

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Social inequity, democratic transition and the Igbo nationalism resurgence in Nigeria**

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**Between 1960 and 2008 Nigeria has been characterized by social inequities in the distribution of power and resources. These inequities, which are rooted in the foundation of the Nigerian state led to a civil war in 1967 in which the Igbo, one of the major ethnic groups sought to secede from Nigeria. But, the attempt was not successful. The war was followed by a number of systematic and calculated policies, which the victors used to keep the Igbo people down and to hegemonise their grip of political domination of Nigeria for a long time in both the Nigerian military and civilian rules. The widened democratic space in 1999 gave rise to a renewed expression of resentment by Igbo youths whose rejection of their post-war socio-political and economic repressions have sparked off the emergence of youth based movements. Thus, nationalism resurgence is manifested in the renewed demand for Biafra by these organizations. They elicited responses from the democratic government, which seemed to have relapsed to the old order of military style of violent repression of dissension that end up as counter productive. Through the processing of primary data, this paper examines the reinvention of Igbo nationalism in eastern Nigeria. The paper looks at its linkage with the 1999 democratic transition in Nigeria, the implications of this development and the management of the issue by the government.**

**The paper concludes that the resurgence of nationalism is caused by the people's perception of social inequities and injustice in the distribution of power and resources. Hence a deliberate effort to correct these social problems assuages ethnic tensions and presumptions of political violence.**

**Keywords:** Igbo Nationalism, Nigerian Politics, Marginalization, Biafra

## **INTRODUCTION**

Deep rooted ethnic grievances and rivalry among the major Nigerian ethnic groups had accompanied the politics of decolonization, culminating in the first attempt at Igbo ethno-nationalism expressed in the declaration of the Biafran Republic in 1967. This attempt at secession was crushed by the Nigerian state after a cruel three year war that resulted in the loss of over one million lives and displacement of many others in eastern Nigeria. The end of the war was followed by deliberate social, political and economic policies aimed at reducing the capacity of the Igbo people to challenge the state or the dominance of the victorious groups.

These policies of marginalization were efficiently and effectively carried out through the autocratic military regimes that dominated Nigerian politics for the greater proportion of its post-war history that spanned between 1970 till 1999. The transition into a democratic dispensation has coincided with the emergence of a post-war

Igbo generation who do not accept the professed marginalization of the Igbos in Nigeria. The manifestation is seen in the number of groups and movements that have emerged to demand for the resuscitation of the defunct Biafran state as a panacea to the alienation of the Igbos in the Nigerian polity. This new Igbo nationalism like any other nationalism is a politicized ethnicity, which often develops when an ethnic group manifests a political agenda (Joireman, 2003). For Hobsbawm (1990), nationalism comes before nation, in the sense that an ethnic group must be somehow politically mobilized before it becomes a nation. The political mobilization occurs in the form of some sort of recognized collective objectives as perceived by an ethnic group that feels marginalized in a heterogeneous society. Joireman (2003) had argued that nationalism is intensified by the politics of exclusion. So any time a group of people in a multi-national polity feel particularly targeted for ill-treatment or oppression, there

is the likelihood that their identification will turn from ethnic to national identity as it becomes politicized. When a group in a society is marked out for unequal treatment, either economically or politically, then the boundaries of that group become clearly defined.

The origin of Igbo nationalism started with the quest for an independent Biafran state which extends back to four decades ago. That quest can be aptly situated in the politics of decolonization in Nigeria that saw to a gradual constitutional evolution by relatively orderly processes of conferences and negotiations, culminating in the independence of Nigeria from British colonialism in 1960.

The hiccups that were associated with these processes, gave rise to the structure of constitutional agreements that collapsed shortly after independence following a military coup in January 1966; the army was broken into regional groups after a counter coup in July of same year thus precipitating series of actions and events before the outbreak of the civil war. At this point citizens of the former Eastern region origin had fled from the rest of the country during a series of massacre known as pogrom in Nigeria that produced a migration of hundreds of thousands of persons as never witnessed in the country before. As Nixon (1972) noted, the central government lost its effective authority over the Eastern region and following a breakdown of the orderly process of negotiations, the Eastern region sought its own security and survival by declaring its independence shortly after which the central government sought to re-establish its authority in the area by military action. The result is the bitter war that lasted for almost three years and with over a million casualties from military action, disease and starvation. The conflict was ended with the collapse of Biafra in January 1970, as the immediate issues of the war were resolved in favor of Nigeria under the Federal Military Government that subsequently declared the war as no victor, no vanquished. The re-entry of the former Biafrans, dominantly of the Igbo ethnic group into the Nigerian society was phenomenal in the annals of group integration. This was the situation, until the emergence of MASSOB in 1999 re-opening the issue of Biafra and working towards its actualization. For a better understanding of the genesis of Igbo nationalism, it is imperative to highlight graphic details of the events that have led to the present situation under discussion. Nixon (1972) had chronicled the distinctive circumstances that led to the first declaration of Biafra in May 1967. According to him, the Biafran claim to independence began in May 1966, following a series of attacks targeted against peoples of Eastern region living in the north of Nigeria. The attacks were followed by the coup of 29 July 1966, during which Nigerian troops of northern origin systematically killed about 240 southern officers and men, of whom at least three quarters were easterners and leading to the emergence of Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon as the Supreme Commander to replace General Aguiyi Ironsi, an ethnic Igbo affected by the mutiny. The action destroy-

ed. This action destroyed the Nigerian army as an effective agent of Nigerian unity as well as the unity of the command because Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, who was the Military Governor of the Eastern Region, did not recognize Gowon as the rightful person to assume the position of supreme commander.

The subsequent massacre of citizens of the Eastern region in the north, starting again in September 1966 and the mass migration back to the east that ensued widened the rupture in national unity. It was at this point that issues such as problems of refugees, economic support of displaced persons and intensified fears of citizens of the Eastern region for their personal safety combined to escalate the tension between the Eastern region and central government.

Nixon (1972) remarks that none of the series of efforts to find a peaceful basis for renewed cooperation between the Eastern region and the center yielded fruit, but it was rather series of unilateral moves in areas of economic and political relations by both the East and the center that worsened the conflict until the Eastern region transformed into Biafran Republic by proclaiming its independence on 30 May 1967. In a bid to stop this secessionist move, the central government opened a military action against the East on July 5, 1967. This action was prolonged till 15 January 1970 when the resistance by the Biafran rebels caved in leading to victory for the unity of Nigeria. The victory created the condition for the re-absorption of the citizens of the defunct Biafra into the Nigerian society as Nigerians, rendering the quest for Biafra completely a forgotten matter amidst for the time being. This re-entry came with assurances of the victorious federal side that the war ended in a no victor, no vanquished designation, but post-war events indicate that the former Biafrans particularly the dominant Igbo ethnic group were reabsorbed into Nigeria as conquered people (Amadiume, 2000).

It was this scenario that created conditions for the cries of marginalization by the Igbos, in their struggle for full insertion into the post-war Nigerian society. Onu (2003) notes that the resurgence of Igbo nationalism which is spearheaded by MASSOB, a youthful and radical organization of succeeding generations of Igbo who fought the civil war, is a result of their frustration in the Nigerian entity and perception that the existing political structure that seeming consign the Igbos to a lower status than it deserves vis-à-vis other groups is illegitimate. Several documented facts supports this view, no wonder the cries of marginalization have been loudest from them. Ikpeze (2000) in an attempt to establish that the Igbos in post-war Nigeria were marginalized, articulated four clear dimensions this marginalization has manifested; economic strangulation, politico-bureaucratic emasculation, military neutralization and ostracism.

Some of the issues that readily come to mind include the 20 pounds ceiling placed on bank lodgments for every Igbo after the war no matter how much such per-

sons had in banks. This has been interpreted as a calculated policy to neutralize the savings and capacity of the Igbos to rehabilitate and re-integrate into the Nigerian economy (Ikpeze, 2000; Ojukwu, 2005). Related to this is the sudden withdrawal of federal troops from the east, a ploy that was aimed at denying the Igbo economy the stimulus for recovery as Igbo people who could have been empowered as suppliers to the troops were denied the opportunity. Also was the timing of the indigenization policy which came shortly after the war when the Igbos were financially constrained to participate, thereby incapacitating the Igbos economically. Of note in post-war Igbo marginalization was the deficient infrastructural development in their homeland resulting in the mass migration of the Igbos to other areas of the country for economic survival. There were also cases of discrimination against the Igbos in the location of industries and the attendant loss of benefits of linkages that come from such locations. Also of mention, was the deliberate neglect of ecological problems in the east, especially the problem of soil erosion that results in loss of agricultural lands and settlements. The ecological devastation becomes obvious in relative terms when compared with the massive attention given to desertification in the north and beach erosion in the western parts of Nigeria (Ikpeze, 2000). Apart from these policies that economically disempowered the Igbos, other instruments were also used to effectively exclude them from economic and political power at the centre. Such include the 'tokenist' appointments to strategically insignificant positions in administrations, marginal presence in the administrative and headship of ministerial and extra-ministerial departments and parastatals. Also of note is the distortions of the federal structure to the disadvantage of the Igbos, such that the zone has the least number of states and local governments compared to the other major tribes, implying smaller resources and representation, because number of states and local government areas are the main basis for resource allocation and representation at the federal level.

Furthermore, the indifferent response of the federal authorities and even governments of other states to uphold the constitutionally inviolable natural residency and citizenship rights of original Igbo owners as far as the issue of 'abandoned property' of the Igbos who fled the pogrom and war is also mentioned. Aware of the role Nigerian military officers of Igbo extraction played in the Biafran armed forces, there was a policy to ensure under representation of the Igbos in the military. Re-absorption after the war was negligible, for the few that were reabsorbed, rate of upward mobility were very slow aimed at preventing resurgence of the Igbos militarily. Related to this is the virtual exclusion of Igbo land from highest sensitive military facilities of such important installation as mechanized division or armories. The predicament of post-war Igbo in Nigeria is a perception that is widely held by members of the ethnic group and its capacity to culminate into negative reactions may have been bottled up due to

the hold on to power by the military.

For close to thirty years after that war, the major pre-occupation of the Igbos was how to be fully reintegrated into the Nigerian society and possibly attain the pre-eminent position as a power bloc which the people had tried to construct prior to the war and thus end the cry of marginalization (Igbokwe, 2005). However, all through this period, there were no recognizable groups that have agitated for the resuscitation of the Biafran Republic as it seemed a forgotten affair publicly. After the war till 1990s, the major public discourse centered on how the Igbos, the major ethnic group in the Biafran rebellion could be accepted back fully as participants in Nigerian political process. But democratic transition in 1999 seems to have created the space for the renewed expression of Igbo nationalism as it marked the beginning of emergence into the scene of organizations and movements calling for the resuscitation of the defunct Biafran Republic. Generated from the above are some pertinent questions; why is there a renewed demand for Biafra, thirty-years after a similar move was crushed? Who are the people behind the organizations spearheading these agitations? How much do they know about the war that was fought in the past and what are the impacts of memories of the former war in this new demand? Does this renewed agitation have solid social bases or is it a ploy by Igbo elites to achieve a greater stake in Nigerian politics? All these form the major thrust of this paper in an attempt to create insights into political imbalances in Nigeria that has remained a major crises of Nigerian development since the 1960's.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data is derived from fieldwork conducted in the eastern part of Nigeria among the categories of participants. Five focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted in Aba and Onitsha towns. These towns are two major commercial centers in Igbo society of eastern Nigeria and serve as the heartbeats for the renewed demand for Biafra. Both are cosmopolitan cities, where Igbo of every dialect are found. Specifically, Aba was the city chosen by the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), to re-launch Biafra on 22 May 2000 and Onitsha has clearly emerged as the most notorious for the violent activities in the quest for the revitalization of Biafra. These groups were homogeneously male. The reason for this choice is found in Morgan (1997) who had argued that young males spend most of their time interacting with other young males. The intention is for us to capture everyday social dynamics of opinion formation as David and Sutton (2004) remarks, that it helps in the study of consensus formation and pressure to conform as a way to determine why individuals buy into an idea and why they enrol into group action.

The other focus groups were the elders groups which were chosen in Owerri. The reason being that Owerri is a town which is central in Igbo land; it was where the battle of control was most intense during the Nigeria-Biafran war of 1967 - 1970. It is also a city where the Biafran rebels surrendered to the Federal troops, which effectively ended the war. The purpose for this is to get the perspective of this category of Igbo population who witnessed the the first Igbo nationalism and the consequences of that action. We also hope to get the impact of memories of the war on the present

conflict, how they relieved the stories to their children and how their post-war experiences relate to the present activities to resuscitate Biafra. The elders group was homogeneously male. The women group, which was also chosen in Owerri comprised of women of varying ages.

The objective of constituting this group was to get the perspective and experiences of the women who together with children are always the vulnerable group that suffers severely during conflict or violence that is often associated with violent activities of nationalism. The last focus group was a mixed panel, made up of Nigerians from diverse ethnic backgrounds and diverse ages but dominantly youths. This group was constituted in Lagos. Lagos was chosen because it is the commercial nerve centre of Nigeria and the most cosmopolitan city where almost every ethnic group that make up Nigeria is represented. A city with a large concentration of Igbo population, it was in Lagos that Chief Ralph Uwazurike and his band of MASSOB members started the campaign for the revamping of Biafra. The purpose for constituting this group is because the demand for Biafra has implications for the Igbos living outside of Igbo land, as well as other Nigerians, who have been co-habiting with the Igbos since the creation of Nigeria by British colonialism. The intension was to gauge the views of other tribes and the Igbos outside of their homeland on this issue of a Biafran state.

The numbers of these FGD panels are ten. The decision for this was anchored on Morgan (1997) who suggested that in the conduct of social research, groups of between 6 and 10 people work best.

Fieldwork data also included information from key informant interviews (KII) with some major actors of this Igbo nationalism resting in call for a Biafran state. Interviewed were four MASSOB activists who hold important positions in the organization even though it was extremely difficult to get the interview as that period was at the height of a clamp down on the group by state security operatives following intense violence associated with the group in some major towns in south-east Nigeria.

Notwithstanding, the activists who hold various positions within the organization, including a leader of "Biafran traditional rulers" who is active in the group, an administrator of a MASSOB district in Imo state, a member of the mobilization committee of the organization and another member of the organization agreed to the interviews.

Also interviewed were security operatives including the director of the State Security Service (SSS) in Imo state and the police prosecution officer in Awka, Anambra state even though it was extremely difficult as this people were very cautious in volunteering information on the subject.

Desire to interview the governors of Imo and Anambra states were frustrated, but a key officer in the Anambra state government gave certain information on the position of the government on the activities of MASSOB in the state. The purpose was to gauge their views on this issue of Igbo nationalism resurgence and the activities of groups like MASSOB, as well as to get their perceptions on the issue of marginalization of the Igbos in Nigeria and what the government is doing or has done to correct it.

Two community leaders were also interviewed. They included the paramount ruler of Okwe community, where the leader of MASSOB, Chief Ralph Uwazurike hails from and where the Freedom House headquarters of the group is situated and the Eze of Owerri, who participated in the first war on the Biafran side and whose uncle, then the Eze, witnessed the surrender by the Biafran rebels.

The traditional ruler was also chosen because his domain, as the capital of Imo state where violent activities attributed to groups agitating for Biafra has been recorded, has a population that is representative of the state.

This interview forms were one-off type and unstructured. The reason for this is to be more in-depth and also to allow the interviewees room to fully express themselves. As David and Sutton (2004) had argued, the unstructured interview lets the interviewee tell their story and so determine to some extent the flow of the dia-

logue

This notwithstanding, the interviews revolved around the key theme as expressed in the research questions.

The key informant interviews and FGD's were recorded and transcribed. Some were conducted in Igbo language and all translations were done by the principal researcher. Apart from the data derived from the above mentioned sources, the paper also relied heavily on secondary sources from literature surveys of books, reports of daily newspapers and magazines and periodicals that were constantly updated. Conference papers, television programmes and internet sources were also combined to provide materials used in the discussion of findings, presented in narratives below.

## RESULTS

### **Igbo nationalism resurgence and democratic dispensation of post-1999**

The resurgence of Igbo nationalism expressed in the renewed demand for Biafra is connected with the democratic transition that occurred in Nigeria in 1999. Whereas imperative of security of the Igbo people led to the first attempt at the declaration of the Republic of Biafra in 1967, the renewed demand for Biafra has to do with the perceived marginalization of the Igbos since the end of the civil war. According to Nixon (1972), the proclamation of the Republic of Biafra on 30th May, 1967 reflected a number of convictions held by eastern leaders on the basis of which they felt secession was a legitimate and necessary action. These included the belief that the security of their lives and property could not be maintained if they were subjected to the Nigerian government as it was then constituted. They also believed that the orderly processes of negotiation aimed at the re-establishment of a workable pattern of political relationships between the eastern region and the rest of the country had been effectively frustrated by the central government and could not practically be resumed. There was also the feeling that secession was widely recognized throughout Nigeria as a politically legitimate step and would be acquiesced in if not actually supported and/or imitated by the rest of Nigeria. And of course the 1967 secession was significantly premised on the Igbo's belief that the move to independence had an overwhelming popular support in the Eastern region.

So, security imperative was very paramount and the main determining factor for the declaration of Biafra at that time. But the resurgence of Igbo nationalism of the twenty-first century mainly revolved around the issue of non-full insertion of the Igbos into the Nigerian society, a perception widely held by many Igbo. The issue of marginalization is what the Igbos had hoped would be mitigated by an inclusive democratic government, knowing the nature and character of such a government as differentiated from an authoritarian regime. Marginalization in this context implies that the Igbos, compared with other major ethnic groups that make up Nigeria, are not getting a fair deal especially since the end of the Nigerian-Biafran war.

There is the belief that a widened political space that

produces an accountable government, which obtains its mandate from the people is better placed and obligated to address issues that concern the people and in the case of the Igbos, redressing the perceived marginalization. Following this belief, the Igbos enthusiastically participated in all the opportunities provided in Nigeria during the processes of democratization to enable them to fully insert into the Nigerian society as equal partners with other ethnic groups. This expectation was not satisfied by the initial action of the elected democratic government in its appointment. And for Uwazurike, its failure to appoint an Igbo to any of the security apparatuses of the state was the catalyst he needed to commence a long held life ambition that relates to his personal experience during the Nigerian-Biafran war of 1967 - 1970 (Uwazurike, 2004). Elsewhere Ajayi and Duruji (2008) had argued that the Igbos were enthusiastic participants in the political transition that ushered in the fourth republic in Nigeria in 1999, because to them, the opportunity of the openness and freedom which democracy offers would lead to efforts aimed at redressing the marginalization of the group. Chief Ralph Uwazurike, the founder of the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) was one of such optimists, who was very active in the Obasanjo presidential campaign of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and so expected recognition by way of juicy appointments for his ethnic group. According to Uwazurike, MASSOB was formed because of his convictions, which included what he calls an assault on the psyche of the Igbos after the war in the manner of distribution of federal appointments and projects and that Igbo people have remained easy targets for riots and disturbances in many parts of country. The issues of marginalization resonated frequently in many interview responses but Eze Njemanze brought it out lucidly. Firstly he stated that the recent development where some groups agitate for the resuscitation of Biafra was not a similar event to those of 1967 - 1970 when a state called Biafra existed in its true sense. He argued that the war that occurred at that time was an accident of time which ought not have happened if Nigerians had had the understanding of today. His argument is anchored on the fact that Nigerians of today seem to have resolved individually and collectively to live together notwithstanding the provocations that would have warranted a repeat of the events of 1967 - 1970. To him the manner of the Biafran surrender which was devoid of a negotiated settlement and the perception held by the Federal Military government as victors is a major factor to the dynamics of post-war Nigeria. He speaks thus; "if the Nigerians of that time were as civilized, educated and broadminded as those of today; if the Nigerians of today who feel for oneness were in the 1960's and feel the need to be together and have respect for each other as we have today, there would not have been a shooting war, because a lot of things have happened that could have triggered a similar situation but somehow, these things had been re-

solved. If former Biafrans, who are now Nigerians and the other Nigerians, had embraced each other, there would not have been any need for these recent developments". Impliedly the resurgence of Igbo nationalism is related to the absence of dialogue, an important element that accompanies the end of a war. According to Njemanze, a dialogue is that instrument that would have brought together the belligerents to a discussion table where salient issues on how former combatants and enemies are to co-habit could be negotiated and agreed amicably. For instance, the issue of what to do with the combatants on the side of Biafra did not take place as it is the practice the world over where a conflict of that magnitude has occurred. That opportunity was lost when the scheduled meeting at Lisbon could not take place, a loss of an opportunity which could have brought in a third party to mediate a conditional surrender. The point argued here is that the surrender of Biafra happened suddenly when the federal troops became stronger than they were for the most period of the war (Biafra no hiding place). As such, the article of surrender which was signed by the leaders of Biafra was a one-sided affair that created the imbalance which reflected soon after the war and have continued up to the present in the marginalization of the Igbos in Nigeria. What resulted from this imbalanced situation is referred to by Eze Njemanze as emanating out of bad faith on the part of the victorious federal government were some immediate actions that were not reconcilable with their avowed post-war objective of reconciliation and ensuring the unity of Nigeria. One of such action of bad faith was the dismissal from service of all Nigerian army officers who were above the rank of captain that fought on the Biafran side, a group of people that are reabsorbed into the army to ensure unity and prevent insurgency in other parts of the world where a similar nature of conflict occurs. The policy on bank lodgements where former Biafrans were given a blanket £20 (twenty pounds) of their money lodged in the banks before the outbreak of the war no matter how much it was is another action in bad faith. He believed it was done to kill the spirit of the people for their perceived support of the rebels. "These actions make it seem to an observer that the war which Nigeria waged on Biafra was not fought to bring them back as citizens but as hewers of wood and drawers of water". The 3R's (reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction) which General Gowon declared at the end of the war, aimed at integrating the former Biafrans into Nigeria and rebuilding the war affected zones in Igbo land, ended up as rhetorical or at best incomplete. According to Eze Njemanze, it was only reconciliation that was achieved as events showed; "Shortly after the war, ordinary Nigerians went about their normal lives and people who fled either from or to the war zone returned to where they fled from to continue their normal lives. However, rehabilitation was incomplete, people who fled to the war area abandoning their work and businesses were not rehabilitated, the combatants

and wounded on the Biafran side were not rehabilitated, and even those who were dismissed from services were not rehabilitated. Again the reconstruction of the war affected zone in terms of infrastructure destroyed during the war was not rebuilt. The worst aspect of it is that the punishment for engaging in the war was not limited to the combatants but when properly analyzed was directed at the populace through the deliberate policies of marginalization and this fact is what has created the condition for the flowering of this recent phenomenon”.

This is best explained in this way. The development that points to the fact that the ordinary civilian did not support the shooting war as noted by Eze Njemanze, was the fact that former Biafrans within 24 h of the end of that war, returned from where they fled and were welcomed by other Nigerians. In the north, rents that accrued to the Igbo landlords were paid to them by their tenants. Insurgent activities that are normal with that kind of conflict especially when an opposing side capitulates in an unconditional surrender as was the case with Biafra, was not reported anywhere, which showed that the people did not support the war, as such punishment should not have been directed at them.

Therefore a strong argument to demonstrate that the renewed demand for Biafra as manifested in the activities of groups like MASSOB is related to the manner affairs were handled immediately after the war. One of the fact is that the military that fought the Biafran army were eventually the elements that captured and controlled levers of power in Nigeria for a long time and ran the affairs of the country with the bitter memories of their war time experiences which reflected in some of the policies of marginalization targeted at the Igbo people who were in reality seen as losers that ought to be treated so. The case of the Igbos was made worst because within the military, representation of the Igbo ethnic group especially at the top echelon was very negligible and inconsequential partly because of the dismissal of the former Nigerian officers that defected to the Biafran army and so they lacked an effective voice in the military councils. The elements that controlled power and ruled Nigeria for a long time were combatants on the federal side whose bitter war experience may have reflected into those policies that were aimed at punishing the people for supporting the rebels. As Njemanze argued, the sustained unmitigated attacks on the populace from the war affected zone had led to a feeling that things would have been different had Biafra succeeded. Therefore when the opportunity of a democratic dispensation presented itself, after the group of people receded from that power, it became easy to mobilize people to support the idea of Biafra again.

Another angle that also came out, which supports the linkage of Igbo nationalism resurgence with the democratic transition in 1999, is the perception that militancy on the part of an ethnic group as an instrument of social pressure can earn them concession from the rest of the

country. What gives credence to this is the seeming consensus by Nigerians to concede the presidency of the country to the Yoruba race in 1998, following the perceived injustice of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election results believed to have been won by M.K.O Abiola, an ethnic Yoruba. That incident of the annulment, led to the formation of ethnic Yoruba based associations and movements, whose activism for the revalidation of that election nearly brought the country to the brink of disintegration until the concession was made. Uwazurike being a close watcher and participant in that process that brought an ethnic Yoruba to the presidency could have felt that a greater Igbo militancy manifesting in form of demand for Biafra, can as well result into a similar concession in the future and finally remove the scar of the war by integrating the Igbos fully into post-war Nigerian society. Another important point that also supports the view of linkage of Biafran resurgence activities to the democratic transition is the role of the courts in the whole saga. The courts have acted to limit the capacity of the police and other security agencies of the state in curbing the activities of groups in the mould of MASSOB. Right from the inception of the organization when it held rallies to sensitize the people of their mission, the police and State Security Services (SSS), had clashed with MASSOB activists. But unlike the era of the military when these bodies could get away with arbitrariness and contempt for the rule of law, the new dispensation compels them to provide evidence and arraign the activists to court. Most of the time, the courts have not found sufficient ground to grant prosecution prayers. A typical example is the April 2000 case in Lagos where the prosecution was praying the court to ban MASSOB from engaging in rallies, which the court refused to grant because it violates the rights of the activist to lawful protest and assembly.

### **The social basis for the resurgence**

The second objective of the study is to assess the socio-economic condition that has led to the emergence of groups such as MASSOB who are demanding for Biafra. This objective is related to the research question which came out in diverse ways in the interviews and discussions in the course of the study; ‘what are the social bases of this renewed demand for Biafra?’ From the responses that came clearly from the participants, especially of Igbo extraction is the perception that the Igbos are not wanted in Nigeria. Apart from marginalization, other post-war developments indicate seemingly that other Nigerians relate to the Igbos with mistrust and this was echoed by most of the respondents who recount how the Igbos have been killed, maimed and their properties looted, whenever there is a riot, religious or political, in the north and west of the country. But is it really out of hatred for the Igbo people in Nigeria that is responsible for the heavy casualties they suffer whenever there is a distur-

bance in Nigerian cities outside of Igbo land? The official position is premised on the high visibility of the Igbos who dominate trading and commerce in the country with their shops and stalls located along the streets, thus making it vulnerable for them to fall victims of riots and disturbances that miscreants cash in on to loot. But the counter argument against this position rests on the inability of the government to curtail these developments that occurs repeatedly over the years and as well as the unwillingness of the government to publicly punish the perpetrators and sponsors of those riots and disturbances, thus sustaining the feeling and perception that the Igbos cannot be protected by the government.

This view came out from all the interviews and focus group discussions that were carried out in the course of the study.

Another perspective on the social bases for Igbo nationalism resurgence can be viewed from the angle taken by Adeyemo (2004) that there was deliberate marginalization of the Igbo people. While writing for *Tell* magazine, Adeyemo (2004) had posited that the Igbo areas suffer neglect in the sense that issues like erosion menace are not checked nor industries provided in the area, compounded by the deliberate policy of their non-inclusion in the power structure of the country. The reason for this is not far-fetched. The southeast has the least number of states and local government areas in the country, an index that is used in revenue sharing. What this implies is that the amount of revenue that accrues to the core Igbo states is small compared to what accrues to other areas of the country from the central pool. This is coupled with the fact that the people who managed these meager resources in Igbo states were military administrators appointed by their commanders that dictated to them on what to do as their interests was not to develop the area thus, compounding the neglect of the centre. The only time a major impact was made by state administrators was during the short-lived second republic.

By the time the new democratic air of freedom was achieved in 1999, a major ruination of the economy had already being done. The army of youths could not find jobs and government policies directed at helping them was very minimal, thus creating alienation and disconnect between the government and the people. So the issue of deprivation is also a view that resonated in all the interviews, including the mixed ethnic panel, which went further to argue that the bad economic condition is not peculiar to the Igbo areas but cuts across the country in different degrees. However the economic condition in the country and particularly the Igbo areas make it germane for groups with parochial agenda to emerge with support and sympathy of the populace.

Findings from the study also showed that this drive or demand for Biafra is motivated by a perception of injustice by the Igbo ethnic group because of the belief that the main resources which is sustaining Nigeria, oil, comes from the areas that constituted former Biafra.

Based on this, there is a strong view that should Biafra succeed, the economic condition of that area will be greatly improved, since this resource will be retained and not shared with the rest of Nigeria. The problem that emanates from here is that the government will not allow a break-away based on this same fact. Moreover, other ethnic groups including some in the proposed Biafra are not going to support such a separatist move. Connected to this is the perceived industrious nature of the Igbos which was demonstrated during the war in the production of technological feats that enabled the tribe to survive for almost three years notwithstanding the blockade by the Federal government of Nigeria. The ability of the group to survive in spite of odds as manifested in post-war rehabilitation with little government support and the success of numerous self help projects undertaken by the people as a stop gap to government neglect creates an image of a people with a high capacity for self sustenance. This perception is widely bandied by people of Igbo extraction and came out strongly from the interactions with MASSOB activists and the focus group discussions. Therefore, there is a belief that a Biafran state will provide opportunities for the people to realize their potentials that have been caged by Nigeria, which implied that things will be positively different in many ways from what obtains in Nigeria.

However, the complaint of marginalization is the premise from which this view draws. In other words, support for Biafra would be watered down if the marginalization of the group is corrected. This view is more apt because a segment of the Igbo elite, the Ohaneze which is the foremost socio-cultural umbrella body of the Igbo ethnic group had in some occasions come out openly to condemn the activities of MASSOB and other groups with similar agenda. The body has rather concerned itself with the pursuit and campaign for a Nigerian president of Igbo extraction, which to them shall be the hallmark of Igbo integration into post-war Nigerian society whenever it occurs. What demonstrates this fact is the involvement of the principal actor in the proclamation of Biafra, Odumegwu Ojukwu, in the political processes in Nigeria. He had contested election into the Nigerian senate shortly after he returned from exile during the second republic and also participated in the presidential elections of 2003 and 2007 as the candidate of the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), an Igbo based political party. Giving credence to this viewpoint, Njemanze remarked that if proper attention was given to the people to make them have a feel or sense of belonging in the Nigerian entity as the present democratic government has started; support for Biafra shall wither away.

### **The role of memory**

Memory is an interdependent process of remembering and forgetting. Depending on the magnitude of the issue, memory can be a burden, when it is not deployed to

serve as a corrective for the future, when a similar situation that occurred in the past presents itself again.

Understanding the importance of this factor, this study attempted to find out the roles memories of the former Biafran experience had in the present resurgence of Igbo nationalism. For instance, Amadiume and An-Na'im (2000) had described Biafra as the first expression of massive suffering inflicted on society by an internal African war. And going by findings in this study, the recollection of this suffering certainly is playing some role in the present Igbo nationalism resurgence. For instance, the leader of MASSOB, Ralph Uwazurike had said what motivated him in the struggle to actualize Biafra was to avenge the death of his sister Mary who died of 'kwa-shiorkor' (malnutrition) during the Biafra-Nigerian war, following the food blockade used by the Federal government as a weapon of war against Biafra. He speaks thus "I felt it was unjust and that if I grew up, I would come up with the Biafran issue again. So it was burning in my mind all through" (Uwazurike, 2004). Another MASSOB activist, Chief Nwanka recounted how his thriving transport business was ruined by the war and told of his resolve never to restart it or any business until Biafra is actualized. This kind of experience varies and is shared by quite a significant number of Igbo people. For instance the Biafran war veterans who engage in MASSOB activities or the activities of the breakaway faction of MASSOB called Biafra Must Be Society (BIAMUBS) have two motivating factors which include, government neglect to the plight they face and the sacrifices they made during the war to the actualization of Biafra.

However most of the participants in the study especially those who witnessed the war are not insupport of any thing that can bring back such a bitter experience again, even though they support MASSOB for their non-violent approach and applauds the capacity of the organization through their activities to generate pressure on the Nigerian system capable of yielding positive concessions for the Igbos in the Nigerian polity. But majority of all the participants in the focus group discussions comprising of Igbo youths expressed their willingness to fight and end the perceived deprivation and marginalization of the Igbos in Nigeria, should that be the last resort. Related to this is the finding from this study that even though the predominant activists working towards the realization of Biafra are youths, membership of MASSOB cut across different age groups and gender.

Therefore the view that it is a new generation of the Igbos that are involved in the activities to resuscitate Biafra is not correct though it could be argued that this set are at the forefront of MASSOB activism that require militant exercises. The director of the SSS in Imo state attested to this fact when he revealed in an interview that even men between the ages of 70 - 80 years are involved in the activities of the group. Majority of the activists in this category who are over fifty years old are war veterans who constitute the bulk of the membership of

BIAMUBS.

### **Support for the Igbo nationalism resurgence**

The question that arises from the third objective was to find out the strategies of MASSOB and other similar organizations that seem to have made them a success in pushing the forgotten issue of Biafra resuscitation to the front burner of national discourse. Findings from the study indicate that combinations of factors were responsible for this.

First, the perception of the people of Igbo extraction that the Nigerian state is oppressing the Igbos is a sufficient condition for Igbo people to embrace any idea that suggests a way out of the situation of marginalization.

The second is the structure of the organization, which is 'grassroots' oriented mass organization. This makes it easier for messages from the organization to be disseminated speedily and widely using the grassroots networks system. This partly accounts for the success of the group in shutting down the south east when it called for a sit-at-home on August 26, 2004 and September, 2005 which was widely adhered to notwithstanding government campaign to the contrary. In the interview with a MASSOB activist, it was revealed that the group operates a shadow governance structure. For instance, the MASSOB structure showed that there is a four-tier administrative system. These administrative systems comprises of the national level, where the apex leadership is composed of officers of MASSOB led by Chief Ralph Uwazurike. At this level regular meetings are held on a monthly basis; each regional branch takes turn to visit the Freedom House headquarters of the group at Okwe near Okigwe in Imo state for these meetings. The next level in the hierarchy is the states which are referred to as 'regions' which is headed by coordinators who administer the regions with assistants in charge of different sectorial compartments recognized by the organization. Following this level are the 'provinces' headed by provincial administrators who also administer the provinces with assistants that functions like a cabinet.

The 'district', headed by district heads with a similar structure of administration at the provincial level is replicated also at this level. At the different levels of organization, there are commissioners and/or directors responsible for various aspects of governance such as education, information, finance and sports among others.

This administrative system invests responsibility on almost every member of the group, which in turn brings out commitment on their part towards the cause of the organization. More so, this well-knit organizational structure, not only makes mobilization easier, it also ensures that there is no disconnection between the leaders at the apex of the group and the rank and file membership at the grassroots level even in the face of opposition and intimidation from agencies of the state. For instance, the



government strategy to decapitate the organization through the arrest and long detention of top leadership aimed at weakening the organization has not succeeded in putting the group in disarray, as vacuum created are easily filled from the rank.

Another factor that has contributed to the relative success of MASSOB in raising the consciousness for the resuscitation of Biafra is the posture projected by the organization and the methodology they have applied in going about the actualization of their objectives. Right from its inception, the organization has projected itself as a non-violent organization. Uwazurike emphasizes this on every public opportunity that he subscribes to the non-violent ideology of Mahatma Gandhi whom he claimed to have understudied for the purpose of achieving his dream Biafran state through non-violent means. Findings from this study through the interviews, discussions and literature surveys, indicate that a lot of respondents seem to agree with the notion that MASSOB is a harmless and non-violent organization. When juxtaposed with the many clashes the group has had with security agencies that most times have led to casualties, this image of a harmless, non-violent organization, paints them as victims of state brutality (Ajayi & Duruji, 2008). Uwazurike himself speaks further on this when asked about the potency of this strategy in the light of raids by security operatives on the organization. It goes thus: "The attack on MASSOB is the beauty of non-violence. If they do not attack us, the world would not hear about us. Do you know that if they had failed to attack MASSOB since 1999 when we started, we would have gone into oblivion? Our popularity soars because we are attacked on daily basis. So people started picking interest. And I tell you, the only good thing on earth is non-violence because that is the only means you can achieve your aim. Look at how much we have achieved in six years. But if we had resorted to arms, they would have finished us and the world would have looked the other way. Today MASSOB is all over the world. A Whiteman just left here. I don't know if you saw him. He came from Holland. He has been here close to two weeks waiting for this interview, staying in a hotel waiting for me. The first thing he told me, he said the beauty of what you are doing is non-violence. I left Nigeria to India and stayed 10 years studying non-violence. I know the rudiments. I know the potency. In non-violence you have nobody to defeat".

Apart from this, the strategy of using education and persuasion to spread the message of the organization seemed to have aroused the consciousness of the Igbos to the existence of the organization and their agenda. The technique of education and persuasion thrives with the peddling of rumors and sentiments through several soft publications, which reels out all manners of sensational reports about the group and their activities. Several blogosphere and websites that highlight the activities of the organization dots the internet. So also is a short wave radio, Voice of Biafra International (VOBI) which broad-

casts from Washington DC every Saturday and Wednesdays. All these together, form the media chain that stirs up and sustains people's interest in the activities of the organization and the issues they represent. Eze Okonkwo of Okwe community in whose domain the organization's Freedom House headquarters is located attested to the existence of multiple publications that not only highlight the plight of the Igbo people but MASSOB activities to put a stop to it through the actualization of Biafran state. The state director of SSS in Imo state confirmed the effectiveness of this propaganda machinery while asked to comment on why so many Igbo people seem to believe MASSOB messages. Uwazurike himself churns out what he calls 'epistles to Massobians' on monthly bases which he uses to inform the membership on the state of the struggle.

The popularity of the group among the people of southeast Nigeria especially the Igbos is not in doubt. For instance, the director of SSS, Kayode Are was reported to have said the group commands a membership of about four million, while his Anambra state subordinate, at the height of SSS clash with the group in Onitsha explained that the difficulty of flushing out the organization from the town is because in Onitsha one out of every twenty resident, is a member of MASSOB. Uwazurike has often boasted that the group has gone beyond him as a person, referring to the membership which spread round the globe including strong presence in cities outside of Igbo land and the Diaspora. A MASSOB activist Mr. Anayo in a key informant in the study revealed that the group was able to gather about 30 million signatures that supported the document they submitted to the United Nations on the need to recognize Biafra as an independent state which to him is a proof that the organization is popular among the Igbo people particularly.

Another aspect of the group's success that worries the government is the internationalization of the struggle. Latching on the United Nations' resolution 1514 of 1947, MASSOB has been able to win the body's acceptance as an unrepresented nation which the organization believes is a right step in the efforts at actualizing an independent state. Apart from the UN, the group has attracted sympathy from the Centre for World Indigenous Studies, as well as international activists. A good example is the case of a Briton who disrupted a programme organized by the Nigeria government in London to launder the image of the country abroad, while demanding the recognition of Biafra (Adeniyi 2006).

The study found that MASSOB activists and many Igbo people believe the view of the genealogical relationship between the Igbos and the Jews. Stemming from that premise is the strong belief that just like how the Jews of the Middle East suffered oppression before God delivered his promise and gave them freedom, so will God someday fulfill the same to the Igbos as one of the lost tribes of Israel. That can only explain the resilience of the group in spite of the might of the state.

## Government response to Biafran resurgence

The initial attitude of the government to MASSOB to dismiss the group and its activities anchored the view that such will fizzle out with the passage of time. But subsequent developments have forced the government to have a rethink especially after the 22nd May, 2000 redeclaration of Biafra at Aba. Thereafter, the government's approach to the organization was changed towards curtailing the group and their activities. This tactics employed by the government tend to be repressive. As a result, several casualties have been recorded following clashes between security operatives and the activists demanding for the revitalization of Biafra. For instance, several human right groups have documented catalogues of MASSOB casualties in the hands of security operatives. One of such, the People against Right Abuse in Nigeria in their 2006 report, gave a blow to blow account of monthly clashes between MASSOB and security operatives starting from May, 2001 to February, 2006. In that account, it was recorded that about eighty MASSOB activists have lost their lives, sixty-six arrested, detained and arraigned, one hundred and six detained and tortured while two hundred and seventeen were arrested and humiliated (PARAN 2006). At the time this report was compiled, what is the worst scenario of security personnel - MASSOB clash was yet to unfold in Onitsha where it has been claimed that about seven hundred MASSOB activists have lost their lives following the shoot-at-sight order by the government of that state.

Those incidences had followed the attempt of MASSOB to dislodge a parasitic body called the National Association of Road Transport Owners (NARTO) from the motor parks and markets in that city. This self imposed responsibility led to crises, which prompted the state government to ban the two groups from operating in the state and instructing security operatives to ensure that such order is enforced in the state even if it took the shoot-on-sight of violators.

But this heavy-handed nature of the government notwithstanding, most members of MASSOB are not deterred by such antics. One of them Mr. Anayo had this to say; "If we follow the reason of killing or that we may be killed and abandon this struggle for independence, then it implies we have resigned to enslavement forever. But God forbid, we cannot remain enslaved forever even if we remain one, the promise of God made to the Israelites shall be fulfilled. So whether we remain one or three, we shall still be looking for Biafra until God grants it to us". This kind of sentiment expressed above runs deep in MASSOB activists and surely the heavy-handed tactics of the government has not succeeded in dampening their confidence in the realization ability of the project. Most Nigerians of Igbo extraction outside of the country are frustrated by the way Nigeria is governed more especially the way their kinsmen are being treated and are therefore heavily supporting the organization. Most participants in the focus group discussion particularly the all male youth

and elders group believe that the scale of brute force employed by the government against MASSOB can only be so because it is an Igbo organization; when the group is non-violent, compared to the Odua People's Congress (OPC) a Yoruba based ethnic militia or the Arewa People's Congress (APC) which the government treats with kid gloves that are perpetrating greater magnitude of violence. The pervasiveness of this perception in Igbo land is what draws sympathy to the group and their cause. This view, confirms what Awodiya (2006) has argued, that the Nigerian government reacts to ethnic activism in a manner that either stokes the courage of the ethnic militias behind the agitation or suggests that it does not know how to handle the situation. He further argued that ethnic movements which enjoy a large follower-ship in their region of occupation or so, because the Federal government of Nigeria has ailed to give the people in those regions a sense of belonging. This is glaring in the case of the Igbos. For instance, in the wake of the heightened publicity about the re-declaration of Biafra in early 2000, the Obasanjo government announced a pardon and conversion from dismissals to retirement of all former Nigerian servicemen in the Armed Forces and Police who defected to Biafra during the war, with a promise to pay all their entitlements. That pronouncement was only implemented in the year 2006. Given that these men have suffered deprivation for many years and coupled with government lackadaisical attitude to their plight, groups like MASSOB capitalize on this lacuna to generate sectarian support for their cause.

The heavy-handed approach of government to MASSOB in particular, apart from generating sympathetic support for them, is also radicalizing the group. This manifestation started to be visible following the last incarceration of the leader of the group Ralph Uwazurike, giving room for a splinter group Biafra Must Be Society (BIAMUBS) to emerge. That group has virtually abandoned the non-violence philosophy of the group and embraced a culture of confrontation with agencies of the state and the result of this is the mayhem in Onitsha, Nnewi and other parts of Anambra state between June - July 2006. This group which is made up of Biafran war veterans and unemployed youths is now engaged in hostage taking and asking for ransoms as is associated with the Niger-delta militants. A MASSOB official confirmed to a daily that a foiled attempt to bomb a police station in Nsukka as part of a guerrilla war was planned by the group. The Imo state director of SSS had confirmed the existence of this group working in tandem with Niger-delta groups. This group according to Eze Okonkwo who ran to the headquarters in his community when they had problems with the police in Onitsha, was having clashes with the main group and is reported to be interfering with people's crops. Chief Nwankwa also confirmed that the group is quartered at their Freedom Headquarters and N30, 000.00k (thirty thousand naira) is raised every day for their upkeep. This group though, not well known for now, but according to Mr. Anayo they

have been in existence for some time now and had been pressing that MASSOB should embrace violence as the solution to the cause of realizing Biafra. He speaks further; "Before Uwazurike was arrested; we held a meeting with BIAMUBS directors and other people. In that meeting, they brought out Uwazurike and asked him why he did not want this struggle to take violence; that if it takes violence now, they are sure of defeating Nigeria. Uwazurike told them that the agreement he reached with United Nations was that it is going to be non-violence.

Since he does not want violence, no matter what you do to him, he will remain resolute carrying on with non-violence; until Nigerians push him to the wall he is still saying non-violence. As it is now, they have pushed him to the wall, if he orders us to go on rampage we are ready for that and everywhere will be set on fire. The way it will be, our people in Lagos will run when they see us in action right there. That is why he told them that he does not agree with a violent struggle. That is why those people broke away from MASSOB to form Biafran Must Be Society. It is not only them; there are other people and groups also. But on this Biafran issue, the main people looking for it is MASSOB. It is the Biafran war veterans that formed this BIAMUBS".

It is obvious that the long incarceration of Uwazurike created conditions for a crack in the organization ostensibly for the control and the vast resources that come into the coffers of the organization. Though MASSOB activists interviewed said there is no financial pressure apart from the initial membership dues and application fee, Diaspora support to the organization in terms of donations brings in enormous resources that may have enabled the construction of the massive edifice which Uwazurike built in his home town Okwe near Okigwe which the organization uses as its headquarters.

Some hold the view that the resources used for that building could not have come from Uwazurike's earnings, since his law practice or business has virtually grounded since he started his activism. This faction, who made so much noise, could not withstand the managerial acumen of Uwazurike to hold the group, came to fore as he was able to contain the renegades within the organization after his release from detention in December 2007.

## Conclusion

The re-emergence of the Biafran issue into the political discourse in Nigeria reflects the lack of social justice in the polity as it was the basis for the war of secession.

This deeply entrenched deprivation that has created the condition for the emergence of ethnic militia organizations is rooted in the long domination of politics by the military in Nigeria. As such, from the study, it was very evident that the democratic transition that Nigeria experienced in 1999 indeed created the condition for bottled and suppressed feelings to come to fore as manifested in the activities of groups like MASSOB. Even though the

democratic administrations have started to address some of those issues that have led to the renewed demand for Biafra, the image the people have of the government is deeply portrait of oppressor. It is rather unfortunate that the perception of people is that the government is rather continuing along the path of the receded military administrations in perpetuating social inequities. The heavy-handed approach of the democratic administration in its response to activities of MASSOB does not help the matter. Its inability to initiate a process of dialogue with extremist group is a manifestation of failure on the part of the government in the management of this resurgent Igbo nationalism.

Therefore there should be a rethink on the path of the government. They should embrace dialogue with organizations like MASSOB and stop the counter productive strategy of suppression as it is in line with the rule of law which is an important element of democracy and stand to be a better option capable of yielding positive results. As Marina Ottaway (1999) has noted about the Nigeria state, ethnicity is a fact of life that is very strong in the African context and cannot be easily wished away. Though it might not be a social force that can act in isolation, it has been entrenched deeply into the fabric of the Nigerian political system to the extent that any search for a solution must find accommodation for ethnicity.

For this accommodation to be found there must be a constitutional review, that should radically address structural imbalances that stoke these developments because it creates room for some ethnic groups to become powerful and able to marginalize others.

This brings up the issue of the character of the African state that has an extensive intervention in the sphere of life of the African society, making access and competition to control it very fierce. This is what leads to politicization of ethnicity. Therefore a reformation of the state in a manner that devolves power to the communities is imperative. This will make governance more accountable and encourage greater participation by individuals and civil society groups that de-emphasises ethnicity or can mobilize it for positive development that can in turn eliminate social deprivation which creates conditions for ethno-nationalism in plural societies.

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