of long-standing anti-federal sentiment in Remo reflects a perception that Yoruba speakers, formerly marginalised or excluded, have finally won access to federal government. Further research may indicate that the local and ethno-regional identity of being Remo and Yoruba has taken on a different and potentially higher value within Nigeria in recent years (cf. Igwara 2001). Within the context of local and regional youth politics, it is not clear what impact this development will have. A closer relationship of local youth to the federal government and other regional factions would further weaken the political unity of local elites and traditional rulers in Yoruba politics. At the same time, the 2003 electoral support for President Obasanjo from his home region – PDP governors were also elected in the former AD states of Ondo, Osun, Oyo and Ekiti – may further legitimise Yoruba and pan-Yoruba politics.
Increasingly, youth politics in Remo are also concerned with social difference, albeit in an atomised and indirect way. Youth politics form a basis of desperate and increasingly furious attempts by young men to escape poverty and insecurity under difficult economic conditions. However, the subordination of any group interest to individual strategies of success makes youth politics a factionalised and complex area, dominated by shifting personal alliances and loyalties. While this factionalism is a response to the frequent instrumentalisation of youth by elites and clearly prevents stable political trajectories, the fluidity inherent in this situation continues to prevent the complete appropriation of youth by elite political strategies. However, comparative studies of youth in other Yoruba speaking areas are clearly needed to investigate this question further.

While it would be premature to predict possible forms of youth politics in the future, it appears from this study that youth politics will continue to reflect the national, regional and local dynamics of elite politics and the economic chances of local youths associated with patronage and support through existing elite factions. Again, further comparative study is needed, but much will probably depend on President Obasanjo’s current policy of including traditionally anti-federal Yoruba groups in the national political discourse while at the same time improving ordinary people’s life chances. While a success of this project is more likely to lead towards an inclusive youth discourse revolving around social difference, a disappointment of popular expectations would probably increase the likelihood that social discontent is voiced through exclusionary Yoruba nationalism.

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Adedoyin, Chief Tokunbo, 5.8.2002. Chief Adedoyin is the son of the late NCNC politician Adeleke Adedoyin, who was declared the winner of the 1965 election against Hannah Awolowo and supported Sabo independence. He is a lawyer with offices in Lagos and Sagamu and represents Ofin (Sagamu) community in several local cases.
Adekoya, Chief Dr Adesino, 4.8.2002 and 20.8.2002. Chief Dr. Adekoya is an Ifá diviner, businessman and state-level politician who was a member of the MDJ (Movement for Democracy and Justice) before joining the AD. He is a local youth leader and the board chairman of the Ogun State council for arts and culture since 1999.

Adekoya, Chief Erelu, 4.8.2002. Chief Adekoya is the chairwoman of the Ogun State Women’s League. Since 1999, she has served in numerous political appointments at the federal level, first for the conservative APP and since 2002 for the progressive PLP (Progressive Liberation Party), now part of APGA (All Progressives Grand Alliance), an alliance of mostly southern-based parties outside the AD.

Chindo, Alhaji Mohammed Namadina, 19.7.2002. Alhaji Chindo is a first-generation settler at Sabo. He moved to Remo in 1992 and drives a trailer from Kara petroleum depot to Gusau (Northern Nigeria). The interview was carried out by my research assistant Mr. Adesanya Adekoya.

Okeowo, Chief Segun, 20.8.2002. Chief Okeowo is a former student leader and local AD politician and businessman. He has represented Makun (Sagamu) community interests in several local disputes.

Opayemi, Prince Juwon, 20.8.2002. Prince Opayemi is the editor of The Community News, a local newspaper covering events in Remo and Ogun state as well as a youth leader in the Remo Anglican church.

Segun-Okeowo, Evangelist Kolade, 21.8.2002. Evangelist Segun-Okeowo is a dramatist working with a religious troupe throughout Ogun state as well as a local historian.

Shehu, Alhaji Haruna Babali, 26.7.2002, Alhaji Shehu’s father settled in Sagamu as a kolanut trader, and all his children have schooled, worked and lived in Remo. Alhaji Shehu has his own transport business to Sokoto and is a former Vice President of the Sagamu Progressive Club (an association of Hausa and Yoruba businessmen) as well as the representative of the Hausa Community to the Police Public Relations Committee. As a community leader and adviser to the
Seriki Hausawa, he was one of the signatories to the 1999 peace treaty at the Akàrìgbò’s palace.

The interview was carried out by my research assistant Mr. Adesanya Adekoya.

Sodeinde, Chief Lateef A., 23.8.2002. Chief Sodeinde is the most prominent youth leader in Remo. A former insurance broker, he was one of the OPC founders in Ogun state. He is currently the Remo chairman of the Faseun or majority faction of the OPC and also holds a high Orò office in Ofin. He has been a representative at the regular Remowide Orò meetings for over a decade.
NOTES

1. The terms ‘tradition’ and ‘traditional’ are used in this article to describe all forms of authority and practice which draw legitimacy from recourse to the – real or imagined – precolonial past.

2. Other factors contributing to the eventually almost exclusive AG-support in Remo were migrants’ negative experiences in NCNC-supporting Ibadan, as well as the rising national profile of Obafemi Awolowo, which helped to facilitate the self-perception of Remo as a community united against ‘outside’ forces.

3. In Remo, interest in education and support for nationalism were strongly associated with migration. There were few posts for school-leavers in Remo, and many educated Remoans lived in Lagos or Ibadan, where they became involved in nationalist politics. Like Obafemi Awolowo, many of them travelled regularly between these centres of power and their hometowns, and established themselves as leaders in local party politics.

4. Almost all Remo traditional rulers embraced party politics and joined the NYM in 1936, the year of its foundation (The Ijebu Weekly News 22.8.1936). Also, as the increasing correspondence with the colonial authorities illustrates, many traditional rulers in Remo were already literate in English by the mid-1930s.

5. This process was neither a retraditionalisation of a previously ‘modern’ colonial society nor a modernisation of a static traditional elite. Colonial rule in Nigeria had been built upon the co-operation and subjugation of local structures of power, which were distinguished from the imported colonial state as indigenous, but also as traditional. Once the previously British administration was opened to Nigerians, two political sectors, each with its distinct trajectory, existed for ambitious politicians.

6. As a number of excellent local studies (cf. Apter 1992; Peel 1983) indicates, similar processes probably took place elsewhere in the Yoruba speaking areas. However, as no explicit (regional or local) study of Yoruba youth politics has been published to date, it is difficult to say to which extent such processes resembled the local trajectory described in this article.

7. While Orò appears to have been the only civic male-only association responsible for the execution of criminals in Egba areas, most Remo towns also possess the Èlúkú association, which has similar functions and explicitly belongs to the elders of the town. Weisser (1992) provides an overview of general ethnographic literature on Orò, and Peel (2000, 2002) discusses the historical practice of Orò in Abeokuta in
some detail. The most detailed description and analysis of Èlúkù in Ijebu and Remo is by ‘Adesola’ in The Nigerian Chronicle between 30 April and 9 July 1909. A critic and collaborator of ‘Adesola’s’ description of Orò in the same source, ‘Niepos’, suggests that Orò was a cultural export from Egbaland to other Yoruba-speaking areas (The Nigerian Chronicle 1.10.1909).

8. It is likely that this process remained contested and that some local Christian and Muslim groups opposed at least public Orò practices, which confined women, forbade the Muslim call to prayer and prohibited drumming even in church for the duration of any Orò ‘outing’. However, no direct reference to local opposition to Orò at this time could be found in the sources, and interviews in the 1990s and 2000s – where some resistance to public Orò practices was mobilised by Yoruba Christians and Muslims – elicited only diplomatic responses from people who considered themselves indigenous Remoans. It is very likely that this tolerant (public) attitude is the result of the important role played by Orò in the organisation of anti-federal resistance in Remo since the 1960s.

9. The technique of using contrasting tone-marks to rhyme is often used in Orò chants.

10. The active exclusion of Northerners from popular politics through Orò may explain why Orò practices are tolerated by the vast majority of Christians and Muslims in Remo today. As Orò practice has come to be an indicator of Remo identity, those who opposed its practice identified themselves as outsiders. While most Remoans’ support for Orò reflects their inclusion, Northerners in Sabo acted their exclusion through Orò. Although even non-indigenous men are usually invited to follow the masquerade in public places, and although all women can participate in the festival by sending food or money to the revellers, Sabo women – as well as most men – did not contribute to these ‘outings’.

11. For example, a rivalry between Ofin and Makun quarters in Sagamu over the control of Falawo market and the two smaller town quarters of Ibido and Igbepa led to several incursions of Ofin Egúngún masquerades to Makun (Segun-Okeowo 1990). As Makun forbids Egúngún practice on its territory, its youth retaliated by beating up some of the masqueraders. Conflicts between these quarters have been enacted through masquerades from the 1960s onwards, with the last major battle in 1988 (Segun-Okeowo 2002 int.).

12. The UPN won both gubernatorial elections in the 1976-created Ogun state with a majority of about 90%.

13. Remo youth leaders of this period have also become judges, senators, industrialists, lawyers, medical doctors, heads of school, chairmen of local government councils and even traditional rulers.
14. According to witnesses, the robbers discovered that the woman had very little to steal and killed her baby in anger. The distraught mother then begged them to kill her as well, which they did.

15. A similar process in which moral outrage over a murder was followed by the establishment and legitimation of a local vigilante force by private business took place in Aba in 1998 (Harnischfeger 2003: 24).

16. In this sense, the proliferation of secret and young men’s groups is an expression of protest against an order in which they have little chance to establish themselves economically and become sexual partners and fathers. Ironically, these sexual politics are illustrated in an exemplary way by the winner of the 1993 election, Moshood Abiola, who is rumoured to have given a house to every woman who bore him a child.

17. Since 1999, youth groups have closely controlled religious politics and practice in Sabo. After the Al-Qaeda attacks on the USA in September 2001, this also led to an increased suspicion that Sabo inhabitants would support terrorist activities. In November 2001, six Pakistani clerics and students celebrated the beginning of Ramadan among the migrant community in Sagamu. When one of them publicly referred to the suffering of the Muslim community in the 1999 riots, a topic studiously avoided by local speakers, indigenous residents alarmed the Akàrígbò. With the consent of the Seriki Hausawa, the Pakistanis and their host were arrested and handed over to the Nigeria Immigration Service who deported them immediately for inciting religious violence (IRIN News Nigeria 19.11.2001; This Day 23.11.2001).

18. To protect informants and actors engaged in youth politics, they are not identified unless otherwise agreed. Many young men use ‘streetnames’ such as ‘Irawo’ (star), under which they are known publicly but which may not be linked easily to their private existence.

19. Both candidates for the AD chairmanship of Sagamu Central Local Government were successful civil servants with similar social and educational backgrounds: Adekunbi was a former local government officer and Akinsanya a former policeman. Also, both had the backing of more influential local leaders. In fact, Akinsanya’s and Adekunbi’s rivalry even crosscut family and friendship ties: one of Akinsanya’s prominent local backers was Olode Oku, a former local government chairman and Adekunbi’s political mentor in 1999. Conversely, Sodeinde, one of Akinsanya’s youth supporters, was a cousin of Adekunbi.

20. Allegedly a number of Abeokuta students were organised through campus cults which ensured solidarity and employed techniques of supernatural protection similar to the youth groups described for Remo. Due to the nature of their institutional environment, such cults can also include students from non-
local backgrounds. One of the reasons the Remo response to the attackers was unsuccessful may be that at the time of writing, it had no secular university. Moreover, former academic and administrative staff of the nearby Ogun State University (OSU) in Ago-Iwoye (Ijebu) were involved in Remo local politics on the side opposed by the ‘Balogun’ youth faction, and it may have been for this reason that OSU students did not get involved in this conflict. However, Remo’s lack of a local university is currently redressed. On land donated by the oba of Idotun, a close ally of the Awolowo family, the Olabisi Onabanjo College of Health and Sciences is being established near Ikenne.

21. Obasanjo’s hometown is the Egba town of Ota, situated south of Abeokuta and north of Lagos. However, as Ota has a history of close alliances with Abeokuta and Obasanjo is widely believed to support Abeokuta like a son of the soil (Abeokuta was chosen as the capital of Ogun state when Obasanjo was the military Head of State), the city is widely identified as his hometown.