Constructing Identities

Alternative Explanations of Conflict and Violence in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

Kalu N. Kalu, PhD*
Air Commodore Olutayo T. Oguntoyinbo, Nigerian Air Force

Located in the southern part of Nigeria and comprising a sizeable proportion of the country's Atlantic coastline, the Niger Delta region (about 40,000 square miles of swamps, creeks, and mangrove forests) has seen growth totaling more than 30 million people (in 2005), representing 23 percent of Nigeria's total population. Further, "the population is . . . among the highest in the world with 265 people per kilometer-squared . . . [and a growth rate of about] 3% per year."[1] As poverty and urbanization increase, the lack of accompanying economic growth and employment opportunities work against the emergent spirit of rising expectations and the quest for improvements in the quality of life.

Concerns about the Niger Delta existed in Nigeria even before oil became a central element in the country's economy. Because the crisis, at one

*Kalu N. Kalu is a professor of political science at Auburn University–Montgomery and an adjunct professor at the University of Connecticut. He has been a research affiliate at the Whitney and Betty Macmillan Center for International and Area Studies, Yale University. He is also a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Victoria Island, Lagos. His research interests include institutional development and organizational change, citizenship and administrative theory, the interface between information technology and leadership, complex adaptive systems, civil-military relations, national security and intelligence policy, globalization, and health care politics and policies. Professor Kalu has published widely in such peer-reviewed journals as *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, *Public Administration Review*, *Administration and Society*, *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *American Review of Public Administration*, *Social Science Computer Review*, *Defence Studies*, *Handbook of Homeland Security*, *Yale Political Quarterly*, and others. Rowman and Littlefield published his book *State Power, Autarchy, and Political Conquest in Nigerian Federalism* in 2008 (hardcover) and 2009 (softcover).

Air Commodore Olutayo T. Oguntoyinbo is commander of the 75th Strike Group, Nigerian Air Force (NAF), Yola, Adamawa State. He has been a specialist trainer and NAF fighter pilot and air weapon instructor (operations) at Headquarters NAF, Abuja. He is a graduate of the Ghana Armed Forces Command and Staff College, Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration, and US Air War College, Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama, USA.

time or the other, has involved competing issues of territorial autonomy, economic opportunity, environmental control and compensation, infrastructural development, political representation, and/or self-determination, accurately pinpointing the single element that lies at the forefront of the conflict has proven problematic. Due to the simple fact that the bulk of Nigeria's oil exports and petroleum reserves is linked to this region more than any other place, the increasing level of infrastructural and economic underdevelopment in the area has become part of a central debate on the distributional incentives of Nigeria's federalist system.

However, "competition for oil wealth has fuelled violence between innumerable ethnic groups, causing the militarization of nearly the entire region by ethnic militia groups as well as Nigerian military and police forces."[2] The rising spate of violence, kidnappings, and murder that pervades the region has thus become more salient to the country and the international community. In the midst of all this, the more central and authentic issues such as poverty, education, the environment, and the competing interests of multinational oil conglomerates and the state economy have become secondary to—or overshadowed by—the more immediate physical manifestations of violence and disorder.

This article proposes that a proper appraisal of the Niger Delta and its security challenges should reflect on some of the historical events that informed it. The autonomy of this area—mostly inhabited by several minority ethnic groups, the largest of whom are the Ijaws, Urhobos, Itsekiri, Ogonis, Andonis, Annang, Isoko, and many others—from the influence of majority ethnic groups in the country was always a major factor in the demand for state creation even before independence. Viewing the crisis in the Niger Delta as solely a matter of relative deprivation and/or environmental degradation would certainly be an understatement. It is much more than that. Because the underlying issues of contention essentially concern property rights and legitimate authority, the evolving nexus between state power and a conflict economy means that the pervasiveness and intensity of ethnic politics and conflict, in the final analysis, would remain a measure of ongoing political contention.

By utilizing a social constructivist approach to ethnic and political conflict, this article seeks to explain how differences in the construction of ideas and identities form the underlying principles that oftentimes lead to and sustain conflict situations in areas such as the Niger Delta. In examining how to approach the idea of social constructivism in political conflict, we draw upon the role of individuals, community, and society in constructing

an "objective reality" in which ideas (perception and interpretation of national events, historical experiences, and policies) constitute material causes leading to conflict and violence.

Violence as Political Participation: Analogues with a Difference

In many developed and developing polities, one cannot help seeing the resort to violence as a form of political participation even when it is morally abhorrent as well as a challenge to the rule of law. Although violence may be relative in terms of degree and type, suffice it to say that it generally seeks to achieve a political objective or attract attention to an issue of importance to the party or parties concerned. But the issue in contention does not necessarily drive most violent acts in politics; more often than not, it is the lack of political opportunity or formal access to bring forth a case to the prevailing authorities. When such opportunity does not exist or the possibility seems remote, collective anger and frustration transform or morph into a violent form of political advocacy.

In his seminal work on the social psychological model of "civil strife," Ted Robert Gurr carried out quantitative analyses of a variety of forms of conflict through national measures of protest and rebellion. Though interested in the individual-level variable of "relative deprivation," he mainly drew on aggregate national demographic data to operationalize his major variables.[3] Two years later, his work *Why Men Rebel* drew attention to some of the political determinants of conflict. He pointed to such factors as the relative balance of institutional support and coercive control, but he was mainly interested in the determinants of collective contention that could be cross-nationally correlated with various measures of conflict.[4]

Contemporary scholars have drawn inspiration from Gurr's earlier work and have sought to analyze different conflict situations, including civil wars. For example, Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler found significant correlations between civil wars and high levels of primary commodity exports, large populations, low levels of secondary education, low economic growth, low per capita income, and the presence of previous civil wars. They also discovered that the lack of democracy was significant, that inequality was insignificant, and that ethnic and religious fractionalization was surprisingly unimportant.[5] Although Nigeria meets the above characteristics, the latter finding is also pertinent because most civil strife in Nigeria is almost always attributed to ethnic or religious foundations, even when other structural but remotely placed factors may be at work.

This observation becomes more important when we look at later works by James Fearon and David Laitin. Proceeding from a similar definition of civil war that involves numerical violence and from microeconomic premises like those of Collier and Hoeffler, they too found that primary exports—especially oil—correlated highly with outbreaks of civil war. Fearon and Laitin also concluded that civil wars would most likely occur in countries governed by weak but nondemocratic governments marked by political instability. Of equal relevance, they found no statistical correlation between civil wars and ethnicity.[6] Consequently, one can learn some crucial lessons in matters of conflict and violence within political communities: "Violence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues."[7] Further, like the various forms of political participation, "power and violence, though they are distinct phenomena, usually appear together. Wherever they are combined, power, we have found, is the primary and predominant factor."[8]

However, the context in which this proposition is cast pertains to situations in which distinct groups seek political, economic, religious, or cultural supremacy over other competing elements in society. In federal systems with generally weak institutions, competing groups will more likely use extraconstitutional means as a way of dealing with seemingly avoidable conflict situations. Therefore, one may conceivably view regional political conflicts in Nigeria as a result of the inevitable quest for power and control over the authoritative allocation of values, which in federal systems such as ours, is more often than not a natural prerogative of the central government. As Hannah Arendt would argue, because power is inherent in the very existence of political communities, it needs no justification—but it does need legitimacy.[9] All the same, many Nigerians, having become so enamored of the level of violence and communal acrimony befalling the country, call for accelerating the devolution of power to the regions in response to various ethnic orientations that seek effective representation at the center.

Nevertheless, one must still raise the question, what type of devolution should take place and how? Moreover, what are the core and specific distinctions between a traditional federal system and the concept of "true" federalism? A substantial difference exists between federalism as division of powers between the center and the constituent units, as opposed to federalism in the context of devolution of powers. They are not the same. The first requires a resolution on specific structural issues that the constitutional document should highlight, specifying the forms of functional and associational relationship within the system. The second is much more problematic

because it requires a more complex platform for renegotiating the constitutional and political fundamentals of association within the federal system as well as who gives up what, how much, and to whom. To the extent that most advocates focus on the latter (while construing it as the former), the evident mismatch between purpose and endgame creates difficulty in developing an initial consensus regarding the practical objectives of political negotiation.

Since May 1999, various ethnic, advocacy, or militant groups have emerged, spearheading one endorsement or the other in the country. We have the Odua Peoples Congress (fighting for the Southwest Yoruba states), the Arewa Consultative Forum (seeking the interest of the northern states), the Middle Belt Forum (seeking to reaffirm an inherent geopolitical identity), the Ohanaeze (seeking a new political affirmation for the southeastern states), and the South-South Forum (seeking increased representation in the political leadership of the country. Other organizations include the Egbesu Boys and the Ijaw Youth Council (seeking a redistribution of Nigeria's oil and petroleum rents in favor of the indigenous interests of the oil-producing areas), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra, and many others less vociferous but equally disapproving of the current state of affairs in the country. Given the present stasis, however, one must still inquire about reconciling the different platforms to attain the primary goal of national integration and unity of purpose.

Competing Epistemology: Structuralist and Social Constructivist Approaches

One cannot blame the source of ethnic and political militancy in Nigeria on Cold War politics (1945–89); instead, it is deeply rooted in the history and character of state formation, power, and the trajectory of political development, especially in the formative years of Nigeria's independence. Although one can also partly attribute such militancy to the competing issues of federalism in the country, it did not evolve as a challenge to the ideal of federalism per se but as a testimony to the various and oftentimes formidable challenges related to emergent issues of governance and distributive politics. In explaining the reasons for ethnic and political conflict, the structuralist and social constructivist approaches offer important analytical lenses to account for specific idiosyncrasies and value premises that are highly consequential in the development of conflict situations.

On the one hand, Fearon and Laitin suggest that since civil war happens along structural rather than ethnic lines, the best way to prevent it involves

removing factors that make insurgency more likely, such as increasing the competence (administrative and military capacity) in a central government. Approaches designed to reduce grievances and boost democracy might appear desirable in their own right, but Fearon and Laitin conclude that they are not "magic bullets" for stopping civil wars.[10] On the other hand, Collier and Hoeffler seem to agree with the basic points of Fearon and Laitin's arguments, attempting to discern whether civil wars will more likely occur in situations characterized by large grievances or in those that hold greater opportunity for a successful rebellion. Their findings reveal little support for the idea that civil wars will most likely occur because of ethnic grievances. For them, the factors that improve opportunities for rebellions include "availability of finance," the potential "cost of rebellion," and the "military advantage" of rebel forces.[11] All of these factors may thus indicate that civil wars are not necessarily created by ethnic tensions but are precipitated by structural factors favorable to a rebellion.[12]

In the Niger Delta region, one finds structural factors that may, in and of themselves, offer opportunities for engaging in militant insurgency. Some of these include the terrain, creeks, and mangrove forests that offer cover and hiding places. Besides providing the opportunity for a quick strike and exit, the area is also less conducive to the application of heavy machinery and military hardware needed to confront a standing army. Because of the loosely structured configuration of militant/insurgency groups, they operate in small cells, and the larger civilian population oftentimes becomes part of their cover, thus complicating the process of preemption and/or interdiction. The general ecology of the region and the resources at its disposal also permit the emergence of a subterranean and illicit economy that supports the funding and maintenance of the insurgency's logistics.

In terms of political hierarchy, the overarching political structure of the state and its institutions creates a framework in which local militant groups appear, on the one hand, as subsystemic actors within a broader national geopolitical system. On the other hand, they seem to operate outside the traditional prerogative of state power and its laws. As the state seeks to reassert its authority, militant groups attempt to limit or, at best, redefine the scope and nature of such authority. The fact that the logic of their argument is buried deeply within the inner recesses of their cultural history, experiences, and their view of the world unfolding around them suggests that understanding the way groups utilize the past in framing and analyzing the future offers an important theoretical pathway for bridging differences over critical social and political issues before they metamorphose into overt violence.

Social Constructivism

As an analytical model, social constructivism has shown promise in the study of ethnic conflict. It has presented new ideas and has utilized ideas advanced in the game-theoretic and structuralist approaches in order to explain how socially constructed ideas and identities can lead to ethnic and political conflict and violence. As described by Alexander Wendt, this approach attempts to see how ideas "constitute" the "ostensibly 'material' causes" of "power, interests, or institutions."[13] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman discuss how society constructs "an objective reality as humans interact and certain patterns are habituated in social interaction and become institutionalized"; hence "any deviance from this perceived institution will be seen as a radical departure from reality."[14]

The social constructivist approach focuses on how differences in the construction of ideas, identities, historical experiences, and worldviews (biases and idiosyncrasies) form the foundation on which people see, understand, and frame important public and national issues. Robert Jervis observes that "what one learns from key events in international history is an important factor in determining the images that shape the interpretation of incoming information." Thus, "analogies are seized upon only to bolster pre-existing beliefs and preferences." He also discusses the interaction between different socially constructed realities that might seem "deviant" to those who do not possess them as something that might lead to conflict.[15] Hence, perceptual differences in terms of relative political and socioeconomic issues generate disparate and competing templates for finding solutions to national problems. When one premises these differences on fundamental ideological and cultural foundations, they oftentimes become quite irreconcilable and hence less amenable to long-lasting and durable solutions. Furthermore, when we throw in the usually diverse conceptions of justice and due process (as is typical among many competing groups), potentially solvable issues could become all the more intractable.

By juxtaposing the competing interests of state power and the various advocacy groups in the Niger Delta, the figure below offers a brief look into the generally incommensurable nature of the foundational issues at the core of the crisis. As the ultimate arbiter of law and order, the state seeks to maximize its authority and power over the territory, whereas advocacy groups seek an incremental (possibly radical) devolution of such power—a minimalist orientation regarding state power and control. They justify their cause as one inspired by normative matters of relative equity, property rights, and political representation. Ho-Won Jeong writes that "differences in perceived interests, values, and needs are perhaps the most basic elements in the motivations behind social conflict.

Inter-group conflict often represents different ways of life and ideologies with implications for incongruent views about relationships with others."[16]

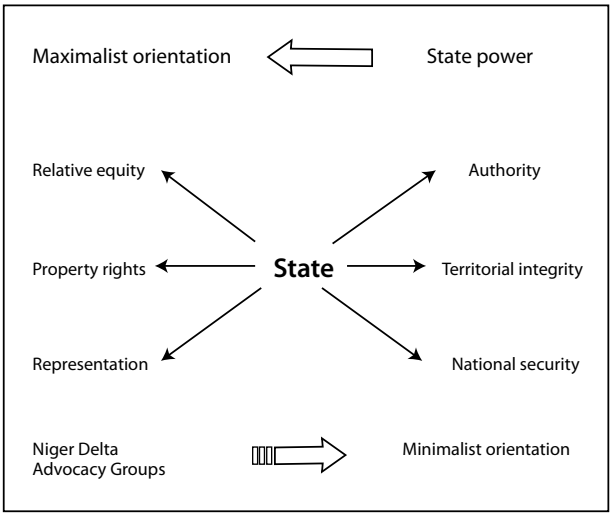

Figure. Negotiating structure and the imperatives of competing endgames

Since the evolution of the modern state system following the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, a state is generally considered the highest authority within its territorial and geopolitical space. A central element in the exercise of state power entails the preservation of its territorial integrity and the provision for internal and external security (national security). To do so, the state has options in the form of hard power (military action) and soft power (negotiation and diplomacy). The state can use both options individually to realize a specific objective. But the unfortunate reality of the modern world, where access to funds and weapons needed for an insurgency movement remains readily available, is that the application of hard power as a complement to soft power becomes a matter of political expediency—a situation most aptly termed the "carrot and stick" approach.

Discussing a number of case studies on ethnic and political conflict, Fearon and Laitin examine several ways in which the social construction of ethnic identity can lead to ethnic and political violence. Based on their findings, they identify support for three constructivist explanations of ethnic violence but believe that more research is needed in each of these areas. The first, "social construction by discourse," posits that social construction occurs at the cultural or social level and that ethnic conflict and political

violence result from the symbols and ideas made when one group differentiates itself from another.[17]

The two other explanations, which focus on "individuals as agents of construction" seem equally credible, according to Fearon and Laitin. The first of these says that ethnic violence is caused by an identity constructed by elites who attempt to cause violence by constructing more "antagonistic ethnic identities." The violence created by this new identity is the desired result of the elites, who believe that violence will allow them to "strengthen their hold on power."[18] This explanation hearkens back to the "in-group dynamics" studied by game theorists. The other explanation focuses on how ordinary people construct identities. Under this framework, violence may occur as dissidents attempt to change cultural identities and boundaries; historical experiences are therefore amplified and sometimes distorted for maximum effect.[19]

Hence, individuals who wish to stop change will, more or less, resort to violence. Fearon and Laitin point to the Basque region of Spain as the perfect example of this phenomenon. As the idea of being a "Spaniard" expanded to "include Basques," those seeking separation from Spain provoked Spanish authorities into taking "punitive actions" due to their violent attacks, thus stopping the adoption of a new identity.[20] From this, one can glean that "the emergence of a collective self-consciousness is found and expressed in a joint awareness of the depth of the challenges as well as the common obligation it imposes on all members of the community."[21] The average individual thus sees and identifies his or her own individual space as an integral part of the community space and identity.

Test Cases in Practice

Edward Aspinall attempts to expand the use of social constructivism in ethnic conflict to include issues concerning natural resources, an idea that also seems to have some overlap with the structural approach. Aspinall looks specifically at the separatist movement of Aceh in Indonesia, noting that "natural resource exploitation gives rise to conflict when it becomes entangled in wider processes of identity construction." He also emphasizes how political entrepreneurs will attempt to exploit existing ethnic issues by "reinterpreting" a new identity back to a populace.[22] Sanjib Baruah examines how different groups constructed identities and visions of reality that have affected the Naga conflict in India, writing that the idea of the Nagas as a distinct group is a very recent one, perhaps originating as early as the 1920s.[23] Prior to this time, the Nagas were simply an incoherent collection

of tribes engaged in constant warfare with one another. Over time, however, those people who consider themselves Naga have constructed a distinct identity that includes unifying all of the Naga people into a single governmental entity.

The conflict in India has to do with who exactly is a Naga and what areas should be unified with Nagaland. Perceived differences in the reality of the Naga claims with regard to ethnic identity have thus paved the way for conflict with those who see an alternate version of reality. Consequently, a socially constructed ethnic identity has managed to create conflict where the identity did not previously exist. Hence Baruah argues that resolution of the conflict depends upon all parties confronting claims about the construction of the Naga identity.[24]

Kristen Williams and Neal Jesse examine how "promoting overlapping identities and pooling sovereignty" can help resolve nationalist conflicts. Addressing the Northern Irish conflict in particular, they argue that a group's construction of a positive identity for itself often leads to conflictual relationships with other groups. They contend that as long as this negative view between groups remains, it impedes the establishment of trust, leading to a security dilemma. Williams and Jesse then ask an important question: "If these conflictual group identities are socially constructed, could that not also mean that they are malleable?" They argue that by creating institutions which promote overlapping identities, we should be able to construct a new identity that allows previously conflicting groups to cooperate. Thus, Williams and Jesse contend that the institutions established by the Northern Ireland peace accords allowed just this kind of overlapping identity which eventually paved the way for peace.[25]

The same scenario seems to apply equally to the Niger Delta situation, drawing upon ideas and historical issues of regional and group identity. People seek not only the political security that a powerful Nigerian state offers but also the political autonomy to decide the nature and boundaries within which it must operate. As Eghosa Osaghae points out, "even with the rebellions in the region, the demands have continued to be for equity and justice within the Nigerian state rather than for separate sovereign states."[26] Because the resolution of key issues of political and economic autonomy (property rights) demands dramatic solutions, both sides have difficulty reaching a compromise. Temporary stop-gap measures can assuage current emotions, but they cannot offer long-lasting solutions.

Conclusion

This article has tried to argue that underlying cultural and psychological variables represent important factors in the evolution as well as the resolution of ethnic and political conflicts. Various studies in the literature attest to the robustness of social constructivism as a way of bridging perceptual differences among social groups in terms of objective realities, identities, and worldviews. By building on ideas, beliefs, and historical experiences that groups use as templates to interpret contemporary national events and issues, the social constructivist approach offers a useful prism for understanding the conflict in the Niger Delta and its broader implications for national security and political integration.

To the extent that all parties bring crucial issues to the table, they should thus be seen as an integral part of negotiating a mutually acceptable solution. The "goalpost" may continue to shift, but only around the margins of the key issues in contention without creating enough momentum that could explode them prematurely. Thus, they still would offer the necessary enabling conditions critical for final resolution of the issues. Even if the opportunity for some form of durable agreement remains remote, that in itself should not provide enough justification for negating them. The mere fact that they are presented for deliberation has its own political benefit.

The fluid nature of Nigerian politics and the often tempestuous flashes it generates should bear constant reminder that the possibility for a prolonged argument on the various competing issues of our federal system does not necessarily lend itself to overnight and impromptu solutions. As long as one can adequately preserve life as well as safeguard the objectives already achieved, and to the extent that violence is avoidable without worsening the current condition, one should view the various bridge-building mechanisms currently in place as part of a multifaceted approach to restoring confidence in the ability of the competing actors to come to a mutual understanding. Therefore, all parties must participate in a continuous process of positive adjustments framed within the context of an overarching principle of national security and territorial integrity.

Notes

1. Moshe Terdman, "Nigerian Oil 'Total War,'" *Islam in Africa Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (May 2006): 6, http://www e-prism.org/images/Islam_in_Africa_Newsletter_-_no1_-_May06.pdf.
2. Ibid.
3. Ted Gurr, "A Causal Model of Civil Strife: A Comparative Analysis Using New Indices," *American Political Science Review* 62, no. 4 (December 1968): 1104–24.

4. Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

5. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, *Greed and Grievance in Civil War*, Centre for the Study of African Economies Working Paper Series no. 160 (Oxford, UK: Centre for the Study of African Economies, 2002), 1–43.

6. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (February 2003): 75–90, http://wand.stanford.edu/courses/polisci350c/classonly/fearon_laitin2003.pdf. See also Collier and Hoeffler, *Greed and Grievance*.

7. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1970), 51.

8. Ibid., 52.

9. Ibid.

10. Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War," 88.

11. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 588.

12. See Timur Kuran, "Ethnic Dissimilation and Its International Diffusion," in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation*, ed. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 35–60; and Kuran, "Ethnic Norms and Their Transformation through Reputational Cascades," *Journal of Legal Studies* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 623–59.

13. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 94.

14. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor, 1967), 64, 66.

15. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 217.

16. Ho-Won Jeong, *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 9.

17. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity," *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 851–53, http://sobek.colorado.edu/~blimes/Fearon%20and%20Laitin%20violence.pdf.

18. Ibid., 853.

19. Ibid., 855–57.

20. Ibid., 856.

21. Kalu N. Kalu, "Strategic Fusion: What Lessons for International Counterterrorism?," *Defence Studies: The Journal of the Joint Services Command and Staff College* 9, no. 1 (2009): 133.

22. Edward Aspinall, "The Construction of Grievance: Natural Resources and Identity in a Separatist Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51 (December 2007): 951.

23. Sanjib Baruah, "Confronting Constructionism: Ending India's Naga War," *Journal of Peace Research* 40, no. 3 (May 2003): 322.

24. Ibid., 321.

25. Kristen P. Williams and Neal G. Jesse, "Resolving Nationalist Conflicts: Promoting Overlapping Identities and Pooling Sovereignty—the 1998 Northern Irish Peace Agreement," *Political Psychology* 22, no. 3 (September 2001): 575. See also Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

26. Eghosa E. Osaghae, "Explaining the Changing Patterns of Ethnic Politics in Nigeria," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 9, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 66.