



READINGS IN

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**CONFLICT MANAGEMENT  
AND PEACE BUILDING IN AFRICA**

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VOLUME II

**Edited by**

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Readings in Conflict Management and Peace Building in Africa

Volume II

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28. **THE MANAGEMENT OF ETHNO NATIONALISM IN NIGERIA: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE MOVEMENT FOR THE ACTUALIZATION OF SOVEREIGN STATE OF BIAFRA.**

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**Introduction**

The history of Nigeria is a story of micro nationalism. The latter took a former root with the Amalgamation Act of 1914, which fused disparate sub group entities into single entity, called Nigeria. In the process of nation building, the competition for resources and power has shown a hegemonic rivalry by these groups for dominance. Often time's groups that are disadvantaged as a result of this competition have threatened to secede from the country (Melson & Wolpe 1970). The culmination of this micro nationalist expression came to its peak from 1967 to 1970 when the country fought a civil war to prevent the Igbo dominated Eastern Region from making a success of its transformation into a Biafran Republic. The long years of military rule in Nigeria, however contributed significantly in conscripting the space for micro nationalism, but the return to democratic dispensation has seemingly witnessed an intensification of this phenomenon. Hence several groups have emerged in different parts of the country either calling for more autonomy or outright secession from Nigeria (Suberu 1996, Duruji 2005).

One such group is the Movement for the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). The group which emerged in 1999 is campaigning for the revitalization of the defunct Biafran Republic. This struggle is hinged on the philosophy of non violence and non exodus. Though its activities started in Lagos, where its founder Ralph Uwazurike resided, security operatives and government officials did not initially consider the group as a threat (BBC Africa 2000). However They were viewed from official quarters as bands of rabble rousers who were not only seeking attention but would soon fizzle out . This perception was bound to change following the realization that the group was growing in popularity as its activities were spreading phenomenally across the towns and villages of the south east zone and in other parts of the country and beyond where there are substantial Igbo settlements. Moreso, the body was becoming audacious in daring even the nation's security agencies.

The consequent change in governments' tactics and strategies to the group's activities resulted in clashes that have led to arson and loss of lives (Vanguard Aug.29, 2000, Vanguard May 22, 2001, Thisday Nov.8, 2005).

In this paper therefore we shall examine the activities of MASSOB, and the strategies the state has adopted in containing its operations. In doing this, we shall analyze the impact of these responses to the activities of the organization, as well as their implications on inter ethnic relations and nation building in Nigeria.

### **Ethnonationalism**

The concept of ethno nationalism is derived from two related concepts of ethnicity and nationalism. It is a form of nationalism in which the state derives political legitimacy from historical, cultural or hereditary grouping. Ethno nationalism therefore manifests where a sub cultural group attempts to assert their differences not with the objectives of gaining political concessions or autonomy within a political system but assuming outright independence. Gurr & Harff (1994) sees ethno nationalists as relatively large regionally concentrated peoples that were historically autonomous and who have pursued separatist objectives at sometimes during the half century. Gurr cited the Quebecois in Canada, the Kurds of Iraq, Turkey and Iran, Brettons and Corsicans of Spain as examples of Ethno nationalism. Therefore, if we accept this description,



many sub-national Nigerian groups correctly fit into the definition. The Nigerian groups were self-sufficing autonomous entities prior to colonial intrusion and there has been evidence of separatist struggle by the various groups.

Though ethno nationalism is derived from two related concepts of nationalism and ethnicity, there are some differences in the two, which we must explain for purpose clarity. According to Young (1979) nationalism stipulates the 'nation' as a terminal community. Loyalty is given to it with transcendent moral sanctions and authority also invested on it. Therefore, hanging on the premise of independence, the terminal community can only be independent if it frees itself of all constraints upon its autonomy (1979:71-72). Nationalism is one dimension of cultural pluralism. Ethnicity which is another differs from nationalism because it lacks ideological elaboration of total autonomy which is required of nationalism. Ethnicity only exists within a political society consisting diverse groups, it is behavioral in form and conflictual in content (Nnoli 1980:6). This occurs according to Ake (1996:25-27) when there is antagonistic competition between ethnic groups, where political claims are viewed as exclusive and in this scenario, ethnic consciousness becomes politicized and constituted towards making exclusive political claims. It is when ethnicity has been politicized, mobilized and ideologized to the point where the main objective is a terminal community that it can be said to have crossed into the threshold of nationalism (Young 1979:2).

The conditions contributory to ethnic grievances include the pattern of state building, political power and economic development (Guff & Harff 1994:12). Nigeria is a typical example as ethnicity in the country has proved irrepressible, and continuous to flourish (Ake 1996:27). Ethnic consciousness is deeply permeative and has given rise to the emergence of ethnic organizations that challenge the legitimacy of the Nigerian state. We have seen this challenge in the activities of organizations such as the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Egbesu Boys of Africa, Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Bakasi Boys and Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta People (MEND). In the past we have equally witnessed the rise of organizations like the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) a group that raised the plight of the

Ogonis to the level of International sympathy with the Ogoni Bill of Rights as the anchor of their struggle. Picking a cue from them, the coalition of Ijaw youths in 1999 came out with the Kaiama Declaration spelling out their demands on the Nigerian state and the management of resources buried in their lands and creeks. This historic declaration was the event that heightened Ijaw ethno nationalism thereafter. The activities of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra are similar to the afore mentioned organisations, except that MASSOB had not only challenged the very existence of the Nigerian state but further called for its balkanization.

### **Issues in Igbo Ethno nationalism**

The Nigerian civil war has been interpreted various, both as a war of independence and an act of persecution, depending on what side of the divide analysis belongs. According to Amadiume (2000), behind the Biafran secessionist movement was a fight for justice, which was aborted by the superior might of the Federal Military government supported heavily by foreign powers whose interest was to secure a managed condition for economic exploitation (2000: 42-44). Recall the five years immediately preceding the Nigerian Biafra war was political uprising and violence across the nation. Fearon (2006:5) recorded 124 of such instigated riots. Most of the victims of the political violence were Igbo. These riots and killings were more pronounced in the North in coordinated attacks against the Igbo. These attacks were prompted by the fear of Igbo domination especially after the Major Nzeogwu led coup in which prominent Northern political leaders were killed. The counter coup that ushered in General Gowon and overturned the Table triggered further attacks. Onu (2001:9) recalls that in 1967, about 30,000 Easterners were killed in the North, and another 1,800,000 were forced back to the East as refugees. The failures of the central government to stop the pogrom as it is known, as well as bring the perpetrators to justice sparked off reprisal killings in the east, and the ultimate decision of the region to secede from the federation. The over stretching of its capacity due to the massive influx of refugees now displaced in their own country by the pogrom and inability of the centre to stem the tide resulted in an inevitable secession.

The bitter war of unity which ensued ended with the Biafrans capitulating to the superior fire power of the federal government, that consequently reunited the country and declared a no victor, no vanquished with a programme of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation (3Rs).

That declaration by the victorious Federal side ended as mere rhetoric's as the practical reality showed otherwise. Infact the Igbo race were treated purely as defeated foes by other ethnic groups who saw themselves as, the heroes of the war and who have remained so ever since.

Marginalization of the Igbo became the keyword and this was in the form of deliberate disempowerment of the people, politically, economically, socially and militarily by a group or groups that during a relevant timeframe wield political power and control the allocation of material and other resources at the centre (Ikpeze 2000:90).

The Igbo have since the collapse of Biafra been at the receiving end of these calculated policies. Adeyemo (2004:18) writing for Tell Magazine posits that the Igbo area suffers neglect in the sense that issues like erosion menace are not checked, industries not provided in the area, combined with the deliberate policy of non inclusion in the power structure of the country. Re echoing this view, another non Igbo, Douglas Oronto expressed the same line of thought when he said thus "if you look at Nigeria prior to the civil war, you find that the Igbo occupied the top echelons of the military, the civil service and so on. But after the war, they are no where around the cadre of leadership. It took a very long time for the Igbo to begin to demand for presidency" (Tell Oct.11, 2004).

This perception, which is also shared by other Nigerians is widely held by the Igbo including those who did not witness the Biafran Nigerian war (Onu 2001). Ikpeze (2000) has made well articulated effort at analyzing the issue. According to him, the marginalization of post war Igbo nation reflected in political power distribution and control of the allocation of material and other resources at the centre. This manifest in three dimensions economic strangulation, politico bureaucratic emasculation and military neutralization and ostracism all tailored with the objective of keeping the race very weak in the context of power contestation relative to the other major groups in the country.

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 they had in banks. Analysts have interpreted this policy as a calculated attempt to neutralize the savings and capacity of Igbo to rehabilitate and re-integrate into the Nigerian economy (Amadiume 2000). Related to this is the sudden withdrawal of federal troops from the east, a ploy that were aimed at denying the Igbo economy the stimulus for recovery as 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 Igbo were financially constrained to participate, thereby incapacitating the Igbo economically. Also of note was the deficient infrastructural development in the Igbo area resulting in the mass migration of the Igbo to other areas of the country for economic survival. There were also cases of discrimination against the Igbo in the location of industries and the attendant loss of benefits of linkages that comes from such location. In addition to these was the deliberate neglect of ecological problems in the East, especially the problem of soil erosion leading to loss in 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 2000:98). Apart from these policies that economically disempowered the Igbo, other instruments were also used to effectively exclude them from economic and political powers at the centre. Such include the tokenist appointment to strategically insignificant positions, marginal presence of the administrative and headship of ministerial and extra-ministerial departments and parastatals, the distortions of the federal structure to the disadvantage of the Igbo who have the least number of states and local governments compared with the other major tribes and the indifferent response of the federal authorities and even governments of other states to uphold the constitutionally inviolable natural residency and citizenry rights of original Igbo owners as far as issue of abandoned property was concerned (Ikpeze *ibid*).

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 Igbo in the military. Re-absorption after the war was negligible, their rate of upward mobility were very slow as well as the

virtual exclusion of Igbo from highest sensitive military facilities of such important installation as mechanized division or armories.

These were mainly the issues that the Igbo were complaining about since the end of the civil war, all through the years of military dictatorship down to the return to democratic dispensation in 1999. This is well captured in the words of Cletus Nwazurike "since the civil war, things have never been the same. We have been trying as we can to get back to our premier position in the First Republic. The Igbo are marginalized, politically, economically and socially. The state of infrastructure in the Igbo area is in a sorry state of dilapidation, we don't have adequate representation in federal appointments"

Hopes that these would be redressed with the dawn of democracy encouraged Igbo participation in the political transition that ushered in the Fourth Republic. The opportunity of the openness and freedom which democracy offers it was hoped, would witness efforts aimed at redressing the perceived marginalization. Ralph Uwazurike was one of such optimists. Active in the People's Democratic Party (PDP), he worked to ensure the victory of the PDP in 1999 especially at the Federal level where he played a role in the Obasanjo campaign. But to his consternation, the new leadership continued in the line of the receded military dictators (Tell Oct.2004:19). According to Uwazurike MASSOB was birthed because of his convictions. This to him were, the assault on the psyche of the Igbo after the war which continued unabated as they are easily targets of riots and disturbances, the persistent neglect of the Igbo nation by the Federal authorities and failure of the democratic government to assuage the feelings of the Igbo (Insider Weekly, Sept.19, 2005).

### **MASSOB Strategy**

The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) has been described as a youthful and radical organization made up of succeeding generation of Easterners and dominantly, the Igbo who fought the civil war (Onu 2001:14). This description certainly have been overtaken by new realities going by the information we obtained from an interview with the Director of State Security Services in Imo State who said that even men as old as sixty seventy years old are actively involved in the groups' activities.

The group itself emerged in 1999 from the carcass of the Uwazurike's led Igbo Council of Chiefs based in Lagos. Uwazurike who claimed that he had gone to India to under study Mahatma Gandhi's non violent approach to political struggle initially concentrated his activities in Lagos (Tell Oct 11 2004:18). But the major strategy of the group was the mobilization of people of the South East through persuasion and education hinged on its philosophy of non violence. The belief of the group according to Onu (2001) was that if the first attempt at establishing Biafra through violence failed, a non violence is likely to succeed.

Uwazurike, the leader of the group, had also outlined there 25 stages, to the actualization of Biafra. The initial strategy of MASSOB was membership hunting which involved house to house enlistments through persuasion and education. In doing this letters were written in addition to other documentary evidence to priests and traditional rulers aimed at enlightening the Igbo on their plight as well as explaining the mission of the group. Another strategy that opened the channel for clashes with security operatives was rallies, demonstrations and processions. The rally that stunned the authorities was the May 22nd 2000, redeclaration of Biafra at Aba. The unanticipated turn out of massive crowd for that event made government to change its pessimistic view about the organization to that of closer monitoring of the groups activities.

Apart from rallies, the group also has a very powerful propaganda machine. Several soft publications that reel out all manner of sensational reports about the groups' activities abound in the news stand, several blogs and websites and a short wave radio station that broadcast from Washington DC every Saturday forms the chain that stirs and sustains people's interest in the groups' activities and the issues they represent. Also as part of the enlightenment is the hoisting of the flag of the former Biafran Republic in the territories they are fighting to liberate from Nigerian occupation, this along with the mass circulation of souvenirs and insignia all play a part in the consciousness and awareness of the people in the groups' activities.

The most worrisome of these activities to the Nigerian state is the internationalization of the issue. The propaganda machinery of the group is succeeding in winning sympathy of International Right groups(CWIS

2006), Biafra has been accepted by the UN unrepresented nation of the world that was created in 1991 on the strength of UN resolution 1514 of 1947 proclaiming that a people has a right to establish its own state (Onu 2001:14). Though Uwazurike was not allowed to attend the 2001 OAU summit held in Cotonu to present the case of Biafra, the organization has been able to establish networks in these African countries and beyond, it maintains an office in Washington DC capital of the United States of America. On August 26th, 2004 the group tested its popularity among the people of the former Biafran republic as it directed that every Igbo man should stay out of work. The sit at home order was widely adhered, not only in the south east but across the country where Igbo has substantial population. Most markets where Igbo ply their trade were closed. Government offices and private establishments were also affected by the directive as Igbo staged a boycott of these organizations. These were achieved in spite of the massive government campaign against MASSOB and its leaders (Vanguard Aug.27, 2004, Daily Champion Aug.27, 2004, Thisday Aug.27, 2004). Adeyemo (2004) writing for Tell Magazine has this to say of the event "...MASSOB ordered sit at home protest last August 26. The success of that protest was a great feat, considering how passionate an average Igbo man could be about his trade. What that means is that the message of MASSOB, for an Igbo identity and self determination for the race is gaining ground. That apparently sent jitters down the spines of the authorities" (Tell Oct.2004:19). This event and the re-introduction of the former Biafran currency as a legal tender, heightened government anxiety over the groups' activities and operation (The Guardian March 28,2006). According to report by The News magazine, the money was exchanging for between N270 N350 in the country and some neighbouring countries, a worrisome development to government in the country (The News Sept.12, 2005).

The success of the group can be attributed to its organizational structure. According to the Director of State Security Service the group commands a membership of about four million. Similarly the commissioner of Police in Anambra state noted that the group number 1: 20 to Onitsha residents. The administrative format of the group is a four tiers system, consisting of the national where you have the apex leadership holding forth with regular meetings conducted on monthly basis; The Areas equivalent of the states is headed by coordinators; the next is the

Provinces with provincial administrators and complements of a cabinet and the District level where structure similar to provincial administration is replicated. At these different levels of organization there are commissioners and/or directors responsible for various aspects of governance such as education, information, sports etc. This well-knit structural organization not only makes mobilization easier, but also ensures that there is no disconnect between the leaders of the group and the group activities even in the face of opposition and intimidation from agencies of the state. The propaganda machinery of MASSOB has also been successful. This has succeeded in portraying the organization as a harmless victim of state repression. In achieving this, it has appealed to emotions and religious sentiments in winning the support of the people. The reference are usually made to the Christian heritage of the people of the former Biafran republic, the need to resist Islamic intrusion and domination, as well as the Igbo ancestral ties and commonality with the Jews of Middle East especially in their common destinies of persecution, resilience, and the intervention of the God factor in the realization of their dreams.

### **Government Response to MASSOB Activities**

According to Awodiya (2006), 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. The response of the government to MASSOB activism is a re enactment of its strategy of managing ethnic conflicts. This strategy hinges on underplaying or completely ignoring the issues that give rise to the emergence of the conflict and organization spearheading them. Hence the erroneous belief that repression is the ultimate cure for uprising. Most of the issues that gave rise to MASSOB fall into afore mentioned pattern. Response to the cry of marginalization has been slow and contemptuous. Awodiya (2006) had argued that ethnic movements enjoy a large followership in their region of occupation because the Federal Government of Nigeria has failed to give the people in these regions a sense of belonging. The case of the Igbo is very glaring, 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 Force and Police of Biafra during the war with a



promise to pay all their accrued entitlements. That pronouncement was only implemented in the year 2006 (Vanguard May 26, 2006). Given that these men have suffered deprivations for many years, and coupled with government lackadaisical attitude to their plight, groups like MASSOB capitalizes on this lacuna to generate sectarian support for their cause. Effective management of ethno nationalism in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria demands that those issues that engender ethnic based movements or organizations such as MASSOB are appraised and appropriately dealt with. This should be done in such a way that those groups that hatch on perceived inequality and deprivation loose that hold and consequently fizzle away with passage of time.

Also government response to the activities of MASSOB has been characterized by repressive tactics. Though the group professes non violence and projects itself as a harmless organization, its experience with the state has been brutal. This has been the pattern after, the May 22, 2000 re declaration of Biafra at Aba. Obviously unanticipative of the turnout, the police in a panicky attempt to disperse the huge crowd, clashed with the organization resulting in the death of two people (Daily Champion, May23, 2000). The general manhunt to clampdown on the movement and its leadership has occasioned a lot of clashes, most of which has led to deaths. A catalogue of MASSOB casualties in the hands of security operative has been compiled and documented by several right groups. People Against Right Abuses in Nigeria in their 2006 report gave a blow to blow account of monthly clashes with security operatives starting from May 2001 to February 2006. In that account it was recorded that about 80 MASSOB activists have lost their lives, 66 were arrested, detained and arraigned, 106 detained and tortured while 217 were arrested and humiliated (PARAN 2006). Apart from arrests, detention and killings, members of the organization have been at various times arraigned before the courts on charges that range from armed robbery, arson to treason. The leader Ralph Uwazurike, who has been arrested and arraigned several times in the past, is currently in prison for sedition, following his arrest in October 2005 shortly after the re- launching of the Biafran pound as a legal tender.

Repression has not been effective in containing the activities of the organization, but rather it seems to have further radicalized the

movement. Today the group is gradually abandoning its philosophy of non violence, and embracing a culture of confrontation with agencies of the state. For example the result was the mayhem in Onitsha, Nnewi and other parts of Anambra state. What we are witnessing today is a militarized MASSOB appropriating the powers and responsibilities of local security agencies especially the police in its self imposed mandate of maintaining law and order. Thus in market places, motor parks, among others, MASSOB has taken over the responsibility of providing security, and this has not gone unchallenged by groups and bodies that felt checkmated by the antics adopted by MASSOB. It is in this light that we can best understand MASSOB's war against parasite from the motor parks in Onitsha and the violent reactions from the motor drivers union, the National Association of Road Transport Owners (NARTO). The groups attempt to disrupt the census exercise conducted in Nigeria in the south east zone pitched it against security operatives (Sun News March 24, 2006, Vanguard March, 27, 2006).

This sudden transformation of MASSOB from a harmless non violent organization to that which engages in use of violence has created a wedge in the structure of the body. Information obtained from a MASSOB activist and confirmed by the Imo state Director of State Security Service indicates that a splinter group called the Biafran Movement for Sovereignty (BIAMOS) is pursuing the violent option. But another group is committed to the non violent approach.

### **Conclusion**

Ethnic struggle and self-determination advocacy are creations of the society. The case of Nigeria is basically fueled by the perverted structure of its federalism.

The issue of Micro - nationalism in Nigeria has been a recurring decimal in the history of the country. The experience as the Igbo is one as the high point in this ethno-nationalism.

The issues marginalization has been at the core Igbo ethno-naturalism. The long duration military rule indeed conscripted the space for the manifestation, but the widened space occasioned by the transition to democracy in 1999, marked the rise of organization like MASSOB spearheading the revitalization of Biafra. The government approach to

managing ethnonationalism as we noted have not been effective. Therefore government attempt at managing eruptions must be re-examined given the conflagration in micro-nationalist's expression in the country as shown by the activities of MASSOB.

Government should pay more attention to the issues that engender these micro-nationalism. Therefore we recommend that the Sovereign National Conference which several groups have advocated should be explored to write a peoples' constitution on the basis of which Nigeria should be governed.

#### Notes.

i Cited from a Tell magazine cover story report "The Igbo Dilemma" October 11,2004 p.18 - 19

ii Information obtained from the Director of state security services in Imo state in September 2006.

iii Mr. X, male 42 years old is the MASSOB provincial administrator of Ihitte Mbieri in Imo state. The information was obtained in a confidential interview conducted September, 2006.

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