

**ETHNIC MILITIAS AND SUB-NATIONALISM IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL
STUDY OF THE MOVEMENT FOR THE ACTUALIZATION OF
SOVEREIGN STATE OF BIAFRA (MASSOB)
AND OODUA PEOPLE'S CONGRESS (OPC)**

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Abstract

The proliferation of violent oriented ethnic organizations operating outside the confines of the law as an expression of sub-nationalism has become a major trend in the country, thus constituting a threat to the survival of the state, especially the fragile democracy in Nigeria and this raises the question of factors responsible for this development. Thus the objective of this study is to examine the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Oodua People's Congress (OPC) as by-products of sub-nationalism in Nigeria. We adopted the theory of instrumentalism which is a perspective to the study of nationalism, ethnicity or sub-nationalism. We equally adopted the comparative study method and so applied comparative analysis. This implies that the focus of the study centred on the discovery of uniqueness and similarities that related to the manifestations of ethnic militia and sub-nationalism. The reason behind the adoption of the comparative method for this study were to, interrogate phenomenon of 'ethnic militias' as a consequence of sub-nationalism in Nigeria. The study showed that both MASSOB and OPC were ethnic militia organizations at various stages of development and that they emerged as an expression of sub-nationalism given the weaknesses and inability of the Nigerian state to resolve questions of citizenship, resource control, federalism and political representation. These lingering issues led to the intensification of ethnic sentiments and the politicization of ethnic cleavages. We found that the exploits of MASSOB and OPC rest on several factors among which are the ideological disposition, the socio-economic conditions and the perception of members of both organizations. The study concluded that both MASSOB and OPC are products of the contradictions and failure of the Nigerian state leading to the militarization of segments averse to the general condition of the political economy. It was therefore recommended that a reformation of the Nigerian state through the democratization of the political and economic institutions is imperative.

Keywords: Ethnic Cleavages, Instrumentalism, Militia and Sub-nationalism.

Introduction

Sub-nationalism in Nigeria is as old as the country and stems from the character of the Nigerian state which cannot be dissociated from the colonialists' role in the creation of the country. Before the intrusion of the British into what is now known as Nigeria, the various ethnic and cultural groups that make up the country existed as autonomous political entities. These entities had their own political systems, social and religious values distinct from one another (Okafor, 1997). The aim of the colonialists in bringing these entities together was purely for the exploitation of capital. To facilitate this, they

employed divide and rule tactics so as to consolidate and preserve British foothold with little interest in the social, economic or political development of the country or its people.

British colonial policies, were not tailored to foster unity among the disparate groups that constitute Nigeria; rather, it was intended to exploit the varied differences, create distrusts, suspicions and cleavages among them (Uzoigwe,1996). The entrenchment of these differences and competition among the ethnic groups to control the soul of the Nigerian state led to several violent confrontations between them prior to the country's independence. The post-

colonial regimes that succeeded the colonialists, instead of carrying out comprehensive reforms of the Nigerian state so as to reduce sub-nationalism, had largely continued the pattern of the receded colonialists (Adejumobi, 2002). These successive post-independence regimes failed to initiate far-reaching policy measures to coalesce ethnic differences into positive ventures that could create a pan Nigerian identity. Instead, most of the policies undertaken were rather aimed at suppressing ethnic consciousness and minimizing the challenge it poses to the legitimacy of the state or the authority of the incumbent regime. The result of this is the heightened hegemonic contest for power at the centre by the ethnic groups that make up Nigeria.

This competition for ethnic domination has, over the years, assumed varying forms. At one time or the other, the ethnic groups that were disadvantaged in this game had either attempted secession or had threatened to secede from the country. For instance, the attempt of the Igbo dominated former Eastern Region to transform into the Republic of Biafra between 1967 and 1970 was crushed by the Federal Government, thus consigning that ambition to history. But since the end of that war, the Igbo who used to be part of the tripod on which the Nigerian state was established has been crying of marginalization and exclusion from full integration into the Nigerian society (Nnoli, 1996). In the Niger Delta region, the minority ethnic groups perceive themselves as second class citizens of Nigeria, and have been crying out for recognition (Osaghae, 1995, Hechter, 2000). This cry for recognition preceded the country's independence, but the

Ogoni uprising of the 1990s gave impetus to the agitations in that region and, from it, other groups have taken cues. The same applies to the Yoruba where perception of injustice against the group, stemmed from the annulment of a presidential election held in June 1993, which was widely believed to have been won by a Yoruba man, Chief Moshood Abiola. The natural effect of all these developments is the emergence of groups as offshoots of these perceptions of marginalization portraying their activities as attempts to redress the marginalization of their particular ethnic groups. But the Nigerian state has been a violent institution right from inception because it has sought to maintain control and hegemony in society through violent means as exemplified by the pattern of administration of the colonial and military regimes that dominated governance for the most part of the country's history (Uzoigwe, 1996, Obi, 2004). Sub-nationalistic tendencies were therefore suppressed because peaceful agitation and popular movements were visited with official violence and repression (Uzoigwe, 1996).

Presently, the use of arms is not restricted to the state and as it is beginning to manifest in Nigeria because there is a tendency within the political society to use violence as an instrument of achieving political ends. Examples abound on how the political parties of the first and second republics recruited armed thugs as a strategy to win elections. As such, the prevalence of violent ethnic movements which now seem to be flourishing is not new, after all, as portrayed in some literature and commentaries. According to Madunagu (2000), the widespread resort to violence

by primordial groups in Nigeria as a means to achieve their ends, stemmed from the nature of politics which compels every political organization at a certain stage of its development to acquire an armed wing. Some ethnic groups take advantage of their entrenched position in the government, to deploy the national army, the police and other security operatives as armed wings to further exclusive group interests. So whether it is called youth wing of a political party or cultural association, thugs, intelligence officers or bodyguards, these militarized forms have been used directly to push for power and political objectives. The background and precursor to the militarization of some civil society organizations, sometimes referred to as ethnic militia groups, was the militarization of the state and politics in Nigeria (Udogu, 1994; Adejumobi, 2002). These varied organizations that are referred to as ethnic militias have different histories, goals and their objectives range from the motive of drawing attention to the perceived marginalization of their ethnic group, serving as social pressure to influence the structure of power to redress perceptions of marginalization of their group or the extreme goal of outright dismemberment from the Nigerian political family.

The implication of the statement above is that new forms of ethnic assertiveness have emerged. This new dimension of sub-nationalism is epitomised by ethnic movements that believe in violence as means to furthering parochial interests (Jason, 2006). The point being made here is that ethnic consciousness has escalated from simple agitation of loose ethnic associations to the level where organised violence oriented groups with the audacity to

carry arms are asking questions and demanding answers, thus directly challenging the legitimacy of the state. This development has been observed across the country. For instance, the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) founded in 1999 is an Igbo dominated ethnic movement, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) is predominant in the Yoruba area and predates the return to democracy in 1999, but became more visible thereafter in their quest for a repositioned Yoruba nation in the politics of Nigeria. In the Niger Delta, the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni Peoples (MOSOP) founded in the 1990s, sparked the formation of loose armed groups that are based in that region such as the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND). These organizations are not only struggling to call attention to the despoliation of the environment of the delta due to oil exploration, but are also demanding that a good proportion of the resources exploited from their region be retained there so as to right the wrongs of years of deprivation. Therefore, the paper aims at a comparative examination of ethnic militias as a form of sub-nationalistic expression in Nigeria. Specific cases that were examined are the MASSOB and OPC which draw their membership from two of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

We adopt the theory of instrumentalism which is a perspective to the study of nationalism, ethnicity or sub-nationalism. Instrumentalism views ethnicity as the means to some specific political end. It emphasizes on the goals

of the ethnic group and that identity is circumstantially played up to advance parochial rather than general interests of the ethnic group (Joireman, 2003:35). Instrumentalism is different from primordialism because as primordialism stresses enduring ties of ethnic group, instrumentalism stresses malleability using ethnic sentiment to affect the choices of individuals. Instrumentalists emphasize ways in which ethnicity is manipulated and used by the elites to achieve political mobilization. In this process, there is an acknowledgement of the importance of objective markers such as symbols, customs, language and appearance, but emphasis is on behaviour, meaning that an individual ethnic identity can be determined by the examinations of his actions and choices. (Joireman, 2003).

This theory sufficiently explains the role of the founders of the MASSOB and OPC movements, Ralph Uwazurike and Fredrick Faseun founders of the two organizations respectively. They had interacted with key political actors in Nigeria and were major participants in the political process who became frustrated when they were not taken into cognizance in the fallout of power equation and configuration. For instance, Faseun contested for the office of president in the Babangida's transition to civil rule programme but was banned along with 23 other contestants after the cancellation of primaries of the two political parties in 1992. He supported Chief Moshood Abiola, his ethnic brother, in the rerun but Abiola was denied victory following the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election. Cashing in on that sentiment, Faseun mobilized his ethnic folks on the plank of perceived injustice of that annulment.

Uwazurike, on the other hand, was an enthusiastic participant in the transition programme as a member of the Obasanjo campaign committee that ushered in the fourth republic.

Prior to that, he had been the leader of Igbo Council of Chiefs, a kind of a social club that is exclusively Igbo. At the end of that transition, he was not compensated by the victorious PDP government in terms of appointment or contact. Therefore, Uwazurike's formation of MASSOB is premised on personal frustration. He cashed in on the disappointment of the Igbo as a result of the failure of the presidential bids of aspirants of Igbo extraction in both the PDP and APP as well as the initial appointments of the Obasanjo administration that seemingly did not redress the long-time complaint of the Igbo. Those conditions made it easier to mobilize the Igbo given their general cry of marginalization.

Ethnic Militia Movements and Sub-nationalism in Nigeria

There is no doubt that the phenomenon of violence-oriented ethnic organizations in contemporary Nigeria has become a huge problem. One perspective views the development from the angle of militarization of the state by repressive governments while the other perspective sees it from a materialistic point of view borne out of economic frustrations. The state militarization perspective contends that ethnic militias are logical outcomes of the increased militarization of the state, especially during those many years of military dominance of politics in the country (Anugwom, 2000). Scholars who project this view anchor their argument on the fact that the Nigerian state was a product

of coercion and that this character of violence has stuck with the state because subsequent rulers in the country have always sought to maintain control and hegemony through the mechanics of violence. This culture of violence suppresses debate and open challenges of the ruling elite, thus leaving those disadvantaged by the power equation to put up countervailing ethnic resistance as the only option of response (Adeoye, 2005). Given the difficulty in creating a pan-Nigerian civil society, the easy way to match state repression with a stronger formation is to relapse into ethnic cocoons not only for protection but also as a force to defend perceived rights within the Nigerian state.

The political economy perspective tallies closely with the economic explanation of the development of violent rebel groups which are always motivated by material gains. The argument of scholars with this viewpoint is that the rise of ethnic militias in Nigeria results from a logical outcome of the frustrations brought about by the material deprivation of the people. The economic woes of the country that followed the introduction of the structural adjustment programme (SAP) and the inability of the central government, that has become much stronger as a result of military rule, to deliver economic dividends to the citizens spurred demands for devolution of powers and more autonomy to the regions as was the case prior to military era in Nigeria.

The correlation here is that those who believe that local autonomy has potentials of improving their economic wellbeing are amenable to join these violent ethnic formations which they believe shall provide the remedies to

their economic downturns (Udogu, 1994; Akinboye, 2001; Badmus, 2006). Other scholars have related this to the rapid population growth that resulted in an explosion in number of youths that could not be taken care of by an education system that had collapsed with no economic opportunity to take care of them, thus leaving a vast number of able bodied people to face harsh and difficult conditions. It is circumstances like these that expose them to a culture of marginality rooted in drugs, loose morality, violence, profanity and disrespect for social institution (Sesay et al, 2003). People in this category are the street urchins and hoodlums comprising children and youth; product of broken, collapsed or homeless families, a ready pool for ambitious politicians willing to employ them as thugs and socialise them into participating in organised violence. These politicians tend to discard these youths after elections, but the respectability acquired by these individuals in the process and the need to maintain their new lifestyle have contributed significantly in transforming them into a more cohesive militia organization most of which now hide under the banner of fighting for ethnically defined interests (Adebanwi, 2002).

Another point of view that is not quite different from the perspective discussed is taken by scholars who see the phenomenon of ethnic militia in Nigeria as cultural and inherent in the character of the Nigerian societies. Such scholars contend that a formation that either enforces laws or defends their communities has always been inexistence (Barongo, 1987; Sesay et al, 2003; Adedimeji, 2005). These formations were composed exclusively

of the members of the local community which gives them authority and credibility to operate. Such examples included the 'Agbekoyas' and the age-grade system in the western and eastern parts of the country respectively. It is this type of formations that were at the forefront of the political protests against perceived malpractices in Nigerian politics before the military intervened in 1966. The oil boom of the 1970s and the consequent economic prosperity distracted potential militant groups for some time as the improved economic condition deterred the rise of disaffected people. Some other scholars added that the traumatic civil war in Nigeria between 1967-1970 created in the people the conviction to give peace a chance. A breakdown of this peace began around the 1980s when an unprecedented increase in criminal activity due to rapid urbanization and the accompanying breakdown of traditional social structures and values as well as the decline in socio-economic fortunes of that period stimulated violence. The consequence of this, the scholars argued are the re-activation and strengthening of these militant groups by many communities in Nigeria as crime fighters.

A follow-up to this sequence was the emergence, in Nigeria, of a new type of vigilante group especially around the mid-1990s due to the rising tide of violent crime and frustrations of the citizenry with the inefficiency and corruption of institutions like the police and judiciary. The proliferations of these groups were linked to the inability of the government to protect its citizens through the instrument of the police and other security services (Sesay et al, 2003). The loss of confidence in the ability of the police to offer protection

prompted communities and neighbourhood security committees to opt for vigilante groups to either compliment or substitute them. The increased availability of illegal small and light weapons in Nigeria estimated to be in the range of 3 million is also attributed as a factor to the rise and proliferation of violent social formations. The relatively easy access to these weapons has promoted a culture of violence and emboldened disaffected groups to mount direct challenge to legitimate authorities (Udeh,2002; Akinwumi,2005). This is linked to the 20th century global phenomenon of de-nationalization of the states that have resulted in the clash of culture and development elsewhere in the world and encourages subnational units in plural societies whose inclination to violence is facilitated through easy access to small and light weapons (SALW). The lack of employment opportunities for the ever teeming school leavers and the increasing circulation of small arms and light weapons in the country were also cited as factors responsible for the phenomenon of ethnic militias in Nigeria.

The perverse Nigerian federalism which is supposed to accommodate the country's diversity has been cited by some scholars as the factor behind the rise of ethnic militias. The argument is that the effect of military rule bastardized the Nigerian federation and turned it into a unitary state. They, therefore, posit that the phenomenon of ethnic militia is a logical derivative of the process of de-federalisation of Nigeria since 1966 (Babawale, 2001). It is the over concentration of power at the centre that created the latent issues for open disaffection and discontent of the Nigerian ethnic groups. The scholars

reasoned that the emergence of ethnic militias came through a process of manipulation of ethnicity by the governing elite across the various regions of Nigeria as a means of bargaining for power. As such ethnic militia is seen by them as a consequence of the mismanagement of ethnic grievances by the Nigerian state and its agents (Anifowose, 2001; Akinboye, 2001 and Akinyele, 2001).

Related to this is the view that the opening up of the polity following the completion of the transition to democracy contributed to the emergence of militia organizations (Akinboye, 2001; Asamu, 2005). The over-centralization of power in Nigeria's federalism and the inability of the democratic administration to genuinely address the Nigerian national question also contributed to the emergence of ethnic militias as a specific response to state incapacity (Ayoade, 1986; Anugwom, 2000; Obianyo, 2007). The consensus in the literature is that ethnic militias are organizations with root in ethnicity and has been with Nigeria prior to independence. There is also that general agreement in the literature that ethnic militias in Nigeria are youth based. Drawing from the existing literature on the subject, we can assert that the generic term of ethnic militia as used in common Nigerian parlance, refers to any armed or organised groups with potential for violent tendencies based in any of Nigeria's geographical region and claiming to be fighting for and defending some common ethnic or geo-political interests whether broad or narrow.

Sub-nationalism, as a form of nationalism, is aimed at widening the degree of political autonomy of a particular region. It is a desire by a sub-

group in a plural society to achieve outright territorial autonomy within existing nation-state or to secede from that nation-state to establish a new nation (Forest, 2004). Sub-nationalism under this context, is the form of nationalism in which the state derives political legitimacy from historical, cultural or hereditary grouping. Gurr (1994) sees advocates of this form of nationalism as relatively large and regionally concentrated peoples who historically were autonomous and who have pursued separatist objectives at some time during the last half-century. Gurr cites Quebecois in Canada, the Kurds of Iraq, Turkey and Iran, as well as Bretons and Corsicans of Spain and France as examples. Nationalism is one dimension of cultural pluralism; ethnicity which is another dimension differs from nationalism in its lack of ideological elaboration of the total autonomy required of nationalism. However, ethnicity can be politicized, mobilized and ideologized to the point where it can cross the threshold of nationalism (Young, 1979).

However, there is no consensus on a singular explanatory variable as responsible for nationalist sentiment. Many scholars who study the phenomenon of nationalism have proffered many explanations for nationalism. The work of Anderson (1991) is very imperative to kick-start this exploratory venture. Anderson had attempted to establish or explain the origin of nationalism. His emphasis is on the constructed nature of culture and the role the emergence of print capitalism played in the development of nations. He argues in his study that it is through the process of modernization that national groups gained consciousness of their

common identities as a people. Scholars such as Geertz (1963), Smith (1986) and Hutcheson (1994) agree with this notion of modernization because urbanization attracts diverse peoples in a particular economic centre to vie for a means of livelihood thus creating the condition for suspicion arising out of differences. Gellner (1964) posits that the political and cultural changes that were associated with industrialization dislocated the social setting that was obtained previously under agrarian communities. The tendencies of modernization to bring people of diverse culture together in industrial cities also create the consequent need for self-security that impels people to naturally associate with others that share close affinities with them. Given the competition that goes with capitalism, these bonding that comes with this association grows into solidarity for collective survival and advancement of interests thus giving rise to nationalism.

Sub-nationalism in Nigeria and the MASSOB/OPC Movements

The frequent re-occurrence of these ethnic eruptions stems from the character of the Nigerian state which was designed to breed inter-ethnic rivalries that promote the interests of the colonialists. Independence was unable to alter this character of the Nigerian state but merely reinforced it because the texture of post-colonial politics has been characterized by domination and hegemonic context by the ethnic groups. As such, the structure and form of the Nigerian state has been sustaining this relationship of inter-ethnic distrusts and rivalry. These rivalries have transformed into dimensions where violence is used, creating the conditions for the emergence

of groups making claims and competing with the state for legitimacy (Badmus, 2006). The fact of the matter is that the group that controls the state uses its power and economic resources to protect the material interests of some members of their folks. The result is the institutionalization of the relationship, perpetually reinforced by economic and political hierarchies and exacerbated by deliberate policy of the ruling class that promotes ethnic exclusion and encourages alienation which ultimately results into resistance expressed in the form of ethnic movements.

Even though most of the ethnic-related issues listed above were spontaneous, they were orchestrated to further ethnic-related interests of the elite (Okafor, 1997). However, the trend has changed as violently oriented organized groups who reject the authority of the state and conduct their activities outside the confines of the law have become the order of the day. Some analysts such as Omeje (2005) and Adejumobi (2002), have argued that this phenomenon is a product of the long military dictatorship in the country. They argue that military rule created the condition for the emergence of organised groups to counter state violence (Omeje, 2005; Freedom House, 2007). This kind of violence exhibited by ethnic militias was a part of the reproduction of the culture of militarism implanted by the state due to the long duration of military rule in the country (Adejumobi, 2002).

The fact is that the character of the Nigerian state which was shaped by colonial overlords at inception has remained violent in orientation and has continuously sought to maintain control and hierarchy in society through the means of coercion (Adejumobi, 2002).

Governance in the country has, therefore, remained largely a dictatorship where the few controlling the reins of power make it extremely difficult for any peaceful agitation by the people. Madunagu (2000) reacting to this tendency, posits that it is the nature of politics whose ultimate form in Nigeria is the struggle for power that compels every political organisation and population movement, at a certain stage in its development, to acquire an armed detachment as a response to this culture. This argument is anchored on the fact that the colonialists utilized a militarized state to further their interests and, through the policies of divide and rule, were able to pitch the desperate groups that make up the country against themselves. The argument also goes to show that in the process of demanding for independence, the state became an arena of contests for these rival groups, in turn, making the group that captured it a mere replacement of the colonialists. The triumphant group uses the state to promote parochial interests which is detested by the others that lost out in the contests and whose only response is to turn to a militarized society or constitute a violent formation as a counter against this domination.

This phenomenon manifested in spontaneous violent eruptions in the form of riots and intermittent violent conflicts in the past as enumerated above. However, the 1990s was the era that saw the emergence of another mode of ethnicity spearheaded by violent oriented ethnic organizations that some have referred to as ethnic militias. This phenomenon was particularly helped by the pervasiveness of personal rule and high concentration of power on an individual as epitomized by the Ibrahim Babaginda and Sani Abacha military

regimes in Nigeria. Particularly, Ibrahim Babaginda who nursed a secret agenda of self-perpetuation, engaged in a political chessboard of banning, unbanning and banning politicians in the name of '*learning processes*' under his transition to civil rule programme. In that process so many decisions were taken including the cancellations of political parties' primaries and election results which frustrated the politicians and the people (Kaur, 2007).

However, the straws that could no longer be swallowed, was the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election won by a Yoruba billionaire businessman Moshood Abiola of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) who was a friend of the ruling military establishment (Faseun, 2005). The fact that he hailed from an area of the country that had spearheaded opposition politics in the country gave fillip to the opposition against that regime (Albert, 2001; Akinyele, 2001). That election has been tagged a watershed because Abiola was perceived as a symbol of change long desired by the peoples of the geographical south of the country especially the Yoruba of the southwest (Faseun, 2003). The most fundamental outcome of this brouhaha was the formation of Oodua People's Congress (OPC) by Dr Fredrick Faseun after he consulted widely with the Yoruba elite (Faseun, 2003).

In the Niger-Delta area, the emergence of militant groups calling for an end to injustice, environmental degradation and deprivation followed the same pattern of state repression (Obi, 2002). Though agitation in that region of the country, predates the era of military rule and even independence, it was the non-violent campaign led by Ken Saro

Wawa and his Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni Peoples (MOSOP) in the early 1990s that prepared the stage for militant ethnic movements in that region (Osezua, 1999; Emmanuel, 2006).

The Ogoni agitation took a violent dimension with the formation of a youth wing of MOSOP called National Youth Council of Ogoni People (NYCOP) whose activities challenged state authorities and Ogoni establishment. This violent posture contributed to the death of four Ogoni leaders who they accused of collaborating with government and led to the militarization of the area by government who had to deploy a joint police/military detachment called Internal State Security Force. Notwithstanding that Ken Saro Wiwa and some of his comrades were hanged by the Abacha military regime, the activities of MOSOP/NYCOP succeeded in stopping oil exploration in Ogoni area and attracting national and international attention to the Ogoni cause because Mr Saro Wiwa laid down a foundation of intellectual struggle, anchored on a well-articulated document called the Ogoni bill of rights (Isumoha, 2004). That document which was signed by thirty traditional rulers and eminent persons of Ogoniland on behalf of the Ogoni people and presented to the government and people of Nigeria in November 1990 was what gingered the youths into taking violent option to realize the objectives enunciated in the document (Isumoha, 2004). It was the Ogoni struggle, coupled with the organizational prowess of Ken Saro Wiwa that not only helped to awaken the entire populace of the Niger Delta to the neglect and destruction that oil exploration brought to the region but, in addition, internationalized the plight

of the Niger Delta peoples (Osaghae, 1995). As Osezua (1999) rightly observed, the advent of the phenomenon of mass protest in Nigerian politics was marked by the rise of MOSOP in their passionate demand for a fundamental restructuring of the Nigerian state.

The Ogoni revolt succeeded in forcing the multinational oil giant, Shell, to suspend operation in the area for many years (Obi, 2004). Though Ken Saro Wiwa paid the supreme price in 1995 when he was hanged by the military administration of Sani Abacha on charges of the murder of four prominent Ogoni chiefs, the flames of agitation and activism in the Niger Delta which the Ogoni struggle sparked off in the area instead of abating, rather reverberated across the Niger Delta and increased in intensity. It was this impetus that was arrived at by the Ijaw who came out with the Kaima Declaration on December 11, 1998. The issues surrounding the Kaima Declaration changed the coloration of the Niger delta struggle and took it to another level beyond where the Ogonis left it. For instance, the declaration had called for the immediate withdrawal from Ijaw land of all military forces of occupation and repression deployed to the area by the Nigerian state, warning oil companies not to employ services of the Nigerian armed forces to protect its operation; otherwise they would be viewed as enemy of the Ijaw people (Ojeifa, 2004). It demanded that oil companies stop all exploration and exploitation activities in the Ijaw area so as to put a stop to gas flaring, oil spillage, blow out, etc, that have despoiled their environment. It advised all oil company staff and contractors to withdraw from Ijaw territories by the 30th of December, 1998 (Ojeifa, 2004).

The core east or the Igbo area is not an exception; violent oriented organizations with different agendas also exist in the region and the Bakassi Boys was one typical example. The organization enjoyed patronage of state governors before the clampdown on it by the federal government shortly before the 2003 general elections which ultimately reduced its visibility (Babawale 2004: 53-56). The group initially came into the scene to fight the rising crime in Aba and Onitsha, two cities that are notorious with commerce and its success was to attract the attention of Abia and Anambra state governments which passed laws that legitimized the activities of the group. But given the limitations of the state on security matters and the increasing notoriety of the group in the run up to the 2003 general election, the federal authorities felt that there should be a stop and subsequently proscribed the organization. This proscription was followed by a clampdown on the organization that consequently reduced its visibility. But by far the most daring organization in the east, with national tentacles is the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) whose activities have been purely confrontational with security operatives. Its demand for an independent Biafran state from Nigeria is a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the Nigerian state. The group which claims a philosophy of non-violence, has since its formation, in 1999, engaged in rallies, use of uniform of former Biafran police and soldiers, hoisting separatists flags and circulating maps that show boundaries of Biafra among many other things (Bach 2004:5). The organization has also organised successful sit-at-home calls that were widely adhered to in the

Igbo area and beyond (Obi, 2004). The organization avers that their objective to actualize Biafra is hinged on the official marginalization of the Igbo in the power equation in Nigeria and the non-acceptance of the Igbo by other groups in Nigeria (Adejumobi, 2002).

According to Badmus (2006:15) even though the organization professes non-violence in its campaigns, the history of its activities had been characterized by a long trail of clashes with security operatives most of the time leading to loss of lives. For instance, the group's attempt to forcefully remove a parasitic group called the National Association of Road Transport Owners (NARTO), which was extorting money from the motor parks and markets in Onitsha resulted in a backlash, when the NARTO mobilized resistance. The consequent crisis generated by that clash was what warranted the deployment of joint police and military outfit in the town to dislodge the feuding groups. Ethnic organizations that are yet to attain the level of organizational sophistication depicted above, manifested this tendency through the texture of violence unleashed mercilessly on little provocation.

THE MASSOB

The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) was founded on the 13th of September, 1999 by Chief Ralph Uwazurike, an Indian trained lawyer based in Lagos. Uwazurike who claimed that he had gone to India to understudy Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent approach to political struggle argues that the necessity for a Biafra state stems from the perceptions that the Igbo are not accepted in Nigeria. The emergence of MASSOB is an attempt to resurrect the struggle for

self-determination waged by the Igbo of South East Nigeria that led to gruesome two and half year civil war that claimed the lives of over a million people and displaced several others. The civil war has been interpreted variously, both as a war of independence and an act of persecution, depending on what side of the divide the analysis belongs. Notwithstanding that victory, General Yakubu Gowon, the Military Head of State, declared at the end of the civil war that there was no victor, no vanquished and launched a programme of reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation (3Rs) as a way of reintegrating the south-east back into the fold of a united federal republic of Nigeria. That declaration by the victorious Federal Military government, ended up as mere rhetoric because practical reality showed otherwise. In fact, the Igbo were treated purely as defeated foes by men of powers who saw themselves as the heroes of the war and who have remained in power for a long time (Amadiume 2000). Marginalization of the Igbo became the keyword in post-war Nigeria and this was in the form of deliberate disempowerment, politically, economically, socially and militarily by those groups that wielded political power and controlled the allocation of material and other resources at the centre (Ikpeze 2000:90).

The cry that became common with the Igbo was that their people had been at the receiving end of calculated policies of marginalization since the collapse of Biafra. This view is not only held by the Igbo. For instance Adeyemo (2004:18) articulated some of the issues including neglect to check erosion menace in Igbo area, non-provision of industries in the area, combined with the deliberate policy

of non-inclusion in the power structure of the country. In MASSOB meetings, references are usually made to the Christian heritage of the people of the former Biafra republic which goes a long way to whip up sentiments on the need to resist Islamic intrusion and dominance. (Anayo, 2007). Also the notion of Igbo ancestral ties with the Jews of Middle East is promoted. These are done, sometimes, through publications which portray the present experiences of Igbo people to be similar to that which the Jews went through as a way of proving that the Igbo share the common destinies of persecution, resilience, and that God would eventually intervene on their side to actualize the dreams of secession. Though Onu (2001) has described the organization as a youthful and radical body dominated mainly by individuals from the generation of those born after the civil war, realities on ground tend not to support the view (Field work 2008). For instance, from information obtained from an interview with the Director of State Security Services in Imo State, old men in their sixties and seventies are actively involved in MASSOB's activities.

MASSOB has a closely knit hierarchical grassroots oriented organizational structure akin to shadow government. The structure of MASSOB organization consists of the national, regions, areas, provinces, districts and wards. The national is made up of the apex leadership comprising officers of MASSOB who host regular national meetings on monthly basis. Each state chapter takes turn to visit the Freedom headquarters of the group at Okwe near Okigwe in Imo state for these meetings. The next level of authority is the regions which are headed by the Regional

administrator with complement of a cabinet organised like the normal government ministerial structure. The regions comprise at least ten areas (10 Areas) and the areas headed by an area Administrator who supervises at least twenty Provinces. In between them is the Chief Provincial Administrator or zonal officer who supervises ten Provisional officers. Under the province is the District. Ten districts make up a province and the districts are headed by district officers. A strategy that was employed by MASSOB to indicate their presence in the Biafran territory was the hoisting of Biafran flags in every part of the territory the group is claiming as New Biafran republic. The hoisting of flag in strategic locations in the south-east was challenged by security operatives who often arrested members of the organization who were caught doing this and destroying such flags. MASSOB is, therefore, the intention of such action; it reminds people about the message of MASSOB and constant citing of the flags placed in strategic places sustains the consciousness of the struggle in the people. MASSOB officials are of the view that with consciousness sustained, the allegiance of the people can be switched from Nigeria to Biafra in the future as it follows through its avowed twenty-five stages of activities towards actualizing Biafra.

The Oodua People's Congress

The philosophy behind the formation of OPC is to identify with the historical and cultural origin of the Yoruba so as to relieve the glory of the Yoruba past for the purpose of posterity. Towards this end, the group intends to educate and mobilize the descendants of Oduduwa to integrate the aspirations and

values of all the descendants of Oduduwa into a collective platform of an Oodua entity. This is to be achieved through a struggle that aims to protect Yoruba interests by advancing Oodua civilization, promoting Oodua values and mores for sustainable transmission from generation to generation (HRW, 2003). Despite the fact that the aforementioned objectives were highlighted in OPC's constitution as reasons behind its formation, the peculiarities and dynamics that played out in Nigeria during the 1990s were the immediate condition that led to the formation of OPC (Guichaoua, 2006). The emergence of the OPC in 1994 was a response to the action of the Ibrahim Babangida's military administration which annulled the June 12, 1993 presidential election in which Moshood Abiola, an ethnic Yoruba, was the apparent winner. That action was interpreted by the Yoruba as calculated ethnic agenda of the Hausa-Fulani ruling elite who have dominated governance in Nigeria to perpetually control political power in the country by denying one of their own access to highest office in the land.

In addition Adejumobi (2002) stated that it was the tendency of the Babangida and Abacha regimes to go after and annihilate individuals or groups that threatened their administration that compelled marginalized elite to form OPC. Those regimes successfully dealt with civil society organizations, with cross-cultural appeal such as the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), and the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) as well as

numerous Human Rights and pro-democracy groups. The decapitulation of these organizations pushed people to recline to their ethnic cocoons as a way of seeking refuge from the onslaught that was unleashed by those regimes on pan-Nigerian grouping. The repressive character of the two regimes led to the formation of opposition organizations such as the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) that conducted most of their activities underground. As a matter of fact, the brain behind the OPC Dr Fredrick Faseun is a well-known civil right activist. Dr Fredrick Faseun was an active participant in the transition to civil rule programme of the Babangida administration and contested for the presidency under the platform of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) but joined forces with others to support the aspiration of Moshood Abiola when the process in which he was participating was halted by Babangida. Babangida had cancelled the primaries involving twenty-three presidential candidates jostling for the nomination of the two recognised political parties; the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). The military president banned all candidates from contesting again citing fraud and other flimsy excuses. It was Faseun's idea that a movement peopled by the youth who are still capable of flexing their muscle was necessary given the conditions of the time especially with an ethno-biased repressive regime targeting the Yoruba ethnic group. The tacit support he got from Beko Ramsome - Kuti who headed the Campaign for Democracy and Adekunle Ajasin, a former governor of Ondo state who was heading the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), went a long way

in making the formation of the movement that is capable of gathering large support as well as display some physical force to oppose the northern elite that control the apparatus of power in Nigeria.

The election of a Yoruba man as the president in 1999 could not stem OPC's relapse into violence which became intensified. Guichaoua (2007) explains this on two fronts; what he identifies as changes that occurred within the organization, the emergence of a new radical faction under the leadership of Gani Adams and the partial conversion of the OPC into a vigilante organization, an activity spurred by consequent opening up of economic opportunity to the members of the organization (Guichaoua, 2007). But how did this radical faction that is amenable to use of violence emerge to affect the contours or tenors of the organization? The explanation for this is not far-fetched as the main reason behind the development is the vacuum that was created as a result of Faseun's absence from the organization. The intention of the government that the organization will fizzle out in disarray and die with the detention of its founder and leader did not materialize. That incarceration rather created an avenue for other elements to rise from within the organization to fill the leadership gap. This explains how Gani Adams came into the fray to become the leader and spokesperson of the group.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that Yoruba people have long been resenting certain inadequacies of the Nigerian political system, but have nursed the hope that this resentment would be corrected with time. The annulment of the 1993 presidential election was too much for them to stomach any longer and hence the

formation of the OPC to rally for the revalidation of that election seemingly won by a Yoruba son. The immediate concern of Dr Faseun was to establish a grassroots Yoruba organization strong enough to challenge the military controlled by the elites of the north. Two important strategies were paramount: sell the idea to influential individuals leading grassroots organization as a springboard to reach the Yoruba masses as well as cultivate the blessing of Yoruba elite because their support is vital if the idea is to become a success. And so the idea of a strong Yoruba organization that can stand up against the military resonated among Yoruba elite because of the highhanded and repressive disposition of the Abacha regime. Faseun's idea of OPC was accepted by the three grassroots mobilisers who had previously worked with him during the days he was the chairman of the defunct Nigerian Labour Party (NLP). They included Mrs Idowu Adebowale; a market women leader, Alhaji Ibrahim known as Baba Oja, leader of market men, and a retired soldier known as Baba Taiwo (Faseun 2008).

According to Faseun, after the initial meeting with these people, they mandated each other to ensure that they brought converts to the following meeting of the group. With these people in the group, the next task was to obtain the support of Yoruba elite which Faseun passionately pursued, consulting people like Chief Michael Ajasin; former governor of Ondo State and chairman of National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) the frontline organization fighting for the revalidation of June 12, 1993 election and leader of a Yoruba socio-cultural organization called 'Afenifere', Chief Anthony Enahoro, a

septuagenarian nationalist who was the Deputy chairman of NADECO as well as the former governor of Oyo state, Chief Bola Ige, one of the influential Yoruba politicians. Once the support of these personalities was obtained, the task of recruitment became easier. The organizations' immediate objective was, therefore, the revalidation of June 12, 1993 election which would mean the release of Moshood Abiola who was incarcerated and a convocation of Sovereign National Conference (SNC) that would negotiate a new future for the Nigerian state in which the former autonomy previously enjoyed by the regions but bastardised by the military unification and centralization of power should be reversed. Apart from intervening in communal clashes in the southwest area, OPC has several times issued warnings of wading into religious disturbances that occur in the northern part of the country, warning of retaliation if Yoruba people are sacrificed. For instance, the OPC articulated its stand on the sharia crisis that engulfed some areas in the north in 2000 to 2001.

MASSOB AND OPC

The clashes between MASSOB and OPC with security operatives establish the two organizations as ones that operated outside the confines of the law. This implies that the two organizations are of high risk in the sense that the members are vulnerable to harassment, arrest, detention and even death. This fact should give pause to individuals during consideration to join the organizations. Yet they still join in high numbers if we are to believe Faseun who said OPC is over six million and Onuegbu who claimed MASSOB has over fifteen million members (Faseun

2008).

Apart from the fact that the members of these organizations, going by the survey, are relatively educated, a high percentage of positive responses show that majority of them are engaged in occupational activities that guarantee their livelihood. That is to say, they are not jobless, though a further probe into the type of occupation, reveals that the argument is limited in the sense that the membership of the two organizations may not be extremely deprived economically, but they are not excluded from the typical economic vulnerability inherent in informal sector activities where large chunk of our respondents operate. Both MASSOB and OPC are mass based organizations with membership cutting across the length and breadth of Nigeria and abroad (Faseun, 2008). The leaders claimed that MASSOB membership in terms of those who have obtained their identity card is over fifteen million. There is no way of verifying these claims given the nature of the two organizations, but going by the activities of the two, such claim may not be too exaggerated. The question that comes to mind is how these huge numbers of individuals were attracted into these organizations and what are the factors sustaining their continued membership in the light of obvious risks that attend to identification with such organizations? Is it the same factors that are motivating membership in the two organizations?

Our explanation for this, based on the information available from this study, shows overwhelmingly that grievance against the Nigerian state are very high among Nigerians. There is the feeling of injustice and marginalization by the Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups. This

makes it much easier to mobilize people on primordial basis which was what Faseun and Uwazurike exploited.

Summary

This study examined the phenomenon of ethnic militia and sub-nationalism in Nigeria by undertaking a comparative analysis of Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Odua People's Congress (OPC). This became necessary because of the preponderance of violence-oriented ethnic organizations and the centrifugal nature of their activities that impact negatively on the course of nation-building in Nigeria. The study focused on ethnic militia as a weapon of sub-nationalism using the specific cases of MASSOB and OPC, two ethnic organizations from two of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The study attempted to find out if these organizations are spontaneous developments in the political system or isolated cases emanating from different circumstances. In this regard, attention was given to efforts at discovering the factors that contributed to the emergence of the organizations.

Findings

1. One striking finding of this study shows that MASSOB and OPC were manifestations of sub-nationalism that emanated from the unattended issues surrounding Nigeria's national question. These issues include citizenship, representation, resource control and allocation as well as access to and use of power in Nigeria. The members see the Nigerian state as unjust and oppressive. This attitude makes it easier for the elite to instrumentalize ethnic publics for the advancement of parochial interests.

2. Another finding of the study shows that both MASSOB and OPC by

their nature, character and activities possess attributes of militia organization. For instance, both organizations lacked such attributes like absolute control of safe haven territory and training camps or training module on use of arms.

3. The study also revealed that both OPC and MASSOB enjoy some level of acceptance among the Yoruba and Igbo publics respectively even though the degree of support varies significantly between the two organizations.

4. Another finding from the study shows that ideological consideration is very paramount as a major motive of enlistment into MASSOB and OPC even though we cannot completely dismiss economic rationale because a large chunk of MASSOB and OPC members operate at the informal sector of the economy which has witnessed tremendous growth as a result of the economic recession in Nigeria since the early 1980s.

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, the Nigerian state is a creation of violence and since inception has been held together via violent means. This is typified by the character of colonial and military administrations which had together dominated greater proportion of the country's political life. An aspect that complemented the violent hold of the country is the tactics of playing up the diversity of the country by pitching one ethnic group against another as a strategy of regime entrenchment, tactics used by both colonial and military administrations to hold on to power.

This style of administration, of course awakened ethnic consciousness giving rise to inter-ethnic suspicions and distrusts among Nigerians. This tendency has been visible in the country's political process in the sense that politics is clouded by rival ethnic competition for

hegemony. That rival hegemonic competition that took ethno-regional lines during the process of decolonization eventually degenerated into a civil war shortly after independence.

One thing that can, however not be taken away is the fact that OPC and MASSOB are developments that emerged from the dynamics of the Nigerian political processes. As such, the study achieved its objective that examined how the organization emerged as a new form of sub-nationalism in Nigeria. It was the contradictions of the Nigerian political system where politics has been defined in the line of ethnic connotation thus constituting the breeding ground for rhetorics of sub nationalism to thrive. Issues relating to the national question were not addressed by the ruling elite in Nigeria. This is what has directly led to the emergence of these organizations, if there were no issues of June 12 presidential election annulment in Nigeria, the OPC would have probably not been formed, neither would MASSOB. if the project of the three R's (Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction) declared by the military government of General Yakubu Gowon in 1970 were sincerely carried out in a way that fully re-integrated the Igbo back into the Nigerian society as equal stakeholders.

Recommendations

The prevalence of violence-oriented ethnic organizations in Nigeria is rooted in the Nigerian national question. Towards this end, the government must change its high-handed approach to management of ethnicity. The government has to strategize away from containing and repressing these

manifestations to positive engagement of the groups in open discussion and dialogues.

As such, there is a need for the federal government to convene a forum for national dialogue where nationality groups and other interests groups in the Nigerian society would meet to meaningfully express their feelings about the Nigerian state and discuss their ideas on how the country can move forward. For the survival of the state, it is imperative for the federal government to embark on the process of ethnic reconciliation in Nigeria as a way of correcting the discord, suspicion and hatred that had root in colonialism.

To create the condition for unity and stability, necessary for the socio-political and economic development of the country, the government should establish Centres for Ethnic Studies in at least six universities spread across the country's geographical zones. The centre will serve as a repository of learning and education in ethnic matters for policy makers and government officials.

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