



## Two Nigerian Ethnonationalist Movements: A Comparison of the OPC and MASSOB

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### Abstract

The proliferation of ethnic militia organisations in Nigeria raises questions about the factors responsible for the development. Although reasons adduced from the rhetoric of these organisations point to the politics of exclusion and marginalisation in Nigeria, this form of ethnicity is a new phenomenon. The growth of these militant formations pervading the length and breadth of the country is attributable to the nature and character of the Nigerian state. Perceptions of marginalisation in the distribution of power and resources, and the repressive tactics of the state to sub-national dissent, have encouraged their growth. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) are prominent ethnic militia groups that draw membership from major ethnic groups in southern Nigeria. Rivalry and hegemonic competition for the control of the state among the major ethnic groups led to a civil war in the late 1960s, but wartime experiences were not harnessed for a nation-building project. The result was the systematic perversion of the state, which has resulted in throwing up new forms of ethnicity in Nigeria as reflected in the emergence of these organisations.

### Introduction

The proliferation of ethnic militia organisations in Nigeria raises questions about the factors responsible for the development. Though reasons adduced from the rhetoric of these organisations point to the politics of exclusion and marginalisation in Nigeria, this form of ethnicity is a new phenomenon. The growth of these militant formations pervading the length and breadth of the

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country is attributed to the nature and character of the Nigerian state. Since its creation by British colonialists in the nineteenth century, the Nigerian state has sought to maintain control and hegemony through the use of violence. This tendency has beclouded attempts at addressing the Nigerian national question, which is the core of the festering divisive ethnicity besetting the country (Asia 2001). It became more profound during military rule when violence was unleashed on civil society groups, thus closing channels of peaceful expression of dissent in the country. The result was the transformation of civil society groups into ethnic organisations, which employed the use of violence not only to counteract the state but also to advance their objectives (Adekson 2004). The most prominent of these militia organisations include the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), which both draw their recruits from the two major ethnic groups in the southern part of the country. What are the socio-political conditions responsible for this development? This article examines this question by comparing MASSOB and the OPC.

### **The Perverse Nigerian Polity**

One striking feature of the Nigerian state is ethnic diversity, which has defined the tone of its politics (Nnoli 2008). About 250 ethnic groups and 400 linguistic groups are indigenous to Nigeria (Aluko 2007). The action of the colonialists to merge these disparate groups and cultures into one political entity created a nation-building problem for the post-independent administrations (Asia 2001). The administrative style of the colonialists compounded the problem by encouraging identity and ethnic division as a strategy for entrenching their foothold in the country. For instance, the colonial policy of indirect rule localised politics and prevented cross-cultural political interaction among the Nigerian groups, thus making suspicion the hallmark of inter-ethnic relations (Ekeh 1996). This was not helped by the nature of the colonial economy, which supplanted the self-sufficing subsistence economy and created the condition of competition for the limited job opportunities offered by the modernisation process along ethnic lines. This state of affairs engendered the emergence of communal associations as a social security fodder for the rising number of migrants who flooded into the urban centres for succour (Nnoli 2008:101–26).

These communal organisations would later become the springboard for political parties, including two of the major pre-independence parties: the Northern People's Congress (NPC), which evolved from 'Jamiyyar Mutanem Arewa', a cultural organisation dominated by the Hausa-Fulani people in 1949, and the Action Group (AG), which evolved from 'Egbe Omo Oduduwa', a cultural organisation of the Yoruba ethnic group in 1951. The emergence of these parties increased ethnic consciousness and turned the politics of decolonisation into contests for ethnic superiority. It was the rivalry and bickering between these ethnically based political parties that led to the demise of the first republic following the military coup d'état in January 1966. That intervention of the military polarised the institution along ethnic lines, as a section of the military interpreted the action of their

colleagues as ethically motivated. This created the condition for a counter coup six months later that degenerated into a civil war between the former eastern region and the rest of the country.

The civil war has been interpreted variously, both as a war of unity and an act of persecution, depending on what side of the divide the analysis belongs. One analysis sees the Biafran secessionist movement as a fight for justice, which was aborted by the superior might of the federal military government supported by foreign powers whose interests were to secure a managed condition for economic exploitation in Africa (Amadiume 2000:42–44). The remote causes of the war could be traced to events that occurred five years immediately preceding the war. Some of these events included the intense political uprisings and violence that erupted across the country. Fearon and Laitin (2006:5) recorded 124 of such instigated riots. Most of the victims of the riots were Igbo people living in the northern parts of the country where the killings were more pronounced and coordinated. The attacks were prompted by the fear of Igbo domination, especially after Major Kaduna Nzeogwu and five other majors of Igbo extraction staged a coup in which prominent northern political leaders were killed. The policies of General Aguiyi Ironsi, an Igbo who took over the reins of power, especially the promulgation of Decree 34 that attempted to abolish Nigerian federalism in place of a unitary system, heightened fear in the north. The counter coup in July 1966 that ushered in General Yakubu Gowon as the head of state turned the table in favour of the north and triggered further attacks against the Igbo in the north. Onu (2001:9) estimates that about thirty thousand easterners were killed in the north, and another 1.8 million were forced back to the east as refugees in 1967. The central government's failure to stop the pogrom or bring the perpetrators to justice sparked reprisal killings in the east and the justification of the decision of the region to secede from the federation. The declaration of the former eastern region as the Republic of Biafra was premised on the argument that the Nigerian state could not guarantee the security of the Igbo and other easterners. This was aggravated by the over-stretching of the then eastern regional government capacity to handle the massive influx of refugees displaced from other parts of the country by the pogrom and the inability of the federal military government to stop the attacks.

Guided by events of the immediate post-independence experience, military administrators who dominated governance attempted to consolidate nation-building on the bequeathed legacies of colonialism by stifling political mobilisation along ethnic lines. To achieve this, they introduced principles that combined elements of federalism and consociationalism as a panacea for Nigeria's unity. Some of these actions included the creation of states from the four it inherited in 1966 to thirty-six when Nigeria transitioned to democracy in 1999. The rationale was to weaken the federating units so as to prevent the re-occurrence of Biafra. The military also incorporated the principle of federal character in the Nigerian constitution, recognising ethnic and regional affiliation as the basis of appointments, recruitment, and promotions in federal institutions and agencies. This principle sacrifices merit and does not promote hard work and patriotism in public service (Oyovbaire 1983:19; Suberu 2001:111).

The implementation of this policy has by no means achieved the intended unity of the country, but instead worsened the structural imbalance of the Nigerian federation, activating latent centrifugal forces in places where it was hitherto dormant and adding strain on the polity (Mustapha 2007:17). This has been reflected in the many ethno-religious riots and communal clashes that washed over the entire country under the fourth democratic dispensation (Ginifer and Ismail 2005:10; Ploughshares 2004). The consequence of this inter-ethnic strife is deepening mistrust among the Nigerian ethnic groups and weakening of governmental institutions (Aluko 2007:35). These factors made the Nigerian space ripe for ethnic rivalry, abuse of human rights, mistrust of government, corruption, unemployment, and pervasive poverty, all of which feed on deep frustrations, creating divisiveness and promoting violent attitudes that have given rise to a new form of ethno-nationalism manifesting in Nigeria since the late 1990s (Duruji 2008).

### **Economic Factors and State Failure in Nigeria**

The global economic crisis of the 1980s was very significant in creating the conditions for the new form of ethno-nationalism that arose in the 1990s in Nigeria. The resultant decline in oil revenue and mismanagement of resources by unaccountable military elites plunged the country into an economic crisis that left its trail of social consequences that partly contributed to this new form of ethno-nationalism (Duruji 2010). The severity of the crisis compelled the government to implement an economic reform programme premised on stabilisation and adjustment, which was supervised by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This reform consisted of liberalisation, privatisation, deregulation, and the removal of subsidies, all of which were ideas aimed at scaling down the state's role in the economy. The effects of these policies were reflected in the collapse of local industries and the decline in the capacity of the industries that survived, including rising costs of business in vital energy and power sectors. The consequent shrinking of economic opportunities and mass unemployment created a large army of frustrated people. The socio-economic condition of this class made them vulnerable and ready tools in the hands of elites with parochial objectives.

The economic crisis signalled an expansion in criminality such as armed banditry, political assassinations, and the use of thugs during electoral contests. The inability of the Nigerian state and its persistent failure to respond to these vices forced a large section of the populace to resort to self help (Obi 2004). That, of course, shows the failure of the state as manifested in its inability to guarantee the security of its citizens. The poor performance of the Nigerian police in the maintenance of security has been attributed to a myriad of deficiencies in that institution, including recruiting, training, and budgetary problems (Bach 2006). As a result, the dependence of the people on the government for security is low, and this explains the increasing privatisation of security and widespread vigilantism at the personal and community levels, respectively (Fabiya 2004; Obasi 2002). These private security units transform into ethnic militias and quickly consolidate as champions of ethno-national interests (Obasi 2002).

The Nigerian state was originally designed by the colonialists to prop up inter-ethnic rivalries in order to promote the interests of the colonialists (Uzoigwe 1996). As such, the structure and form of the Nigerian state continue to sustain the relationship of inter-ethnic distrust and rivalry, which has transformed into dimensions where use of violence by groups challenging its legitimacy is prevalent (Duruji 2008; for an explanation of the reasons behind the predominance of the ethnic group over the state in Nigeria, see Ekeh 1996). The ethnic group that controls the state uses its power and economic resources to protect the material interests of its own people. Institutionalisation of this state of affairs promotes economic and political hierarchies, exacerbated by deliberate policies of ethnic exclusion and alienation, which make resistance inevitable. The OPC and MASSOB emerged as part of that resistance by ethnic groups asking for a fair share in the Nigerian polity.

### **The Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC)**

The OPC emerged in 1994 as a response to Ibrahim Babangida's military administration's annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election of which Moshood Abiola of the Yoruba extraction won. The annulment was interpreted by many Yoruba people as furthering an agenda of the Hausa-Fulani ruling elites to maintain their power monopoly in Nigeria (Adejumobi 2002; Faseun 2005). The annulled election, which would have completed the transition programme of the Babangida military administration, was seen as one too many by a cross-section of politicians who had suffered the same fate in the course of the long transition. Abiola, who believed he won that election, was able to deploy his financial clout to rally these politicians to vehemently oppose the annulment. The repressive response of General Babangida and later General Sani Abacha drove these elements into the trenches. The OPC therefore was created as a counterforce against an ambitious military class perceived to be furthering a Hausa-Fulani ethno-regional agenda (Babawale 2004). In Faseun's own words, the OPC was formed 'to defend, protect and promote Yoruba interests and to ensure that justice is done to other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria' (Faseun 2008).

The OPC's definition of Yoruba interests has been transformed radically from the posture at the inception of the organisation, especially since the country transitioned to democracy in 1999 when Olusegun Obasanjo, who was of Yoruba extraction, emerged as the president. Obasanjo benefited from the understanding among the elites to concede the position of president to the Yoruba ethnic group as a way of pacifying them over the injustice of the annulled election of 12 June 1993. But this notwithstanding, the OPC leaders had sustained the popularity of the organisation by refocusing it towards providing social services to its communities. Since the overwhelming membership of the organisation was part of their communities, it could respond to the problems of the people more effectively than the state (Fabiya 2004). The organisation is attested to have relative success in fighting crime. For instance, the OPC's involvement in the provision of security stems from the fact that crime is a huge concern in Yoruba land as it is for the rest of Nigeria (Alemika and Chukwuma 2005). The operational style of the OPC is the instant

liquidation of arrested criminals. This action is hinged on the perception of the police as unreliable in the prosecution of criminals (Guichaoua 2006; 2007).

The involvement of OPC members in dispute settlement has also ensured the acceptability of the group by its public. This is made possible given the hurdles encountered by ordinary Nigerians in formal processes of dispute settlement; traditional alternatives provided by the OPC thus become an easy choice. The OPC has gained tremendous legitimacy in these areas through its meticulous arbitration of landlord and tenant issues and collection of debts, among others (Okechukwu 2000). The success of the OPC has transformed the organisation into ‘an informal actor regulating Yoruba society . . . facilitated by the identity of its local leaders, who generally share many other affiliations as members of traditional secret societies called *oro* (Nolte 2004), or members of labour unions’ (Guichaoua 2006:14). Other populist activities of the OPC include defending the interests of workers who have been threatened with dismissals from their workplaces (Omole 2005), as well as the delivery of social services especially where formal state institutions have failed (Guichaoua 2006:14). Its success in these endeavours is attested to by a wide spectrum of the people, which has made the organisation relevant in post-transition Nigeria (Okechukwu 2000). Members of the OPC are recommended as vigilantes in its areas of influence, returners of stolen goods to their owners, and mediators between conflicting parties (Nolte 2004). Though prices for these services are not fixed, the beneficiaries pay depending on the social status of the parties to the transaction. The local OPC leaders see these avenues as lucrative because of the percentage that accrue to them (Faseun 2008). However, the booty that is gained from the provision of these services is not appropriated solely by the members or their immediate officers; the national body of the OPC is entitled to 10% of whatever fees are paid to these individuals (*ibid.*). These lucrative activities have kept the OPC relevant and attractive to recruits despite the fact that the issue that informed the formation of the movement was resolved in 1999 by the election of a Yoruba man to the presidency.

The instrumentalisation of the OPC by local politicians, which was alluded to by Fredrick Faseun while referring to the activities of Chief Gani Adams’ faction of the organisation, has kept the organisation relevant in the post-transition to civil rule period (Faseun 2008). Faseun’s grouse with Adams is premised on the use of the OPC as mercenaries to service the inordinate ambitions of politicians, whereas Adams accused Faseun of collecting bribes from candidate Obasanjo in exchange for the OPC’s support of his candidacy. This is contrary to the ideological disposition of the organisation for a radical restructuring of the country before the handover to a democratically elected government.

The bitter rivalry and supremacy contests between the Adams and Faseun factions of the organisation, which lasted for close to nine years, resulted in several violent clashes (Akinyele 2001). Several meetings called by prominent Yoruba leaders, including monarchs led by the Oni of Ife, to reconcile the two factions did not yield a positive outcome until Gbenda Daniels, then the governor of Ogun state, intervened in 2007 to bring some modicum of peace. He succeeded in prevailing upon Adams to recognise Faseun as the founder and leader of the organisation, while the position of national coordinator was conceded to him. The

interests shown by prominent Yoruba elites in the unity of the organisation demonstrate acceptance of the OPC. The use of the organisation as a social pressure group makes them relevant in the post-transition period. On this score, the OPC has not disappointed Yoruba elites. Its ability to intervene in political wrangling involving them at the national and local levels has been demonstrated. Examples include the dispute between Obasanjo's presidency and the National Assembly led by Senator Anyim Piuos Anyim and Representative Ghali Na'Abasi in 2003 when Obasanjo was threatened with impeachment. Another example is the political dispute between Governor Gbenga Daniel and the Ogun state House of Assembly. On both occasions, the politicians had to toe the line of the OPC.

The robust relationship between the OPC and Yoruba elites emboldens the group to stage violent actions, some of which were to defend perceived interests of the Yoruba against other groups. Such examples include OPC meddlesomeness in the Ilorin chieftaincy conflict between the Afonja and Fulani ruling families, the Sagamu inter-ethnic clash between the Yoruba and the Hausa, the Ketu-Mile 12 market disturbance between the Hausa and Yoruba, and the Apapa Warf dock workers conflict between the Igbo and Yoruba. In all of these disputes, the OPC intervened to support the Yoruba against other groups. Some of these violent actions, which led to the loss of lives and property, inadvertently helped the OPC to consolidate its support base among Yoruba-speaking people. These actions present the OPC as the liberator of the Yoruba ethnic group (Nolte 2004). The perception of the OPC as liberator overshadows the excesses of the organisation such as confrontations with security operatives, including the burning down of a police station and killing of police officers, an incident that made the former president at one point order security operatives to shoot on sight anybody that claimed to be a member of the OPC. Another aspect is the use of the name of the organisation to intimidate and extort money from gullible members of the public, a problem recognised by both Faseun (2008) and Adams (2008). The transformation of the OPC has established its viability and relevance in spite of the fact that the issue of access to the presidency by a Yoruba man has been resolved.

### **The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB)**

MASSOB was formed on 13 September 1999 to actualise the Biafran republic by Chief Ralph Uwazurike, an Indian-trained lawyer. He claimed that he went to India to study Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent approach to political struggle to avoid the replication of 1967–1970 episodes when the initial attempt to create a Biafran state failed after three years of a gruesome, catastrophic war (Uwazurike 2005). To him, a Biafran state is necessary because Igbo people are not wanted as full Nigerian citizens by other ethnic groups in the country. Uwazurike and his followers believe that the declaration of 'no victor, no vanquish' after the war and the programme of rehabilitation, reconstruction, and reconciliation (3Rs), which the administration of General Yakubu Gowon launched as a way of reintegrating the Igbo into the fold of a united Nigeria, was merely rhetorical as no concrete actions were undertaken to accomplish those objectives (Onuegbu 2008; Uwazurike 2005).

Nnaemeka Ikpeze agrees with the view that the Igbo race was treated purely as defeated foes by the military leaders who ruled Nigeria after the war, as most of them were heroes of the war who fought the Biafrans at the frontline. Marginalisation of the Igbo became the keyword throughout the dispensation of military rule, as they were deliberately disempowered politically, economically, socially, and militarily (Ikpeze 2000:90).

The clear articulation of these policies has been used wisely by Uwazurike and MASSOB activists in recruitment campaigns. However, this view is not held by people of Igbo extraction alone, as other Nigerians such as Wola Adeyemo and Douglas Oronto share this view. For instance, writing for *Tell Magazine*, Adeyemo (2004:18) posits:

Igbo land suffers neglect by the federal government, in the sense that erosion menace common in the southeast are not checked, nor federal industries sited in the area coupled with the deliberate policy of non-inclusion in the power structure of the country.

Douglas Oronto echoes this view:

If you look at Nigeria prior to the civil war, you find that the Igbo occupied the top echelons of the military, the civil service and so on. But after the war, they are no where around the cadre of leadership. It took a very long time for the Igbo to begin to demand for presidency.

(Cited in Adeyemo 2004:12)

Sentiments such as those expressed above are not only held by elderly Igbo people but have been embraced by Igbo youths who did not witness the Nigerian civil war but constitute a significant proportion of MASSOB's membership (Onu 2001). These points are articulated to sway converts into believing that the marginalisation of Igbo people in Nigeria is reflected in political power distribution and control of the allocation of materials and other resources at the centre of the three dimensions of economic strangulation, politico-bureaucratic emasculation, and military neutralisation and ostracism. Discussions in MASSOB meetings and rallies revolve around the hatred of Igbos using examples such as the £20 ceiling placed on bank lodgements for every Igbo after the war no matter how much a person had in the bank. This policy was interpreted as a calculated attempt to neutralise the savings and capacity of the Igbo to rehabilitate and reintegrate into the Nigerian economy (Amadiume 2000). The sudden withdrawal of federal troops that fought Biafran rebels from the east is also viewed with suspicion. As providing supplies to the troops could have empowered the local inhabitants, this withdrawal was interpreted as a means to deny the Igbo an opportunity for economic stimulus. The timing of the indigenisation policy of the federal government, which transferred ownership of foreign enterprises to Nigerians, also disfavoured the Igbo economically as it occurred shortly after the war during a period of acute financial constraint. This is also cited as part of the marginalisation agenda.

The deficient infrastructural development in Igbo land is cited as the reason for the mass migration of the Igbo people to other areas of the country for economic survival. This tendency results from the discrimination against Igbo land in



locating federal industries and the deprivation of the associated benefits to the area surrounding such sites. It is also connected to the deliberate neglect of ecological problems related to soil erosion, which contribute substantially to the loss of agricultural lands and settlements in Igbo land (see Ikpeze 2000).

Beside the policies that disempowered Igbo people economically, MASSOB members also express frustration about policies used to effectively exclude them from economic and political power at the centre. These include the tokenistic appointment to strategically insignificant positions, marginal presence in administrative ranks and the headship of ministerial and extra-ministerial departments and parastatals, the distortions of the federal structure to the disadvantage of the Igbo-speaking people who have the least number of states and local governments compared with those of other major tribes and zones in the country, and the indifferent response of federal authorities and even governments of other states to uphold the constitutionally inviolable natural residency and citizenry rights of original Igbo owners concerning the issue of abandoned property.

The aforementioned were issues that concerned numerous Igbo organisations prior to the return to democratic dispensation in 1999. These issues also formed the basis of MASSOB's agitation for secession of Igbo land from the rest of Nigeria. This is well captured in the words of Cletus Nwazurike (2008), a MASSOB activist:

Since the civil war, things have never been the same. We have been trying as we can to get back to our premier position in the First Republic. The Igbo are marginalised, politically, economically, and socially. The state of infrastructure in the Igbo area is in a sorry state of dilapidation, we don't have adequate representation in federal appointments.

Hopes that these issues would be redressed with the dawn of democracy encouraged massive participation of Igbo people in the transition programme that ushered in the fourth republic democratic dispensation in Nigeria. It was hoped that the openness and freedom that democracy offers would bring about efforts aimed at redressing the perceived marginalisation (Onuegbu 2008). For instance, Ralph Uwazurike, who founded MASSOB, played an active role as a member of the Obasanjo presidential campaign in 1999, and was hopeful that the civilian administration would toe a different line from those of the receded military regimes, but was surprised when the new PDP administration failed to appoint Igbo people into strategically important ministerial positions or the headship of security services (Uwazurike 2008). To him, the nonchalant attitude of both federal and state authorities to bring to justice perpetrators of the Sharia riot of 2000 in Kaduna and the Miss World riot of 2002 in Kano, was an assault on the psyche of the Igbo people who were the most seriously affected victims of the riots. This and other sentiments expressing the alienation and marginalisation of Igbo people in Nigeria constituted the bedrock upon which MASSOB was formed and sustained (for an extended articulation of these issues, see Obianyo 2007:7).

MASSOB activists have exploited these sentiments in their drive for membership and support using the strategy of persuasion and education to reach potential recruits. According to Onuegbu (2008), mobilisation of people is hinged on a

philosophy of non-violence and non-exodus to avoid replication of what happened the first time Biafra was declared. To accomplish this, MASSOB started by organising rallies, marches, and demonstrations in Lagos as a way of creating awareness before the symbolic flag hoisting ceremony on 22 May 2000 in Aba that was referred to as the re-declaration of Biafra. The event marked the first time the group openly clashed with security operatives who were awed by the huge crowd that attended. That incident was a turning point for MASSOB and the government, which had to change its perception of the group from rabble-rousers to a potential security threat.

Beside activities that were aimed at awakening the consciousness of Igbo people, MASSOB activists had internationalised the struggle and succeeded in winning international support. Topmost of these strategies was seeking support of Igbo people in the diaspora, which paid off as manifested in the number of affiliate organisations abroad such as the Biafran Actualization Forum (BAF) and the Biafran Liberation Front (BLF). MASSOB collaborated with these groups to establish a short wave radio station, 'Voice of Biafra International', based in Washington, D.C. and London; a cable television programme, 'T.V. Biafra', which broadcast every Saturday on Channel-Faith Intelcat 10; and a functional website (<http://www.biafraland.com>) that propagates the groups' activities and philosophy. The organisation has also established offices abroad with the support of these affiliates, including the Biafra House in Washington, D.C. and Senegal. The recognition of Biafra as one of the unrepresented nations in 2000 by the United Nations was achieved through a MASSOB campaign. Other international groups have cited the heavy hand of state repression against MASSOB as a reason behind such support. The Centre for World Indigenous Studies (CWIS), which recognised MASSOB and the demand for Biafra in 2006, is one such group (CWIS 2006). However, there is no open support from sovereign states even though the group has launched a Biafran international passport for its members. The arrest of Chief Ralph Uwazurike when he attempted uninvited to attend the 2001 African Union Summit of Heads of States and Government held in Cotonou attests to this lack of support.

Taking a cue from the OPC in the west, MASSOB has attempted to garner a positive public reputation through the provision of social services in Igbo land. Some of these activities include the interception of petroleum tankers headed to northern parts of the country and the distribution of such to south-easterners as a way of redressing what it perceived as injustice to the southeast where fuel products were selling above the government-prescribed official rate. Uwazurike justified MASSOB members' interception of petroleum tankers heading to the northern parts of the country on the basis of the necessity of correcting the marginalisation of the Igbo area. Those incidents, which took place at the height of the fuel scarcity in 2004, attracted the wrath of security operatives who swooped on MASSOB members perpetrating such acts.

MASSOB has also attempted to forcefully remove the National Association of Road Transport Organization (NARTO), which it sees as parasitic, from motor parks in Onitsha. The resistance put up by NARTO led to violent clashes. The anarchy that resulted in those clashes formed the basis under which the Anambra

state government prohibited both MASSOB and NARTO from operating in the state. The government had to order a deployment of a joint security task force comprising the military and police on strict instruction 'to shoot on sight' any individual that claimed membership of any of these organisations. MASSOB officials claimed that the organisation lost about seven hundred of its members in Onitsha as a result of the task force's enforcement of this order (Onuegbu 2008).

Despite its claims of non-violence, MASSOB's violent inclination was glaring during the 2006 census exercise in Nigeria. MASSOB activists who opposed the exercise in Igbo land forcefully stopped officials of the National Population Commission (NPC) from carrying out their duties. Those actions attracted the attention of security operatives who confronted MASSOB throughout the duration of that exercise.

Another provocative action of the organisation that has irked the government is the re-introduction of the former Biafran republic currencies, which were circulating nationally and internationally as a medium of exchange. The use of these monies was more pronounced with MASSOB members, who encouraged the use of the monies in business transactions. Uwazurike does not see anything illegal about the circulation of the former Biafran currencies even within the framework of the Nigerian legal system. To him, it is purely the choice of the parties transacting business to use whatever medium of exchange acceptable to them (Uwazurike 2008).

Though MASSOB appears organisationally cohesive, cracks have occasionally occurred leading to divisions in the organisation. The first sign of division appeared after the group gained national visibility in 2000 when Uche Okwukwu, its legal adviser, disagreed publicly with Uwazurike over his style of administration. Splinter groups such as the Coalition of Biafra Liberation Groups (COBLIG) and the Biafra Must Be Society (BIAMUBS) broke away from the organisation. The repressive tactics of security operatives radicalised a section of the MASSOB membership who believed that the non-violent disposition of Chief Uwazurike needed to be reconsidered. The inability to resolve that debate within MASSOB led to the formation of BIAMUBS. Beside ideological misunderstanding and differing approaches towards achieving an independent Biafran state, access to materialism, which rests on who controls the organisation, is largely responsible for these divisions. For instance, COBLIG, which comprises seven groups at home and two others in the diaspora,<sup>1</sup> accused Uwazurike of high-handedness and misuse of the organisation's resources for personal gratification, including the building of the massive edifice called the Freedom House in his hometown of Okwe, Imo state. Furthermore, they accused the Uwazurike-led group of derailing the organisation's efforts and turning into oppressors of the same people they purportedly strove to liberate (Okonkwo 2008).

### **Comparison of the OPC and MASSOB**

The inadequacies of the Nigerian state gave rise to both the OPC and MASSOB (Adejumobi 2002). Grievances against the state, which stem from the perception of marginalisation and injustice, incubated the condition for recruits into both

organisations (Awodiya 2006; Reno 1999). The structures of the two organisations are substantially similar, though there are differences in their style of organisation and strategy. The OPC is more daring and violently oriented compared to MASSOB. MASSOB employs more subtle tactics given its philosophy of non-violence, even though some of its actions are violent.

While still relatively cohesive, divisions exist in both organisations. However, the factionalisation of the OPC was much more notorious than that of MASSOB. The divisions in both organisations stem from the management and distribution of economic booty and not necessarily from ideological rhetoric often parroted by the leaders in public. The potential of opening up access to economic gains for anyone controlling either of the two organisations engendered the leadership tussle facing both organisations (Faseun 2008; Onuegbu 2008). Despite this, the rating of the two organisations in terms of cohesion remains very strong (Duruji 2009; Nolte 2004). This is attributed to the dynamism of the leadership of the two organisations. Before he founded the OPC, Dr Faseun had national leadership exposure unlike Uwazurike of MASSOB, who had neither national nor regional name recognition before he founded MASSOB except for the leadership of a social club called the Igbo Council of Chiefs in Lagos. What is common between them is the fact that the two founders were schemed out of the power equation and so the formation of the two organisations was an attempt to redefine the power configuration in the country. Faseun was a participant in the political process of the 1990s as a presidential aspirant under the Social Democratic Party (SDP) before he was banned by the military administration of General Babangida from further participation. Uwazurike, on the other hand, was a member of the Peoples Democratic Party's (PDP) presidential campaign organisation for the former president Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 but was dissatisfied with the direction of the Obasanjo administration after his victory. As such, the explanation of instrumentalists is more apt to this phenomenon of violence-oriented ethnic organisation in Nigeria as exemplified by MASSOB and the OPC.

The nature of the relationship both organisations have with their publics to some extent impacted the way the government relates to them. The solid support the OPC enjoys from both Yoruba masses and elites accounts for the government's more tolerable stance on the organisation in spite of its excesses and notoriety as compared to MASSOB, which does not enjoy support of mainstream Igbo elites and has received a more repressive response from security operatives. Faseun's background and exposure contributed significantly to create the kind of relationship the OPC had with Yoruba elites unlike MASSOB, whose leader has rebuffed attempts by some Igbo elites to repackage the organisation to serve as a social pressure group in the mould of the OPC. Furthermore, the OPC has gained footing in Yoruba land given the populist social services the organisation renders (Fabiya 2004). MASSOB's attempt at rendering social services in Igbo land has not been that effective as indicated by the clash with NARTO in Onitsha.

It is also of note that the government's repressive response against the two organisations has been counterproductive. The actions of security operatives, instead of curbing the activities of these organisations, has resulted in radicalising

them and forcing them to turn more violent as exemplified in the formation of BIAMUBS, which does not share the non-violent, non-exodus philosophy of MASSOB, and the emergence of the Chief Gani Adams faction of the OPC, which has had numerous clashes with the police. Besides that, the government is hamstrung in the use of repressive strategies given the democratic dispensation that demands adherence to rule of law and human rights, thus creating an environment that encourages both MASSOB and the OPC to thrive.

### **Conclusion**

Ethnic struggle and self-determination are creations of society. The case of Nigeria is basically fuelled by the perverted nature of the Nigerian state. The concentration of enormous power and resources at the centre leaves little room at the federating units, thus making the centre too attractive. The attraction to control the centre creates the condition of politics in which elites organised on ethnic lines compete fiercely for power at the centre. The zero-sum nature of Nigerian politics makes feelings and perceptions of marginalisation inevitable for members of the ethnic groups that are edged out of power. This forms the basis of mobilisation by the elites desperate to wrest power or retain it, which in turn generates animosity and mistrust among the general public.

Recognising this significant problem, attempts have been made to reduce these centrifugal forces through policies aimed at giving every group a sense of belonging. But instead of abating, ethno-nationalism has intensified in the country because those efforts at most are perceived as tokenistic. The unwillingness of the managers of the Nigerian state to boldly confront these issues openly through dialogue has made them seem permanent. It is rather the repressive response of the government to ethnic agitations that has given room for conflagration of ethnic grievances in the country. The non-tolerance of ethnic agitation and the use of repressive tactics has also given rise to the radicalisation of ethnic struggles as manifested in the emergence of MASSOB and the OPC.

Therefore the onus lies more with the government to mitigate this phenomenon. While less emphasis should be placed on repressive tactics in the management of ethno-nationalism, serious attention should be given to efforts at reforming the state to meet the needs of an ethnically diverse society. This can only be achieved through genuine discussion and open debate in a democratic environment.

Ethnicity and its associated complications are firmly rooted in African society. Because ethnicity is so deeply entrenched into the fabric of the Nigerian political system, any solution must accommodate the reality of ethnic relationships and identities. For this accommodation to be found there must be a constitutional review in the mould of a sovereign national conference to address the structural imbalance in the Nigerian federation and resolve issues of resource control that have continued to ferment ethno-nationalism. The present structure allows some ethnic groups to become powerful while marginalising others. It also provides elites a tool to manipulate ethnicity for parochial interests. Therefore, reformation of the state must devolve power to the communities. This will make government more accountable and encourage greater participation by individuals and civil

society groups in the political process such that ethnicity can be de-emphasised or mobilised for positive development.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> These groups are the Eastern Peoples Congress (EPC), Movement for Igbo Defence (MID), Eastern Mandate Union (EMU), Popular Front for the Development of Igbo Land (PFDIL), Biafra Liberation Group (BLG), Ohazurume Ndi Igbo (ONI), Eastern Solidarity Forum (ESF), Biafra Human Right (BHR) Germany, and Ekwenche Ndi Igbo (ENI) USA.

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