

## **Biafra and the Niger Delta: International Perceptions of Conflict in Postcolonial Nigeria**

### **I. Introduction**

The situations in which groups of people come into violent conflict with each other are varied and diverse, as are the causes and preceding factors which make a political situation particularly volatile. The propulsion of ethnic divisions along national lines, histories of colonization and hard-fought independence, the rise of identity politics and violent ideologies, and continuing narratives of oppression and liberation – all have factored into the major conflicts of the modern world, often connected to items from the ancient past while instigated through a peculiarly modern context. In the case of the West African country of Nigeria, the sociopolitical concepts of ethnicity, nationalism, and colonialism gain acute relevance because the conflicts which have plagued Nigeria since its independence in 1960 were given impetus through these lenses. Since these perspectives are consequential yet also potentially blinding and limiting of the people they implicate, we will adopt a political criticism which highlights the significance of *narrative* for a third-party appreciation of what is vied for and what is presently possible in the Nigerian context. A focus on the narrative construction of peoples' histories will point to the simple and yet profound questions which those who work as international conflict resolution professionals in settings of protracted violence increasingly find themselves in need of asking: "Who are we? What are we doing? Where are we going? What is our purpose?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 176. Lederach finds these most basic questions relevant: "This quest is one that

This essay seeks to depict the stories and rationales underlying the justifications of the major political actors in the Biafran and Niger Delta conflicts, in order to perceive their limitations and thus pose the possibility of their present transformation. These two encounters, one a civil war and claim to secession (1967-70) and the other a prolonged and violent dispute within roughly the same area of land (1990s to present), are connected in history directly via the mode of geography, but also indirectly via certain themes that are faced and replayed again in postcolonial struggles. Thus, it is argued that a sympathetic insight into the narratives which stimulated the Biafran war can benefit international observers of the present conflict in the Niger Delta through recognition of the self-structured nature of representations of history, which in turn justify the colonial legacy or competing claims to power in the region. The appreciation of the often shaky modes of history-telling will allow us to speak about an appreciation of *the other*, as well as those things which constitute radical transformation in a society. This topic is significant for international understandings of conflicts in Nigeria in general.

## **II. A Narrative Approach to the Nigerian Conflicts**

In the effort to discover not only that which allows one to describe history and to narrate conflicts, but that which serves to transform a situation from one of human catastrophe to one of reconciliation and active justice, a methodology should be sought which acknowledges the complicity that outside explanations often share in the perpetuation of conflicts. One way to proceed in this direction is through the epistemological embrace of the significance of narrative or story in the way that histories are written and group identities are constructed. While this would seem to sway toward

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must take seriously the process of listening to the deeper inner voice...this is the heart, the art and soul of who we are in the world, and it cannot be disconnected from what we do in the world" (ibid.).

an impotent, postmodern relativism, leaving one no way to decipher between competing narratives, it also opens the door for a new criterion of political criticism and a potential for the transformation of a given situation.

Deconstructive thought and Hayden White's philosophy of history are appealed to by David Campbell in his work on the Bosnian conflict in order to show that traditional theories of ethics and history and past responses to extreme instances of violence fall short as real remedies and cannot serve to transform conflicts.<sup>2</sup> The reason for this failure is that they often operate along the same lines as the nationalist-inspired conflicts they seek to describe by failing to admit to their own subjectivity and their self-structured reality of representation. It has been observed that the more a historian's portrait reaches a level of comprehensiveness the more "it becomes mythical in shape, and so approaches the poetic in its structure."<sup>3</sup> When historians reproduce what happened in the past they face at sometime a decision of interpretation to emplot the historical record as "a story of a particular kind," such as a tragedy, a comedy, or a romance, and thus communicate to their wider culture by well-known literary conventions.<sup>4</sup> Historians inevitably draw upon "a fund of culturally provided *mythoi*" in arranging the facts figuring the story, which may also render the account with a sense of meaning and significance.<sup>5</sup> In conflict settings the result of history-telling is revealed in the clash of competing narratives as conflicting ideologies. When describing conflict the imagination is too often "corralled

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<sup>2</sup> David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity and Justice in Bosnia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998). Deconstructive thought is attributed in this context to the philosopher Jacques Derrida, and post-structuralist thought to Michel Foucault.

<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye, quoted in Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 57.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

and shackled by the very parameters and sources that create and perpetrate violence.”<sup>6</sup>

This confusion may be transcended, not through the simple assertion of one old narrative over another, but through an ethos of continued political criticism which reaches out to embrace the other.

The question of how and when a destructive social setting is changed and transformed pushes the bounds between theory and intellectual approaches on the one hand, and the nature of art, soul, and poetry on the other. It has been observed that in moments when new spaces were introduced and birthed, what John Paul Lederach calls haiku or “ah-ha” moments, walls broken down and constructive social change experienced, that “it was as if they [the people who were real agents of change] had not fully thought it through.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, while not devoid of theory, the newness was something sensed, something intuited, something called forth relationally, more than something grasped intellectually. What the people possessed, those who needed to survive in their own home settings which were afflicted with violence, was a willingness to risk and to step into a mysterious place that required something creative and spontaneous from them. It meant their stepping into what did not before exist, into a new and unfamiliar land; it tapped into what Lederach has come to refer to as “the moral imagination.”

As relates to Nigeria, these philosophical considerations provide some of the tools for delineating claims which operate in diverse ways along the antagonistic lines of *ethnicity* and *the colonial legacy*. For example, the stridency of the sociological category of *ethnicity* in conflicts is often apparent, even while its definition is not definitively

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<sup>6</sup> Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 172.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

clear. Belief in a common origin and fate, possessing a shared history, culture, and traditions are likely elements of a definition of ethnicity.<sup>8</sup> Yet, it has also been acknowledged that ethnicity is a “chameleonic” category and carries subtle, intangible qualities:

Ethnicity taps cultural and symbolic issues – basic notions of identity and self, of individual and group worth and entitlement – the conflicts it generates are intrinsically less amenable to compromise than those revolving around material issues.<sup>9</sup>

These intangible, group qualities appear to have a primordial quality, one whose particularity and tribal attributes are scandalous to the modern ideal of a pluralistic nation-state.

Moreover, the concepts of ethnicity and nation are related to one another. As Walker Conner argues, an ethnic group that has achieved self-awareness becomes a nation.<sup>10</sup> The centrality of nationalism in modern life (even if its demise is predicted) is quite explainable in terms of group belonging (often related to ethnicity), which functions very concretely in peoples’ lives:

Nationalism, in Herder’s view, fulfills a deep need in human beings – the need to belong to a society that provides them with a complete form of life...<sup>11</sup>

Nationalism fulfills a need for belonging which when met is that very thing which allows for human expression. Hence, “nationalism is partly the expression of a tribalism that goes very deep in our psychology.”<sup>12</sup> A sense of belonging can allow for positive human expression and a sense of tribal lines can help create identity. Yet, when politicized one

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<sup>8</sup> Rian Leith and Hussein Solomon, “On Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict Management in Nigeria,” *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 2 (1), (2001), 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Walker Conner, “A Nation is a Nation, is a State, is an Ethnic Group, is a...,” *Nationalism*, John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 45.

<sup>11</sup> Avisha Margalit, “The Moral Psychology of Nationalism” *The Morality of Nationalism*, eds. Robert McKim and Jeff McMahan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 83-84.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Glover, “Nations, Identity, and Conflict” (McKim, *The Morality of Nationalism*, 25).

may quickly sense the tension created by tribal lines. In a provocative work, Anthony Marx states (in critique of Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner) that a more politically conscious account of nations is needed, one “which incorporates the pivotal role of conflict and exclusion.”<sup>13</sup> The intangible, deep assumptions which characterize the concept of ethnicity make the possibility of peace after ethnic conflict very difficult to satisfactorily achieve; but an understanding of the role of narrative may lead one away from more exclusive terms.<sup>14</sup>

This approach to history and politics also penetrates *the colonial legacy* which has been pictured as the “Achilles heel” of development in Africa today.<sup>15</sup> State repression, “the politics of exclusion, and the myth of the self-sustaining, independent nation-state” are parts of the legacy that continually contribute to the gap between state and human wellbeing and the tendency to embrace identity based movements, such as ethnic secessionism, which reject a common African identity.<sup>16</sup>

The colonial legacy cannot be inscribed in the annals of history in a disconnected way, for the structural realities affected in its wake form an important aspect of the conflicts in Nigeria. These structures can produce violence, even if indirect and seemingly impersonal.<sup>17</sup> One is reminded of Derek Gregory's powerful awareness of “the colonial present,” and the attention drawn to our role in it, as something

so commonplace that it has become axiomatic, so much part of our established order of things that it is easy to forget that this order has *been* established: that it is a fabrication. This does not mean that it is simply false. On the contrary, it is

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<sup>13</sup> Anthony W. Marx, *Faith in Nation: The Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 193.

<sup>14</sup> Campbell, *National Deconstruction*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Hussein Solomon, “Overcoming the Achilles Heel of the African Renaissance – The Legacy of the Colonial State,” *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* (1), (1999). 28.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., see Wendy Lambourne, “Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Meeting Human Needs for Justice and Reconciliation,” *Peace, Conflict and Development* (4), (April, 2004), 3.

validated by its own regimes of truth and it produces acutely real, visibly material consequences.<sup>18</sup>

In this discussion of colonialism, the subtle values which reach into the arena of allegiances are drawn out again and issues of power and its inheritance are brought to the fore. But it need not be said that humans are therefore perpetually bound to their situations, as the constructed nature of many rationales of political orders encourages one to realize that “even in the most difficult circumstances individuals exercise the capacity for ongoing and ever present judgment.”<sup>19</sup> There is never a system which is so totalizing that it contains every last bit of human thought and action; there is some portion which finds a way outside, and perhaps provides a clue for a changing of the circumstance.

The appreciation of the narrative spirit of history and politics allows for an inclusion of the relational elements to any conflict, which include psychological and emotional components. As it has been argued, because there is a relational, emotional aspect to protracted conflicts, that same aspect is likely present in their resolution.<sup>20</sup> In line with Lederach’s earlier theories on peacebuilding, identifying this relational reality could help the international community acquire views of conflicts which open wider the way toward transformation. Lambourne writes that “the concern with ‘hard-nosed’ *geopolitics* needs to expand to include the realm of *geosocial politics* in which relationship-building and reconciliation take center stage.”<sup>21</sup> The relational nature of conflicts was part of Lederach’s “integrated framework” which sought to give attention to the many and diverse issues that relate to the general transformation of a broken society,

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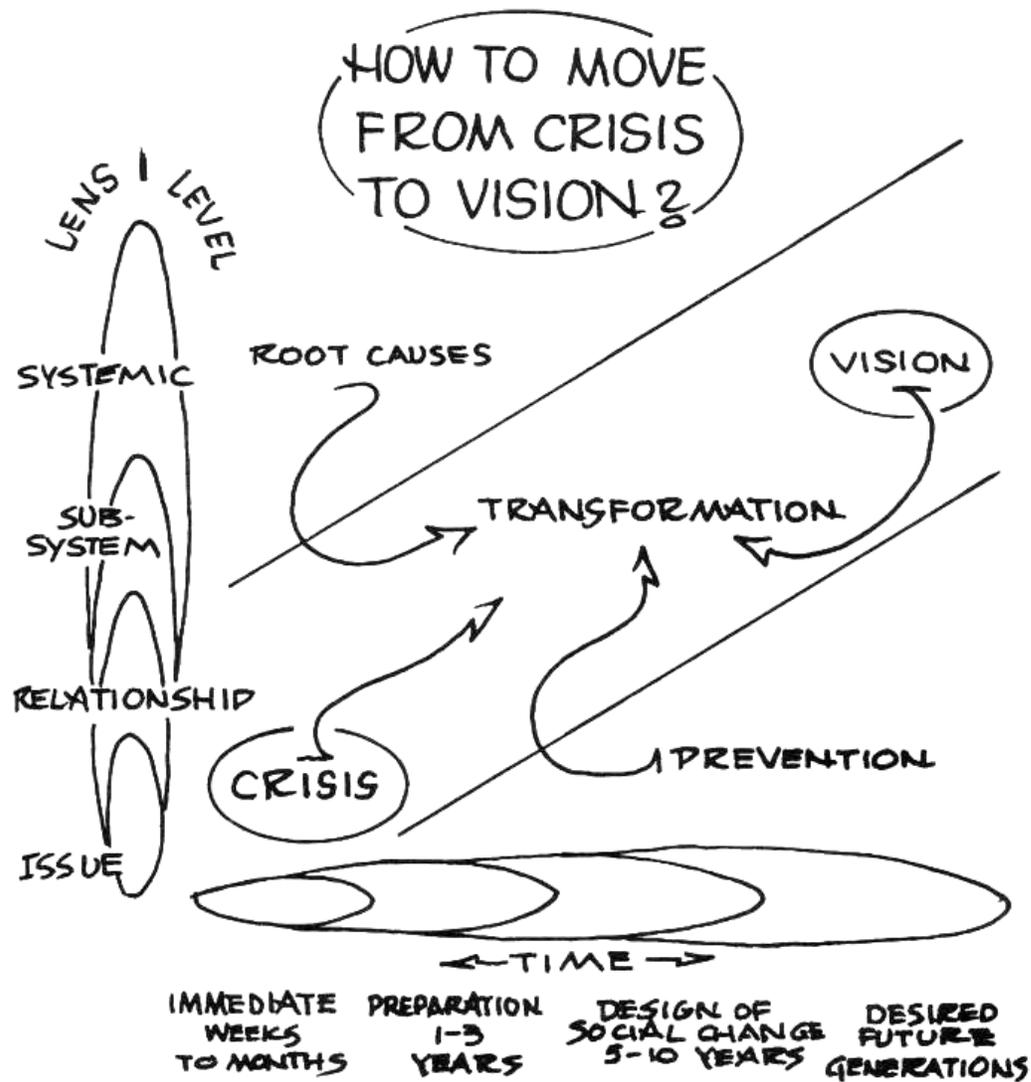
<sup>18</sup> *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Campbell, *National Deconstruction*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Lambourne, “Post-Conflict Peacebuilding,” 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

including personal (emotional, spiritual), relational, structural, and cultural dimensions.<sup>22</sup>



“Integrated Framework” (Lederach, 1997, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, 80).

Reconciliation is a place of encounter which embraces the paradoxical energies of human relationships in contexts of conflict with the goal of creating something new.<sup>23</sup> A

<sup>22</sup> John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998), 79-83.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

long-term vision is sought after, as opposed to immediate crisis intervention alone, expanding the potentials for change to non-political or non-state actors.<sup>24</sup> The harried, intersecting messiness of human relationships and group affiliations in settings of protracted violence must be engaged and experienced, not downplayed or relegated to the sidelines, in order for lasting peace to come. The purpose and goal is the buildup of new societal structures for “reconciliation that centers on the redefinition and restoration of broken relationships.”<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, though the “integrated framework” which Lederach put forward in his 1997 work *Building Peace* sought to unite various disciplines toward a holistic view of the long-term transformation of society, Lederach explains in his 2005 book *The Moral Imagination* that he came to see that the framework was missing something very important. The missing perspective was exposed to him especially through indigenous and aboriginal people who after viewing the framework closely would ask, “What happened to the past?” What the framework lacked and subsequently endured a process of expansion in order to include was the significant place of narrative. As Lederach explains:

It proposed a capacity to imagine the future. It did not explore what capacity might be needed to imagine a past that was alive and accompanying us every step of the way.<sup>26</sup>

Discussed here is the development of an African concept of time in which the past lies in front of us and the future behind us, since it is the past which we have seen and known

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 78. Cf. Solomon, “This involves reconstructing the very edifice of the African State and imbuing it with its precolonial democratic and participatory ethos...One way this can be accomplished is by forging dynamic partnerships between state and non-state actors” (“Overcoming the Achilles Heel of the African Renaissance,” 29); Lederach, “...reconciliation requires that we look outside the mainstream of international political traditions” (*Building Peace*, 27-28).

<sup>25</sup> Lederach, *Building Peace*, 84.

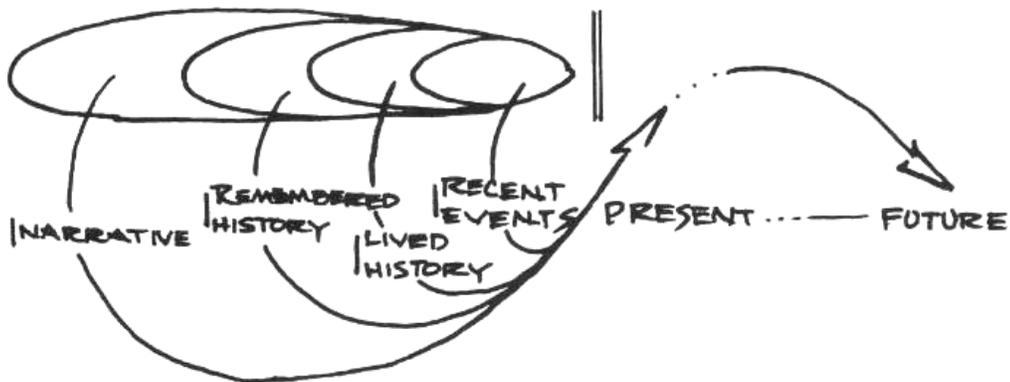
<sup>26</sup> Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 138-39.

and which is understood most by the eldest among us. Because we are reunited with the ancestors upon our physical death, those who are still alive through collective memory, the past and the future are connected in a way which is multidimensional and polychronic, rather than dualistic and exclusively linear. The result is a deep sense of place as human beings within the larger creation. Similarly, Lederach shares this story:

On one occasion a Mayan traditional priest in Guatemala, having listened to me most of the morning and having watched me draw a version of the integrated framework on newsprint, came up at lunchtime to talk. “From my view,” he said, “your framework captures many things but it is missing one overarching element.”

“What is that?” I was curious about what political, economic, or historical piece I might be missing.

“Your framework is missing the earth and skies, the winds and rocks. It does not say where you are located,” he responded. “In traditional Mayan view, if there is a problem in the community, the first thing we would ask is: Did you greet the sun today? Did you thank the earth for the corn? It is not the only thing, but it is the first. We always must know where, [in] what place and time, we are located.”<sup>27</sup>

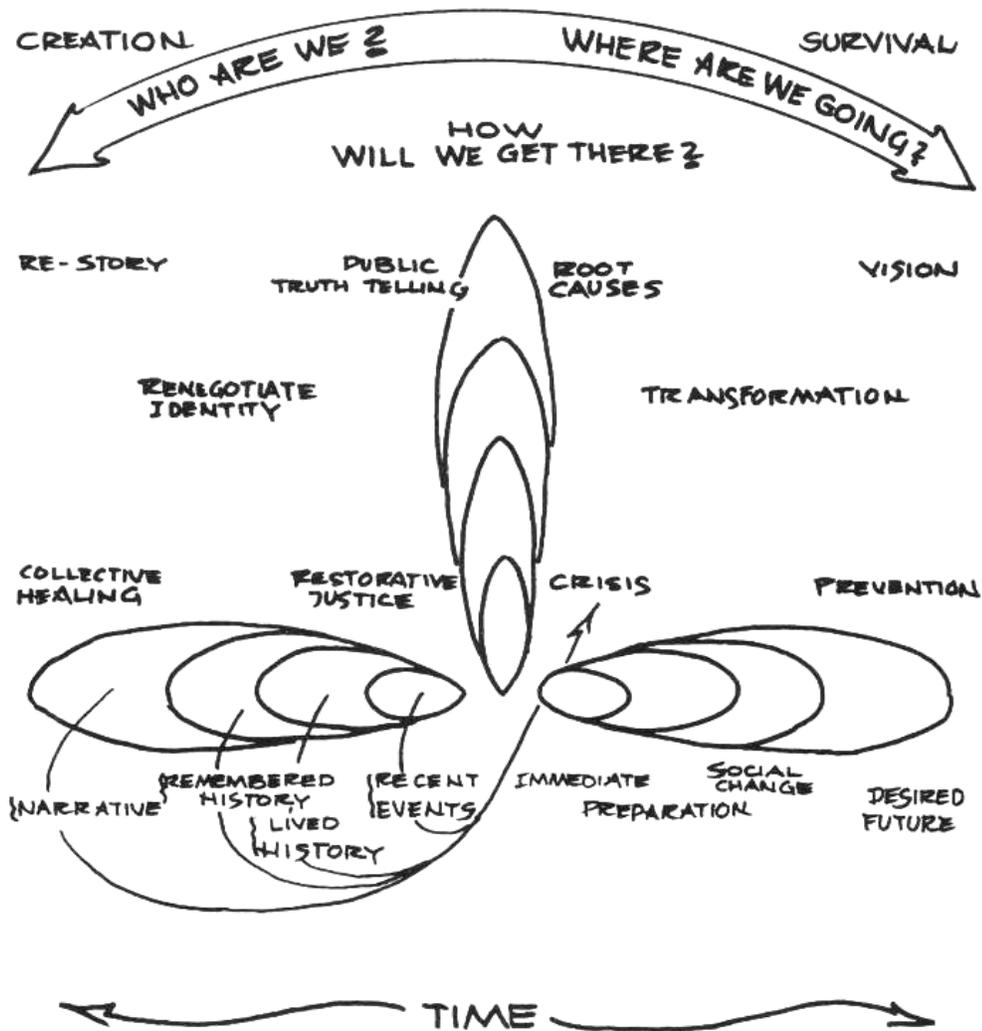


“The Past That Lies Before Us” (Lederach, 2005, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, 141)

The original violence that is found in contexts all over the world is the disruption, or many cases the destruction, of a people’s story. Because the past cannot be changed or

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 140.

returned, broken narratives cannot be directly repaired. Yet, history is alive and in need of recognition, and the challenging question which is laid upon us now is how interdependent peoples are to “re-story.” In the above doodle the nested circles stretch into the past with narrative as the deepest area, containing elements even beyond remembered history (collective memory). The exploration into the idea of narrative here finds recent counterparts from a wide array of disciplines, and connotes notions of origin, of place, of voice, and of story, which come together to make up a people’s identity.



“Expanded Framework for Peacebuilding” (Lederach, 2005, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, 144).

Lederach dwells on the significance of narrative:

As the indigenous world view suggests, social meaning, identity, and story are linked through narrative, which connects the remote past of *who* we are with the remote future of *how* we will survive in the context of an expansive present where we share space and relationship...When deep narrative is broken, the journey toward the past that lies before us is marginalized, truncated...<sup>28</sup>

The task which narrative requires of international actors is understood as a move which treads closer rather than further to the other's story, even when it constitutes one source of the conflict:

If we take seriously traditional wisdom, and I believe we should, it suggests that collective memory and survival are linked...much is at stake for those involved. It is not a matter of talking them into rationality...Our challenge is to engage the source that generates the energy while creating processes that move it toward constructive expression and interaction.<sup>29</sup>

The purpose here is not to explain every quadrant of Lederach's expanded framework but merely to illustrate the kind of progression which was required for the inclusion of the idea of narrative. Through inculcating the ethical and political criticism of Campbell (Derrida, Foucault, and White) and being informed by Lederach's expansion of the integrated framework to include the deep, narrative past with an orientation toward transformation, we will reflect on some lessons the international community might learn from Nigeria.

### **III. The Battle for Biafra**

In 1967, the nascent, independent State of Nigeria fell into political turmoil, with extensive violence carried out along ethnic lines and a three-year long civil war. The mostly Ibo Eastern region of Biafra declared its own independence, in a struggle for secession from the Federation, but was eventually defeated and reincorporated into

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 146-47.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 148-49.

Nigeria in 1970. Every ethnic group poses a problem for a coherent state, but the Ibos were a special case due to the impression they left on other tribes as being aggressive, independent, and clannish. As one professor satirically put it, “Nigeria has an Ibo problem.”<sup>30</sup> The Ibos had experienced extensive violence perpetrated against their own tribe specifically, carried out by members of other tribes and those loyal to the federal governing system, and they suffered from mass starvation, which was the largest killer in the war period. It is estimated that one to two million Biafrans died in the conflict.<sup>31</sup>

The experiences of tribal persecution and suffering led to the frequent claim that genocide was occurring, and these wrongs carried out against them fueled nationalist fervor, serving to unify and strengthen the moral backbone of the Biafran and Ibo narratives. The sense of Ibo identity has been compared to Jewish identity because of its particularity and its experience of suffering (after the glorious results of Israel’s Six Day War in 1967, when the Jews pushed out all the armies of its large Arab neighbors, many were encouraged that such an “underdog” victory would be accomplished through Biafra). So even with its back against the wall, Biafra possessed something of a holistic, ethnic narrative which mobilized people to strive for independence and freedom.

The historical background of the war is ripe with perspectives and interpretations (i.e., the British and international views, Biafran contentions, as well as other explanations), but few will deny the significance of British presence in the country for the conflict which developed. Nigeria’s boundaries were created by the British in 1914, containing at least two hundred ethnic groups speaking more than two hundred and fifty

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<sup>30</sup> Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (London: Heinemann, 1983).

<sup>31</sup> Leith, “On Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict,” 3.

languages.<sup>32</sup> The new political entity arose through the combining of three administrative regions which had been set up in relation to the major tribes: the Hausa-Fulani in the North (twenty-eight percent of the population), the Yoruba in the West (twenty percent), and the Ibo in the East (seventeen percent).<sup>33</sup> It has been argued that the social construction of tribal allegiances were enhanced or even created by the artificially drawn lines of the British, and put bluntly, that “Nigeria had never been more than an amalgamation of peoples welded together in the interests and for the benefit of European Power.”<sup>34</sup> In 1954, a federal framework was enacted which secured autonomy for these three major tribes in each region. After gaining independence in 1960, the stage was set for the volatile social forces contained within the state to surface, as ethno-regional politics propelled the issue of ethnicity to a central place for all political parties.<sup>35</sup>

There are a number of problems and offenses which influenced the war and the Biafran and Ibo desire to secede. In an interview in 1968, Ibo writer Chinua Achebe presented his feelings on many of these issues.<sup>36</sup> Secession and the establishment of a separate nation did not spring from conceited desire as other tribes maintained, since the Ibos “went out in the spirit of this experiment of one nation,” even in a time of the near secession of the North. Rather, it became a necessity for the Ibo, who had suffered the severity of massacres in the Northern region of the country between May and September of 1966, consequently pushing hundreds of thousands back into the Eastern region as refugees:

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 11. Forsyth’s account is told unashamedly “from the Biafran standpoint” (7).

<sup>35</sup> Leith, “On Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict,” 3.

<sup>36</sup> Chioma Oruh, “Remembering Biafra: A Literary Review,” *Pambazuka News, Fahamu* (Oct 31, 2007), <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/books/44150>.

As it turned out the Constitutional Conference came to naught; for it was interrupted and stultified by another outbreak of killings of Easterners in the North, the worst ever, and of such an intensity that it destroyed once and for all any illusion that the hatred of the North towards the East could be dismissed as a passing phase in a new nation, and laid the grounds for the Eastern feeling that their only hope of ultimate survival as a people was to get out of Nigeria.<sup>37</sup>

The scene in Eastern Nigeria at the time resembled to some the ingathering of the exiles to Israel (“the parallel is not fanciful”).<sup>38</sup> The most terrifying part in the whole ordeal, according to Achebe, was that there was a detailed plan of “mass killing which the Government – the Army, the Police, the people who were there to protect life and property – brought against the people they were supposed to protect.”<sup>39</sup> The direct or indirect complicity of the Northern government and international actors like the British in the slaughtering of masses of Ibos was felt by the East as an intolerable injustice.

Frederick Forsyth relays an article written by a European eyewitness in the London *Observer*, which stated that

the Ibos know the whole terrible story from the 600,000 or so refugees who have fled to the safety of the Eastern region – hacked, slashed, mangled, stripped naked and robbed of all their possessions; the orphans, the widows, the traumatized. A woman, mute and dazed, arrived back in her village after traveling for five days with only a bowl in her lap. She held her child’s head, which was severed before her eyes.<sup>40</sup>

On 29 September, 1966, a few weeks prior to this publication, Colonel Gowon of the Nigerian military stated on a radio broadcast that it appeared that the violence was “going beyond reason,” to reach a point of “recklessness and irresponsibility,” implying that some measure of violence against Easterners was within reason.<sup>41</sup> These atrocities gave

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<sup>37</sup> Forsyth, *The Biafra Story*, 75.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>39</sup> Oruh, “Remembering Biafra,” 3.

<sup>40</sup> 16 October, 1966 (Forsyth, *The Biafra Story*, 78).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

rise to the claim of genocide on the part of Biafrans, appealed to consistently to explain the root causes of the war.

The argument that the Nigerian government itself attempted the perpetration of genocide against the Ibos, understood as such by most within Biafra, was corroborated by Irish historian Conor Cruise O'Brien, maintaining that "ever since the 1966 massacres it had been the *intention* of the Federal government to eliminate the Ibos."<sup>42</sup> In September 1967, he issued a public warning saying that "mass murder on a scale unprecedented as yet in Africa" was taking place.

While the killings which occurred in the North and elsewhere in 1966 were a form of genocide, there are certain qualifications which complicate the straightforward nature of the claim that the government was intent on genocide. For example, if one distinguishes between wartime killings and peacetime killings, these massacres were undertaken by civilians and local soldiers against "an alien, economically dominant minority" during peacetime (preceding the official war). John De St. Jorre elucidates the irony that "curiously, the Eastern government never referred to these genuinely genocidal massacres as 'genocide' but reserved the term for the war-time deaths" – a time when the government was in fact trying to keep Biafra *within* the Federation.

Nonetheless, the belief persisted that if given the chance, the Nigerians would have annihilated the Ibo race.<sup>43</sup> And that this horrific violence was perpetrated against the Ibos and was related to the Eastern call for separation was a contention which both Nigerian and British governments had vested interest to sweep under the carpet and

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<sup>42</sup> John De St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 284.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

forget. Forsyth jabs, “For the Nigerian government the subject is taboo; in Whitehall circles it is the best conversation-stopper since Burgess and Maclean.”<sup>44</sup>

Thus, the British policy which transferred power to a federal government did not enjoy a steady course, and the war was, from the perspective of the Pan-African movement and the OAU (Organization for African Unity), the most serious crisis of ethnic secessionism and irredentism to date.<sup>45</sup> Only four African states recognized Biafra’s independence in 1968, but still the OAU was divided and impotent in the conflict. The Nigerian Federal government received arms from Egypt, Britain, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, while Biafra was supported by Portugal, France, and possibly South Africa.<sup>46</sup> Foreign influences and outside interests were consequential for arms struggle and the outcome of the internal strife.

Oil was and is a primary source of contention in the Niger Delta (the Eastern region and proclaimed nation of Biafra encompassed this very territory). Discovered in 1956 at Oloibiri in the Niger Delta and exported within two years by Shell-BP, financed also by the Royal Dutch Shell group and British Company, oil was an essential component of the Nigerian economy by the years of the Biafran war.<sup>47</sup> The Federal government and its British supporters had no economic gain in recognizing Biafran independence in this oil-rich area. In the 1968 interview Achebe spoke to these economic reasons behind Britain’s interest:

It is probably clear to them that Nigeria will be the worse for not having the place now called Biafra, not only in terms of natural resources but in human resources.

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<sup>44</sup> Forsyth, *The Biafra Story*, 78.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Crowder, ed., *The Cambridge History of Africa*, Vol. 8, from c. 1940 to c. 1975 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 125.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Oruh, “Remembering Biafra,” 5.

But more, there is the glamour with oil. I think this is by far the most important reason.<sup>48</sup>

These assertions would be shown as valid one year after the war, when a government agency was established (the Nigerian National Oil Corporation) with the newfound strength to exploit all of the country's oil resources.

A dispute arose over the oil revenues for the first half of the year of 1967, estimated at seven million pounds. Biafra had effective control over all operations east of the Niger, and Ojukwu, Biafra's military leader, insisted that "if you are operating in Biafra, you pay Biafra – it's as simple as that."

This, finally, gave Shell/BP a convenient, though not wholly satisfactory, loophole out of its contractual obligations to the Federal government. It declared *force majeure* and promised, within hours of the deadline expiring, to pay the Biafrans a 'token' payment of 250,000 pounds.<sup>49</sup>

The discreet transaction fell like a "bombshell" on all other parties affected. The following day the Nigerian government completed its effort of blockading the Biafran coastline and the British High Commissioner in Lagos also was in "a towering rage."<sup>50</sup> Through some quick maneuvering all dues were paid to Nigeria in the end, while Biafra never saw any of the promised payment.

#### **IV. International Perspectives and the Significance for Modern Conflicts in Nigeria**

Some more words should be said on the roles of other major international powers as well as the propaganda which sought to influence them. As already noted, Britain's interest laid in the maintenance of the federal system – which it had played a great role creating – for political and economic reasons. It assumed the laudable goal "to keep Nigeria one," as forwarded also by the North, to respect its territorial integrity, and to

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> De St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*, 140.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

guard against the balkanization of Africa.<sup>51</sup> The arms race escalated throughout the war and “immediately put the outsiders in the quandary they had hoped to avoid...Pressed by both sides to sell them arms, they had to take a position.”<sup>52</sup> The United States secretary of state said, “We regard Nigeria as part of Britain’s sphere of influence,” an honest and belittling suggestion which was characteristic of much of the Western attitude toward Nigeria in general, i.e., to let the conflict fade in its own heat only to participate in exploiting what the country had to offer after it was safe to do so.<sup>53</sup>

The United States had an arms embargo on both sides throughout the war, while Britain continued its policy of supplying small arms and defensive weapons to Nigeria, even while it claimed neutrality. The Arab nations were also in favor of the North and sold Nigeria some of the machineries denied them by the British. While Israel supported Biafra in speech, it did not assist materially. The Biafrans won the support of France and Portugal and acquired arms where they could, since the French also adopted an arms embargo against both sides in 1968. The aid Biafra did receive from the French came with the practical motivations of breaking up Nigerian hegemony in West Africa and gaining access to its oil reserves.<sup>54</sup> The role of the Soviet Union would be an important factor, and with “America’s diplomatic approval and Britain’s limited military support” the Soviet loyalty to Lagos and the Federal government ensured that a ‘Cold War’ confrontation would not ensue.<sup>55</sup>

The intended posture of political neutrality of the Western powers prevented recognition of Biafra, which would have benefited most from international intervention.

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<sup>51</sup> Forsyth, *The Biafra Story*, 101.

<sup>52</sup> De St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*, 181.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>54</sup> Crowder, *The Cambridge History of Africa*, 668.

<sup>55</sup> De St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*, 183.

Media outlets were used for propaganda as leverage for garnishing support. This was most effective in communicating the desperateness of the Eastern plight, with the common image of pot-bellied, starving infants. The most prominent hand that was actually extended was that of relief and humanitarian aid, evermore crucial as the war dragged on. As De St. Jorre explains:

In Western Europe and North America concern over Biafra's plight was mounting, helped by the energies and skills of the public relations men ('Markpress' had almost become a synonym for 'Biafra') and the modern techniques of 'telly war' reporting. But the message was beginning to transcend the medium.<sup>56</sup>

The mounting international attention affected the war as lobbyists pressured governments to end their sales of arms to the region. Passionate individuals and organizations made their presence felt as they sought to relieve the misery in Biafra which had come to be known. Relief agencies agreed that millions more would be killed swiftly unless something was done and public opinion generally began sympathizing with Biafra. Britain defended its arms policy but said it was willing to reconsider it if genocide was occurring. The British eventually convinced Nigeria to allow a team of international observers to monitor the activities of the Federal army.<sup>57</sup>

The fashioning of propaganda and its efficacy in the course of the war is significantly related to the power of words and images to influence events, and at some level, to the potential of particular narratives to inspire human support. It attracted outsiders into the heat of battle, whether genuinely humanitarian or self-interested, so that "out of it arose the sociological phenomenon of 'Biafra,' still an emotional word for many today:"

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 210.

Rarely has such a distant, complex and localized conflict aroused such passion among foreigners, particularly among the sophisticated and normally dispassionate Anglo-Saxons of Europe and North America.<sup>58</sup>

It was as though the pangs which affected and helped mobilize one ethnic group were translated and sensitized for the world.

At the same time, a general humanitarianism and concern for Biafrans and Nigerians did not guarantee deep respect or understanding, and much of the coverage of the conflict was characterized by a shallow identification and patronizing attitude on the part of the Western observers. This problem is articulated by Joseph Okpaku, who criticizes international commentators for assuming that perspectives of Nigerians themselves were not the most valuable insights into the conflict. In a penetrating observation, he writes:

Somewhere what seems to be forgotten or perhaps deliberately ignored is the fact that since participants in a given situation will act in accordance with their comprehension of the situation, that comprehension remains the most important insight into the given situation. Thus, Western prejudices notwithstanding, the most important opinion on the Biafran crisis was and remains that of the Nigerian people themselves. Yet it is precisely this opinion which was not sought in all the international centers of concern.<sup>59</sup>

What follows from Okpaku is a blistering critique of the West's assumed superiority and failed belief that if Nigeria pulled itself up to imitate the West, all would be well.

Western observers and third-party actors alike would benefit from listening to such voices, for the exposing of their assumed norm of development and for the apprehension of another narrative. In the thoughts of mediators and interveners, local perceptions are key – like the “face-to-face encounters” in Bosnia described by Campbell, they may possess within themselves the capacity to move beyond those things that confine them,

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>59</sup> Joseph Okpaku, *Nigeria: Dilemma of Nationhood, An African Analysis of the Biafran Conflict* (New York: Third Press, 1972), 2.

for they beat with the pulse of felt-history and are not always more limiting than those of outsiders who lend their expertise.<sup>60</sup>

International approaches to Nigerian conflicts are still crippled with a representation of violence that creates a near inability to see them, and the societies in which they occur, as anything besides “other.” An example is the sheer shock at the unquenched anger of Nigerian rebel soldiers, sabotaging the oil industry in the Niger Delta to oust foreign companies who exploit the land for their private gain. This past Thursday, 21 May, 2009, the Nigerian military led an assault in a remote area of the region, prompting thousands of people to leave their homes. According to the BBC the rationales behind these actions and the exact consequences of them are still quite confused:

There are two versions of events leading up to Friday's assault on Oporoza in the Gbaramatu kingdom of Delta State. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (Mend) says the military launched an unprovoked attack on a militant camp in the riverine area, east of the state capital. The JTF [Joint Task Force, the government organization in charge of providing security in the Niger Delta] says one of its patrols was ambushed...It is impossible to verify what is happening in the area, as the military have stopped all boats...It is also impossible to know how many have died - the military are not giving any figures.<sup>61</sup>

If it was difficult for Britain to see that forces of control in the oil territories of Eastern Nigeria could disenfranchise the inhabitants, it should come as no surprise that a similar difficulty exists today.

A clash of narratives and of values prompts us to rethink the way we view ourselves and understand our relation to other people. The misrecognition of Nigerian conflicts as other, in their postcolonial and tribal heritage, stems from “a misrecognition

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<sup>60</sup> Campbell, *National Deconstruction*, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Walker, “Thousands Flee Nigeria Delta Carnage,” *BBC News* (21 May, 2009), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8062315.stm>.

of the self that flows from the repeated denial of the radical contingency of ‘our’ identities and territorialities.”<sup>62</sup> In order to know how to listen to others we must also know how to listen to our own voices, which speak to the deep sense of our vocation in life.<sup>63</sup> As Lederach has argued for the transformation of a conflicted society, through the redefinition of all relations and orderings which have gone sour, deconstructive thought would maintain that every political rendering carries somewhere within itself “the space for its dissimulation and transformation,” preceding what may come as historical, social progress.<sup>64</sup> The idea that deconstruction could at some point be a promising practice is hinted at by Lederach when he writes:

The greatest movements forward, when you look really closely, often germinated from something that collapsed, fell to the ground, and then sprouted something that moved beyond what was then known.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, our challenge is “to invoke, set free, and sustain innovative responses to the roots of violence while rising above it,” realizing that “creativity, divinely embedded in the human spirit, is always within reach.”<sup>66</sup> The Niger Delta region is not disconnected today from the notions of ethnic identity and international struggle, elaborated upon here by way of the country’s most dramatic war. An appreciation of history and our complicity in it will enliven international efforts to more beneficially perceive the Nigerian situation and to act upon those perceptions for reliable, transformative ends.

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<sup>62</sup> Campbell, *National Deconstruction*, 14.

<sup>63</sup> Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 165.

<sup>64</sup> Campbell, *National Deconstruction*, 14.

<sup>65</sup> Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 162.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-73.

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