

## CITIZENSHIP AND ETHNIC MILITIA POLITICS IN NIGERIA-MARGINALIZATION OR IDENTITY QUESTION? -THE CASE OF MASSOB.

By

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### **Introduction:**

Nigeria became independent in 1960. Since her birth as a nation, Nigeria has been immersed in the twin struggle of maintaining its corporate existence and building an integrated nation. The Nigerian state has struggled with the multiplicity of nations within it for the loyalty and allegiance of its citizens. At each point of this struggle, she has always lost to these primordial groups that compose it. To many Nigerians, (borrowing the words of late Chief Obafemi Awolowo-seen as the chief apologist of ethnic politics in Nigeria); ‘Nigeria is a mere geographical expression’, bound together by nothing except the coercive apparatus of the state. Scholars have given explanations for this trend, ranging from the colonial origin of the Nigerian state to ethnicity and the exclusionist politics of the hegemonic ruling class in post colonial Nigeria. Of recent there is a heightening of the resurgence of ethnic identity politics in Nigeria. The current trend manifests not just through the ‘ethnicization’ of party politics and electoral politics but through a civil cum military outfits known as ethnic militias. These militias and separatist movements not only challenge the authority of the Nigerian state as the only body with legal or legitimate control of instruments of coercion but detracts from it the loyalty and obedience that should accrue to it from her citizens. Thus the Nigerian citizens are torn between loyalty to the Nigerian State and loyalty to the in-group movements manifesting today as ethnic militias. Forced to choose between the two, loyalty to the primordial group supersedes loyalty to the Nigerian state. To many Nigerians, Nigeria is still kept together by what each group feels it can still get from it in the accumulation process and not by virtue of any legal or psychological identification with its aspirations and goals as a nation. Thus where and when any group’s access to this accumulation process is denied or curtailed, a phenomenon popularly known in Nigeria as marginalization, the group threatens to secede. The situation is true of all the ethnic groups and movements in Nigeria. For instance the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) representing the interests of the Yoruba ethnic group threatened to secede when Chief Moshood Abiola, a Yoruba was denied his mandate as the winner of the 1993 presidential election, the various movements in the Niger Delta, namely, Movement For the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP),Ijaw National Council,(INC),Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEN),Egbesu Youths also threatened to secede if they were not allowed to control the resources in their area or get larger share of the oil revenue; and likewise the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) representing the Igbo Nation want the state of Biafra because of feeling of exclusion from the socio-economic and political mainstream of the Nigerian state. In other words, all these groups at one time or the other demanded separate existence from Nigeria as a result of marginalization from state power, economic control and social provisioning. Interestingly the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) representing the interest of the North has not been as vociferous as the other groups in asking for separate existence for the singular reason that the north has been in control of political power in Nigeria for the greater part of the existence of the Nigerian state. If anything the APC works to spoil the separatist agitation of other groups. It is the belief of the other groups that the north has benefited more than any other group from the Nigerian Project, having been in control of state power and all the largesse accruing from it. A phenomenon Jega (1996:96) refers to as the phenomenon of reactionary ethnicity. Jega thus notes:

*The faction of the ruling classes that controls political power at the federal level tends to rely on reactionary ethnicity to generate group solidarity to secure its hegemony. Those who lose out of this power game in the accumulation process, also, whip up ‘fairy tales’ and reactionary ethnicity to cultivate group solidarity so as to prop up and strengthen their contest for hegemony.*

The use of ethnicity for acquisition of state power and rents accruing from it has been so elevated to the centre stage of Nigerian politics that the Nigerian state has legally and unconventionally come to accept ethnicity as an integral aspect of the Nigerian project. The Nigerian constitution thus made provision for individual and group rights, groups interpreted as states which in Nigeria are homogenous with ethnic divisions. Thus ethnic balancing policies occupied centre stage in the power configuration and economic /social provisioning of the

Nigerian state. Policies, appointments, electoral victories, and most especially rent from oil were seen from the point of view of which unit or ethnic group(s) benefits the most. The balancing policies not only increased ethnic identity consciousness, identity politics further reinforced ethnic balancing measures. Consequently group rights in Nigeria came to overshadow individual rights. The adoption of the market policies of the International Financial Institutions (IFIS) otherwise known as Structural Adjustment Policies (SAP) in the 80's by the military government of Rtd Gen. Ibrahim Babangida which unleashed series of harsh measures that set the people on the part of poverty further reinforced and intensified ethnic identity politics in Nigeria. State shrinkage and oppressive policies resulting from the emergent market policies and norms further strengthened ethnic identity politics and the quest for independence by many of such groups. It is within this period that the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and other similar groups were born. The activities of MASSOB has not only queried the citizenship question in Nigeria but has continued to challenge the rationale behind the corporate existence of the Nigerian State. MASSOB creates an identity dilemma for the Igbo nation whose interests it claims to protect. It is against this backdrop that this paper interrogates the concept of citizenship *vis-a-vis* group/ethnic rights and identity in Nigeria. It seeks to find explanation for the resurgence and persistence of ethnic militia politics in Nigeria, most especially how the power configuration in Nigeria has intensified the phenomenon. The paper shall discuss the activities and tactics of MASSOB as separatist movement and the rationale behind its demand.

### **Citizenship, Ethnic Rights and Identity Question in Nigeria: Conceptual Issues-**

Generally citizenship denotes the status of an individual as a full and responsible member of a political community. A citizen is thus a person who owes allegiance to a state and in turn receives protection from the state. It involves a reciprocal relationship in which he/ she must fulfil certain duties and obligations of citizenship towards the state in return for the civil, political and social rights granted him/her by the state. (Gaubá 2003:26) In the views of Hill (quoted in William 2004:49) citizenship as a status denotes individuals with rights and duties constitutionally guaranteed to all members of society. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed. (Marshall in Williams 2004:49) Citizens constitute the state. (Gaubá 2003) Thus citizenship is implicitly tied to statehood. Thus the hallmark of modern nation state is citizenship; a state implies the existence of citizenship. (William 2004:49) Carens (2004) however notes that the notion of citizenship sometimes presumably assumes an idealised and misleading conception of nation-state as an administratively centralised, culturally homogeneous form of political community. In this idealised form the nation state becomes the only locus of political community that matters. Citizenship assumes the definitional status of membership in a nation state, in which everyone is expected to belong to one such state. This unitary picture of citizenship with its legal connotations is inadequate in the sense that it does not appreciate the multiple dimensions of citizenship and the complex relationships among these dimensions. It does not correspond to actual practices in many states that embody recognition of multiple forms of belonging and of overlapping membership. The unitary or legal or formalistic conception of citizenship is the ideal which many societies aspire to, however the reality of multiple membership /identities in many societies proves it to be unrealistic and removed from the practical realities of existence in multicultural societies like Nigeria. Hence Schuck & Baldwin (No Date ) distinguished the formalistic conception of citizenship which borders on legal stipulations from the substantive which presents though lamentably the failure of the legal concept. In Carens's (2004) view conceptions of citizenship and political community should grow out of, rather determine, the political and social arrangements that we choose. This enables us to address the multiple dimensions of citizenship or identity questions that characterize the organization of many modern states. Carens (2004) thus identified three dimensions of citizenship, namely the legal dimension, which refers to formal rights and duties that one possesses as a member of a political community; the psychological dimension which refers to one's sense of identification with the political community or communities to which one belongs; and the political dimension which refers to one's sense of representational legitimacy of those who act authoritatively on behalf of and in the name of the political community. These dimensions he notes interact with each other in complex ways. Despite the limitations or idealistic nature of the legal or formalistic notion, it serves as starting point for understanding and distinguishing citizens from non citizens. The rights it guarantee members helps them to challenge the denial of these rights. In fact the resurgence of separatist cultural movements stems from the state's inability to satisfactorily uphold the basic tenets of legal citizenship which includes among several rights the universalistic principles of equality, freedom from discrimination on the basis of sex, race, language or culture. It is worthy to note that the demands for separate existence by many separatist ethnic movements in Nigeria stems from the feelings of alienation arising from the denial of these rights to citizens. As William (2004:49) observed, the constitutional or legal conception of citizenship is either in abeyance or simply non-existent in most of Africa, Nigeria inclusive. According to Taiwo (in William 2004:50) "beyond phrase mongering, there are no citizens in Nigeria only citizens of Nigeria. Chabal & Daloz

(1999: 52) however observed that the concept of citizen as conceived by western scholars is of little relevance to the African experience as the notion of the individual in Africa is inclusive rather than exclusive. In other words, individuals are not perceived as being meaningfully and instrumentally separate from the communities to which they belong. The individual remains firmly placed within the family, kin and community networks from which s/he issues. The point that is being made is that the legal dimension of citizenship does not capture in real terms the disposition of the people within a state towards that state especially in multicultural and multi ethnic societies like Nigeria. The average Nigerian identifies more with his ethnic community than he identifies with Nigeria. To his ethnic community he owes duties, to the Nigerian state he expects rights. Ekeh (1978 317-320 in William 2004) identified three principal contradictory notion of citizenship as it applies to Africa and in particular Nigeria. These are (i) Identification of citizenship with rights, and not with duties; (ii) Dissociation of rights and duties in the conception of citizenship; (iii) The development of two publics, in respect of the conception of citizenship, in political life: an amoral civic public from whom rights are expected, duties not owed; a moral primordial public defined in terms of one's ethnic groups, to which one's duties are paid, but we never expect any right. In the light of the third notion an average Nigerian will expect the state to provide a multiplicity of social services and infrastructures but sees it as inhuman for the same state to expect him/her to pay tax or for the use of certain social services like electricity. This attitude emanates from the 'we/them' feelings that characterized relationship between the people and the state in colonial Nigeria. Mamdani ( in Iroanya 2005) notes that the colonial state in Africa recognised two types of political identities, the civic and the ethnic. Civic identity was racially defined as it was reserved for those considered civilised. Civic rights were therefore for the settlers; while the native populace were excluded from this regime of rights. Natives belonged not to the civic space but to the ethnic space. The native identity was not defined by where he or she was born or lived but by his ancestral area. The area in turn was defined ethnically. This derivative of the colonial state was passed over to the post colonial state which in content and behaviour does not differ from the colonial state. The colonial state transmitted the legitimacy problem today suffered by the post colonial state. It was a state that was based on force rather than consent of the governed. It emphasised local particulars that today pervades all aspects of national life in Nigeria. As William (2004) observed "the sociology of citizenship in Nigeria is now defined as exclusion rather than inclusion...it has its profound base in the particularities of birth, ethnic considerations, emphasis on geographical location etc." This local particularars found expression in the notion of indigene. Thus the dimension of citizenship pervasive in Nigeria pertains to the psychological dimension identified by Caren. While Nigerians recognise their de jury status as citizens of the Nigerian state, in real terms they identify with their local community, an identity which is not fixed but fluctuates depending on their location at any point in time. Indigene is a member of a community within the geographical space of an ethnic group. It is biologically determined and discriminates first against the members of same ethnic group and second against members of the other ethnic groups. In Nigeria, indigenship is manifested at the state and local government level, even community levels; at the federal level it is manifested as ethnicity. The relationship between members of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria namely Igbo, Hausa –Fulani, Yoruba, Tivs is defined by ethnicity, while within the geographical space occupied by these various ethnic groups relationship within the in group is defined by 'indigeneship'. Thus an Igbo person from Anambra state or Imo state (all within the geographical region occupied by the Igbo ethnic group ) in Ibadan town will be seen by the yorubas as Igbo, if he happens to relocate to Onitsha in Anambra state which is an Igbo state, he still does not enjoy the rights of other Igbos from Anambra State. He is discriminated against as non indigene. An Anambra Igbo will suffer similar fate in any of the other Igbo States. In a similar manner, Anambra State citizens resident in communities other than the ones of their ancestral origin faces the same discrimination on the basis of 'indigeneship' or what has also become known as the 'son of the soil' in Nigeria, meaning a son of the relevant community. In addition the indigene factor rather than just birth also defines legal citizenship in Nigeria. (Section 25(1) of 1999 Nigerian Constitution) The multiplicity of identity that defines inclusion and exclusion go to confirm Nnoli's claim that the boundary of ethnicity is fluid and not rigid. (Nnoli 1978:18) The indigene factor strong as it may be does not define the contestation for state power at the centre as much as ethnicity. It however does in local politics at the state and local government levels. The average Nigerian does not feel represented by members of other ethnic national or for that matter indigenes of other localities except their own. Hence the psychological and the political dimension of citizenship identified by Carens play significant role in identity politics and the resurgence of Ethnic militia politics in Nigeria. The Nigerian state through its constitutional provisions and other policies has given de facto recognition to these multiple identities. Section 14(3) of the 1979 and 1999 constitutions of Nigeria stipulates:

*The composition of the Government of the federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that Government or in any of its agencies .*

Similar provisions were made with respect to composition of government of states and local government in Section 14 (4). In addition a federal character commission was created by the constitution in Section C, Part 1 of the Third Schedule of the 1999 constitution to ensure compliance with this policy by all federal government parastatals and agencies. Other measures like creation of more states and local government areas to accommodate agitations for local self government, the establishment of unity schools, the one year national youth service were all measures put in place to address the twin problem of promoting unity while according recognition to the diverse composition of Nigeria. Today there is the conventional practice of rotating key state positions amongst the different geo-political zones in the country. Same applies to political positions at the state and local government levels. This is known as ethnic balancing measures. Thinking along this line, Chabal & Daloz (1999:58) opine that a political compact based on ethnicity could bring together, rather than separate the constituent members of what now form existing African countries. What they termed an ethnic state rather than the usual nation state. The failure of such compact depicted in the failure of the balancing measures as the road map to integration and national identity in Nigeria negates this view. The failure of these measures Nnoli (1996:239) observed stems from the fact that the measures do not address the causes of imbalance but are oriented towards the search for benefits, privileges, and advantages by the elite of the ethnic groups and regional enclaves. The measures also create a paradox as equity is achieved through a levelling down rather than levelling up strategy. In the process the more advance groups who had to slow down for the less privileged in the catch up policies are alienated while the beneficiaries of the policies are thankful to their ethnic or sub-national units rather than the nation state for the benefits. Worse still the policies made being disadvantaged attractive as it confers leisure and benefits rather than a push for change in status by the disadvantaged group(s). (Nnoli 1996; 237) In fact at a time in Nigeria it became fashionable to claim marginalisation in order to attract more federal allocations and infrastructures. Williams (2004:55) also observed that the federal character principle made Nigerians more aware of their communal background than the building of a common feeling of loyalty to the Nigerian state. It increased the awareness of some groups of their disadvantages and invariably their vulnerability towards domination by others better favoured. The implication of this is the ascendancy of the local over the national and the absence of a moral bond between the state and its citizens. In the face of this scenario the politics of domination and the dominated best captured by the concept of marginalization occupied a centre stage in military and post military politics of Nigeria. This politics is what culminated to the emergence of ethnic militias in Nigeria.

### **Ethnic Militia Politics in Nigeria: The Role of the Nigerian State.**

A major disturbing feature of the Nigerian post colonial state is its dependent and rentier character. A large portion of the crisis in Nigeria whether political, economic or social can be attributed to the rentier state of Nigeria. Because of its rentier nature it has also become what Jega (2003:52) called a Patrimonial state. That is a state in which the distinction between the public and the private realm is blurred, and state power personalised. A rentier state is one in which the main relationship between the society and the state is mediated through its expenditures on the military and the state security, development projects, consumption subsidies construction etc (Skocpol 1982:269 in Jega 2003). In addition it relies substantially on external rent and government is the main recipient of the external rent, while the rest of the society is routinely engaged in the distribution and utilization of the rent so created. ( Jega ,2003:53). Its whole ensemble rests on distribution rather than production. What is worse the only source of this external rent is oil export. As a result the state created an unproductive ruling class which depend on state rent for primitive accumulation. Thus getting access to the rent circuit is greater preoccupation than attaining production efficiency (Beblawi & Luciani 1987 in Jega 2003). This has lead to a rentier mentality which embodies a break in the work –reward causation. Reward –income or wealth is not related to work or risk bearing, rather to chance. (Jega 2003:53) In other words in a rentier state wealth is divorced from production. Sometimes well paid positions are created just to give jobs to people whose political support is considered important; the country pays for no service rendered; worse it pays for nuisance value. In some cases people are over paid for what they do in order to keep them happy, creating demoralizing disparities between reward and effort.(Ake,1989:56) In this way the rentier state is oriented away from providing public goods to a provider of private favours, what Luciani (1987 in Jega 2003:53)called an allocation state. In fulfilment of its character as a patrimonial state, it also allocates resources to suit ethnic embers in ways that perjure equity and efficiency. For instance projects are initiated for wrong reasons and located in places where they are least beneficial just to satisfy personal or primordial interests. The immensity of state power and the material benefits accruing from it led to the overvaluation of state power. Every means is considered legitimate and expedient to acquire state power, for the principal reason that those who win state power win everything and those who lose, lose everything; as Ake (1996:7-8) noted “ nothing can be worse than losing , nothing better than winning”. Those who get it first use it without restraint to criminalize opposition, put them out of business, even to deprive them of their liberty. What emerges is a politics that does not know legality, only expediency because it is constituted as warfare. In this vein Ake thus surmised that:

*There is no public realm, stricely speaking no state. There is only a contested terrain, where interest groups and communities go to fight for appropriation. There is no space which incarnates a collective identity; there is only a battle field where the act of doing battle constitutes us as a purely negative unity. We are a polity of takers rather than givers .What we like to take is state power, and being strangers to one another and adversaries, we necessarily take it as private property.*

Thus the rentier character of the state and the scenario described by Claude Ake best explain the persistence and the intensification of ethnic politics in Nigeria. The emaciation of the state resulting from its parasitical relationship with the ruling class further narrows and constricts the political and by implication the economic space, as the state embarks on survival mechanism. This is done using the IFIS widely canvassed market reforms. For the state to survive, the state must shrink, roll back and elevate the private sector as the major player in the economy. However, the implementation of this policy in a rentier state has its own negative implications. For instance poverty is increased as the state embarks on cuts in subsidy, retrenchment of state workforce and commercialization and privatization of public services. In addition the hegemonic ruling class uses exclusion to appropriate the enormous wealth base that has to be privatized for themselves and their ethnic members in the first instance and others they choose to benefit in the second instance. This way the state further suffers legitimacy crisis as the excluded groups clothe in ethnic garb emerge to demand their own portion of the national cake. Jega (2003:27) puts it thus:

*Under conditions of economic crisis, and subsequently structural adjustment, there has been a swift decline in the ability of the Nigerian state to provide for the basic socio-economic needs of the people. Similarly, there has been increased exclusion of a segment of the elite and the bourgeoisie in the distribution of the spoils of office, and an acute marginalisation of the majority of the population from the benefits of development projects and social provisioning. All these have led to an increased crisis of legitimacy of the state....As the state experiences ...a process of decomposition and recomposition ...and disengages from critical social provisioning ,only the constituencies and clients e of those who control state power actually continue to have access to state resources and patronage. Thus under these conditions groups have tended to rely on identity based politics to struggle for access to the state and the resources that it controls ,in order to protest exclusion and oppression as well as to demand basic rights and socio economic provisioning.*

It is in this context that we can explain the emergence and sustenance of ethnic militia in Nigeria.

### **What is Ethnic Militia?**

Ethnic Militias are essentially youth based groups formed with the purpose of promoting and protecting the parochial interests of their ethnic groups, and whose activities sometimes involve the use of violence.(Adejumobi, 2002) Sesay etal (2003:23) defined militia as an irregular or paramilitary group usually made up of civilians who might have received some form of non- formalized or unofficial military training and are armed with small arms and light weapons. They resemble the regular professional army in the manner of their operation and command structure. Sesay etal were apt to note that ethnic militias in Nigeria do not fit neatly into this definition. They are defined as militia because their activities approximate what militias are usually supposed to do. Badmus (2006) defined it as ‘extreme form of ethnic agitation for self determination as various ethnic groups assume militant posture and gradually metamorphosed into militia groups each of which bear an ethnic identity and purport to act as the machinery through which the desires of its people are sought and realised.’ There is also the scholarly confusion as to which ethnic organization to be categorized as ethnic militia. Hence the tendency to categorise any organization with a violent bent as ethnic militia. For instance the ACF which is usually categorized as militia of the Northern Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, is but a pan cultural organization on the same pedestal as similar organizations from other ethnic groups like the “Afenifere” of the Yoruba ethnic group and the Oha n’ eze of the Igbo ethnic group, although it has the ability to organise militant youths as and when the occasion demands. Similarly, the Bakassi boys, a vigilante organization that operated in many Igbo states is sometimes categorized as ethnic militia, which it is not .The definition given by Adejumobi best describes the organizations that in this paper we shall identify as ethnic militia. These are OPC, MOSOP, MOSIEN, EGBESU BOYS and of recent MASSOB.

### **MASSOB-Origin and Composition.**

Movement for the Actualization for the Sovereign State of Biafra otherwise known as MASSOB is a separatist movement founded on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1999 and led by Chief Ralph Uwazurike an Indian trained lawyer. MASSOB has as its main objectives:

- To actualize the independent nation of Biafra
- To use peaceful means only

- To support all entities using peaceful means to bring about Biafra
- To encourage sincere and honest dialogue with all nations in Nigeria aimed at peaceful separation of Biafra (and other nations, if they so desire).
- To inform the rest of the world about Biafra actualization (Biafra Nation)

From the tone of their mission MASSOB is a non violent separatist movement fighting for self determination with membership open to all persons who accepts the goal of Biafra actualization and peaceful means for the realization of this goal. It is a resurrection of the struggle for self determination waged by the Igbos of south east Nigeria during the three and a half civil war that saw millions killed and the insurgency defeated by the Nigerian federal led army. Despite the “no victor no vanquished” declaration by the then head of the federal military government Gen.Yakubu Gowon, the Igbos have always felt completely vanquished by the war because of the various policies of attrition meted against them not minding the rhetoric of what has become known as the three “R’s -Reconstruction Rehabilitation and Reconciliation” declared by the federal government. Membership of MASSOB cuts across classes although the majority of the members are drawn from the class of traders, motor drivers, commercial motor cycle riders (popularly known as Okada riders in Nigeria) students, the teeming army of the unemployed and artisans. There are also educated persons, civil servants, religious leaders, town unions and community leaders, priests and women. (MASSOB-Membership) Due to the state clampdown on MASSOB members in the recent times many do not want to be openly identified. There is also MASSOB international which caters for those who identify with goals and aspirations of MASSOB in other parts of the world especially in Europe and America where there are many resident Nigerians of Igbo extraction. (MASSOBUSA 2004) For instance there is the US based Biafra Liberation Movement (BLM) formed in 2003 allied to MASSOB and also funds MASSOB. (Biafra:The Sun Rises 2004, Obasi 2002:70) It is important to note that many Igbos identify with MASSOB though they may not be card carrying members. (Obasi 2007:70) In addition MASSOB has not always been a militia until it succumbed to the use of violence to defend itself against the violent onslaught of the Nigerian state against its members. At the apex of the movement is the leader, followed by the national coordinators (equivalent of ministers), Provincial administrators (equivalent of Governors for the 24 provinces.(Obasi 2002:71). From its organizational structure, it is obvious that MASSOB runs like a state in anticipation of self determination.

### **MASSOB –Marginalization? Or Identity Question?**

As earlier stated the separatist agitation of MASSOB stems from the fact that the Igbos feel completely alienated from the Nigerian state since the end of the civil war. What in the Nigerian parlance is called ‘marginalization’. Marginalization according to Oha n’eze ndi Igbo (1999:7) is “the deliberate disempowerment of a group of people in the federation politically, economically, socially, and militarily, by another group or groups, who during the relevant time frame wield power and control the allocation of materials and financial resources at the centre of the federation.” “It entails the apparent deliberate exclusion of any particular group(s) by another similar group or groups from either having access to and or taking due possession of common key positions and common resources, as manifested in the political economic military, educational, media and bureaucratic realm. ”It denotes denial of something or obstruction from participating in what belongs to a group. In Nigerian politics it depicts neglect, non involvement or inequity in the distribution of the socio-economic and political resources of the state or indices of development.(Obianyo 2003:66) The attack and marginalization of Igbos predate independence starting with the exclusion of Azikiwe from the central legislature by the Western House of Assembly in 1951; the massacre of the Igbos in the north in 1966-67 program, an event that led to the secessionist policy of the Eastern region, and the immediate post war policies embarked by the federal military government after the war, geared towards the economic strangulation of the Igbos. These include

- The seizures of landed properties owned by the Igbos in the old Rivers State otherwise known ‘abandon property policy.’
- The 20 pounds flat exchange for all cash deposits by the Igbos in the various Nigerian banks based on the maxim ‘that starvation is a legitimate instrument of war’
- The Indigenization of foreign industries in Nigeria at a time Igbos could hardly afford to purchase any of them.

- The non absorption of Igbo serving military officers who fought on the Biafran side back into the Nigerian Army.
- The non absorption of the Igbo federal civil servants back into the national service.
- The reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation policy is a sham, existing only on paper as no visible attempt was made to rehabilitate the Igbos much less have them properly integrated back into the mainstream of Nigerian politics. (Ochoma 2007)

The Igbos have managed to rehabilitate themselves but this feeling of alienation and marginalization has exacerbated, for the simple reason that they feel that the deliberate policy to exclude the Igbos from the upper echelons of governmental institutions and other social provisioning by the federal government of Nigeria led by members of other ethnic groups has continued unabated. Their grievances include:

- The conspiracy never to allow an Igbo head the Nigeria state as president. For instance it is believed and rightly so, that President Obasanjo usurped the rights of the Igbos to lead Nigeria when he refused to step down in 2003 and instead ran for a second term.
- The non establishment of federal institutions, namely parastatals, international airport, industries, seaports in Igbo states. In fact the dredging of the River Niger to serve as a seaport for the south east has been a subject of negative politicking.
- The dilapidated nature of federal roads in the south east which has turned out to become death traps for the teeming mass of easterners plying these roads. Those constructed were not awarded to reputable companies like 'Julius Berger' known for building durable and quality roads in other parts of Nigeria.
- The under representation of the Igbos in top positions of the Nigerian state structure like the army, customs, federal civil service and key political positions.
- South East has the least number of states in Nigeria, five in all; while other geo-political zones have six.
- Exclusion of oil producing states in the south east from benefiting from the federal government development program for the oil producing states.
- The use of quota system to slow down the fast pace of educational attainment of the Igbos.
- The ban on importation of foreign goods to frustrate the Igbos whose main occupation is trading on all forms of merchandise.
- The killing of the Igbos and looting of their properties in other parts of the country especially in the North at the slightest provocation even where the provocation is not caused by the Igbos. In this regard the Denmark cartoon riot in 2006 in which many Igbo people were attacked and killed by angry Moslem youths in the north comes to mind. (Ochoma 2007; Ezeonu, 2006; Lawal, 2005; Onu 2001 Oha n'eze ndi Igbo 1999).

These and other grievances form the bedrock for resuscitation of the separatist agitation by MASSOB. The Igbo feel hated by other ethnics and saw no reason to continue being part of Nigeria. A prominent Igbo son once commented that one thing all other ethnic groups have in common is their hatred of Igbo people. It is in recognition of this fact that the new generation of the Igbos suffering these exclusionist policies have either become members of MASSOB or given their unalloyed support to its struggle. It is this feeling and treatment that has led to the construction of Igbo identity and consciousness.

### **MASSOB and the Struggle for Self Determination: Tactics and Strategies.**

MASSOB has always has as its core philosophy the principle of non violence in the realization of its dream state of Biafra. That is why it has always called on its members to eschew violence and use peaceful means to achieve its goals. At the same time it has carried on its activities in such manner as to elicit the violent response or harassment from the Nigerian state. Their modus operandi is treated as nothing short of treason. The strategies include:

- Petition to the presidency demanding negotiation for separate existence.
- Presentation of a Bill of Rights before the United Nations (UN)
- Sensitization of the international community about the Biafran dream
- Formation of Biafran security agency
- The declaration of the State of Biafra and the hoisting of the Biafran flag in various places in Nigeria and New York in USA.
- Cooperation with other similar organizations in other parts of the country with similar goals.
- Organization of sensitization workshops, seminars and conferences (US Newswire.2003, Obasi,2002)

- The circulation of Biafran currency and encouragement of use of same for business transactions
- The establishment of a communication outfit or radio house called Voice of Biafra with headquarter in the United States. It also has a weekly newspaper similarly called.
- The opening of an embassy in the United States known as the embassy of Biafra.(Akinterinwa 2001)
- The calling out of Igbo people in a civil protest in which they were urged to sit at home and close all commercial activities and offices in August 26, 2004. This call was obeyed by many Igbos in different parts of the country bringing commercial activities to a halt while it lasted.(Odili 2004)
- Mass protest in various Nigerian cities in 2005 in protest for the detention of MASSOB leader, chief Uwazurike and other MASSOB members.
- The enforcement of rules on residents of states considered to be Igbo states or Biafra territories. For instance, the enforcement of the official price of fuel in filling stations in the Igbo states. Forceful seizing of Fuel tankers passing through Igbo states in protest for non supply of enough petroleum products to Igbo states in 2001.(Edike 2001; Troops Deployed... 2000)
- The pegging of house rents for landlords at the commercial city of Onitsha where house rent has become exorbitant. Landlords who failed to comply were abducted and thoroughly beaten. (Report from residents of Onitsha)
- Enforcement of sanitation laws on residents of commercial city of Onitsha with serious punitive measures for defaulters.
- The outlawing of the census exercise in many cities in Igbo states on the grounds that these were Biafran territories and therefore should not be counted as Nigerians. Many young men and women involved in the exercise were severely beaten. Many Igbos in other states who shared similar beliefs refused to be counted.(NTA and AIT news reports)
- The taking over of security in the commercial city of Onitsha and settlement of disputes between warring groups in the state.( Report from residents of Onitsha).

Some of these strategies employed by the movement pitched them not only against the Nigerian state but their own people as well. Many were arrested and detained on various occasions, an exercise that leads to more protests and more clamp down. The climax was in 2006 when the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) took over government in Anambra state after the decision of the electoral tribunal and the Appeal court was given in its favour. Many MASSOB members saw it as victory for Biafra as APGA whose presidential candidate Chief Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu was the leader of the defunct Biafra and still serves as a source of inspiration for MASSOB members. It was at this point too that MASSOB degenerated into a militia. They took the laws into their hands to enforce rules which should be enforced by the Nigerian state to the dismay of the Anambra state governor Mr. Peter Obi. When the situation could not be contained by the Nigerian police believed to be afraid of the armed wing of MASSOB, because they do not easily fall prey to gunshots as members are believed to have charms that protect them against gunshots and machete cuts. When the security situation in the state degenerated the governor had to call in the help of the federal government which deployed teams of soldiers to Onitsha to fight the insurgents. In the process many lives were lost as many killed were not even MASSOB members but young men and women going about their daily business. The soldiers were accused of all kinds of human rights abuse, ranging from monetary extortion of thousands of naira to rape and brutality. On one occasion the soldiers opened fire on traders in the motor- spare parts market at Obosi Anambra state and gunned down many young men. The Igbos believed that the soldiers who hailed from the Northern part of Nigeria used the opportunity to revenge the blood of their brothers killed during the reprisal attack of Igbos against the northerners in their midst when Igbos in the north were killed during the Denmark cartoon protest. With that attack, MASSOB degenerated into a militia characteristic of the ones in the Niger Delta. They got involved in the kidnap of prominent and wealthy Igbo men whom they argued have been collaborating with the Nigerian state against their fellow Igbo men but more importantly for their complacency in securing a release for the leader of MASSOB chief Ralph Uwazurike. They release their victim after a ransom running into millions of naira has been paid. Some leaders of the organization have repeatedly argued that the militia involved in violent acts and criminal activities like kidnapping are not MASSOB members but persons trying to tarnish the image of the movement. In the past few months the military and the police have been arms in battle trying to contain the menace of this group camped in the small Island of Enenchele near the river Niger from where they operate. According to news report many of them have been killed in the fight. (MASSOB update 2007). Obviously kidnapping has turned out to become new method of wealth acquisition by the mass of unemployed youths in these movements, and it is fast gaining currency in a state that cares little or nothing about the future of its young ones, in a polity in which the leaders deep their hands in to state coffers and make away with huge sums of money

running into billions of naira. In addition the fact that the Nigerian state negotiate with and is even ready to appease the militia groups in the Niger Delta that employ violence and kidnapping as their main strategy made violence an attractive option for fighting separatist cause. Interestingly many Igbos are against MASSOB when it violates individual rights of Igbo sons and daughters like kidnapping and fixing of house rents for land lords, such actions are criminalized, but they applaud them when they violate the rights of other ethnics in their midst like the reprisal attack at Onitsha in 2006 that saw many Northerners killed; such action is considered defensive, thus confirming Chabal and Daloz (1999) typology of criminal violence and political violence in Africa. Political violence however brutal denotes the struggle for power it is therefore considered legitimate while criminal violence whatever the motive is illegitimate and wrong. The violation of the rights of Igbo prominent sons or elite also underscores the class character of MASSOB membership which is drawn mainly from the large army of the unemployed, artisans petty traders, drivers and commercial cyclists, street urchins, in fact those living on the edge of life. On the other hand many of the Igbo elite belong to the more benign Pan Igbo cultural organizations like Ohan'eze, Igbo- ezue etc accused of being complacent over Igbo rights and using their organizations to fight for selfish ends. The elite organizations no doubt agree with the grievances of MASSOB but not with many of its strategies which they believe border on treason.

## **Conclusion**

The basic issue underlying our argument is that the character of the Nigerian state, namely the pattern of its construction and composition, its rentier character, its power structure, the parochial behaviour of its hegemonic ruling class, especially the politics of exclusion played along the lines of ethnicity, the total indifference of the state to citizen welfare and well being, state centred corruption, and the present market norms that nourishes rather than reduce or eliminate poverty account largely for the emergence of ethnic militia in Nigeria. The grievances that led to the resuscitation of separatist agitation in Nigeria whether by MASSOB or any other similar group borders on inequity in the distribution of power, economic and other social resources of the Nigerian state. Rawls (in Kymlicka 1999:187) observed that "the source of unity in a modern state is a shared conception of justice. According to Rawls 'although a well ordered society is divided and pluralistic...public agreement on questions of political and social justice support ties of civic friendship and secures the bonds of association'. This shared sense of justice is what is lacking in the Nigerian Project, hence the call for sovereign national conference by the different groups at one point or the other to debate the manner and pattern of reconstructing the Nigerian state to give all the groups within it a shared sense of belonging and participation. The demand for this conference has always been rebuffed by the hegemonic group in power as that may jeopardize the centralization that today characterise Nigerian federal system and invariably the rents that flow to it. Militia politics in Nigeria continuously raises the issue of 'true federalism' or put differently the issue of power devolution in an over centralised federal system. Federalism has been identified as one mechanism of addressing group specific rights. According to Lijphart (1977) federalism is not only useful in addressing cleavages in plural societies because it grants segmental autonomy to its smaller subdivisions but is especially useful in federal societies in which segmental cleavages coincide with regional cleavages as it is in Nigeria. Obviously federalism has not been able to address conflicts arising from ethnicity because of its functional deformity in which the centre in a de jure and de facto manner co-opted and usurped powers that ordinarily should be exercised by the state Thus over centralization continues to harm the harmonious relationship of the ethnic groups that make up Nigeria which from the very start never decided to come together. Hence the call for a sovereign national conference is not only legitimate but also timely. This conference shall enable Nigerians decide among other things the manner and pattern of state reconstruction, more especially its power structure and relationship of the various ethnic groups to this structure. In fact it will enable Nigerians decide for themselves whether they still want to stay together and how? Unless this fact is addressed, we may yet not see the end of such manifestation of such tendencies as those exhibited by groups like MASSOB. The agitation of MASSOB is not so much a demand for identity per se but a demand for justice and equity in the pattern of state allocation of resources and power, a demand for participation in the Nigerian project and that is not an illegitimate demand for that is also a demand for identity recognition.

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