

# **Ethno-nationalist movements and political mobilisation in Africa: The Nigeria experience (1990-2003)**

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**Abstract:**

Contemporary social movements in Africa are shrugging off state patronage in order to reconstruct the substance and direction of local-level development. They are also addressing issues of emancipation, empowerment and social transformation. The mobilisation of marginalised groups for political struggles, resistance to dominant groups within the state, and the importance attributed to participatory models of their activities have demonstrated that African social movements are increasingly becoming political.

Against this background analysis, four ethno-regional organisations in Nigeria are examined in the study. These organizations are the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP); Egbe Afenifere (Society of the lovers of good things); Ohanaeze-Ndigbo (Igbo Citizens Assembly) and, the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF). The study attempts to answer the following questions: how strong are ethno-nationalist movements in influencing the direction of political struggles? Are ethno-nationalist movements enhancing popular participation through engaging the state, or simply extricating their constituents from state hegemony? Which social classes are mobilised in the course of political struggle and the strategies used in mobilisation? The study was conducted at first hand in Nigeria employing a qualitative approach involving desk reviews, interviews, engagement with local debates and the use of archival materials.

## **Introduction**

The forces of economic globalisation and democratisation underlie the political turbulence across Africa in the last decade of the twentieth century, as various groups struggled to survive economic hardship and demanded democratic reforms. The partial retreat of the state amidst the external imposition of economic liberalisation opened up space for new autonomous forms of organization, many of which avoided questions of political power and sought local solutions to growing economic and social decline. Party-states became more willing to tolerate social movement initiatives which might alleviate problems they were unable to address. It was in these struggles that African social movements blossomed, thereby strengthening civil society's efficacy, but at the same time, they also deepened centrifugal forces.

From the Nigerian experience, the paper argues that beyond the civic public realm, there are vast networks of social movements whose capacities have hardly been measured in academic research. Operating at this level are numerous informal grassroots associations ranging from revolving credit unions, vigilante groups, religious sects, neighbourhood associations, co-operative societies, traditional musical groups and ethno-regional movements. The character of social movements in Africa has shifted significantly in the 1980s and 1990s (Olayode 2004: 56f). Contemporary social movements are shrugging off state patronage in order to reconstruct the substance and direction of local-level development. They are also addressing issues of emancipation, empowerment and social transformation. The mobilisation of marginalised groups for political struggles, resistance to dominant groups within the state, and the importance attributed to the participatory model of their activities has demonstrated that African social movements are increasingly becoming political (Olayode 2004: 258f).

Against this background analysis, four ethno-regional organizations in Nigeria are examined in the study. These organizations are the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP); Egbe Afenifere (Society of the lovers of good things); Ohanaeze-Ndigbo (Igbo Citizens Assembly); and the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF). The groups were selected in view of the formidable roles they are playing in political mobilisation of their respective ethnic-groups in Nigeria. These groups started obviously as 'socio-cultural' organizations within groups that felt marginalised, and have become political pressure movements. Their strategies for empowerment and

struggle evolved in politically and socially repressive settings. The focus on ethno-nationalist movements is informed by the strong bond to ethnic sentiments, which is widespread in most African countries. Ethnic affiliations have been manipulated by political leaders as instruments of mobilisation in socio-political struggles.

The study attempts to answer the following questions: How strong are ethno-nationalist movements in influencing the direction of political struggles? Which social classes are mobilised in the course of political struggle and what mobilisation strategies do they use? Do the activities of ethno-nationalist movements transcend ethno-regional interests? What are the limitations of ethno-nationalist movements in democratisation struggles? The study was conducted at first hand in Nigeria employing a qualitative approach involving desk reviews, engagement with local debates and the use of archival materials. Although, the study focuses largely on the Nigerian experience, it was informed by diverse experiences of ethno-nationalism in many African countries, notably, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Congo and Ethiopia. The findings and conclusions of the study are likely to resonate with the experience of other African countries because of similar socio-economic and political experiences.

### **Theoretical Consideration**

Voluntary organizations or associations that do not seek state power have been conceived of as 'civil society', drawing on Hegelian notions of the relationship between the modern state and society under capitalism. Fowler (2002: 287-300) describes civil society as an area for voluntary formal and informal collective citizen engagement distinct from families, state and profit seeking organizations. In the broadest sense, civil society encompasses all social, economic, cultural and political relations, but the emphasis is usually on the political aspects of these relations.

Included in civil society are variety of social movements, village and neighbourhood associations, women's groups, religious groupings, intellectuals, the press and other media, civic organizations, associations of professionals, entrepreneurs, and employees, whose purposes and direction are not controlled by the institutions of state (Hawthron 2002: 276). Social movements are collective efforts on the part of excluded groups, to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to non-institutional forms of political participation (McAdam 1982: 25). The

coherence of social movements is highly dependent on the ability of members to forge common interests, goals and strategies. Human rights tend to be fundamental to these interests and strategies because allegations and perceptions of discrimination, exclusion, oppression, injustice, and exploitation, which all arise from denials and violations of human rights, underlie the emergence of social movements (Alani 2003: 23ff). Ethno-nationalist movements emerge in response to changes in political context and their development and outcomes largely depend on their protest strategies and location in broader waves of mobilization, in which they are usually embedded. Ethno-nationalist movements are purpose-oriented and goal-directed activities of a group over collective grievances (Aderemi /Osahon 2008: 350ff). Like other social movements, African ethno-nationalist movements rarely appear in isolation and often develop together with other movements and forming cycles of contention. Consequently, African ethno-nationalist movements should be studied as a species of social movements.

Ethnic nationalism is the mobilisation of ethnic groups by using language, ethno-history, religion, traditions and customs. In other words, through the rediscovery of an ethnic past, national identity could inspire ethnic communities to claim their rights as nations (Isiksal 2002: 9). A belief in common historical evolution provides an inheritance of symbols, heroes, events, values, and hierarchies and confirms the social identities for separating both insiders and outsiders (Ake 2000: 93).

Far from being primordial and a largely uncontrollable source of instability, contemporary ethno-nationalism is political and to some extent, artificial. Ethnic mobilisation has been a political instrument of the African elites in the post-independence period, much the same way that the phenomenon of nationalism was in the decolonisation struggle. It is against this background that ethno-nationalist movements should be understood.

Mobilisation strategies of ethno-nationalist movements may range from sporadic peaceful protests to sustained violent campaigns like terrorism, armed rebellion and economic sabotage. Among the claims of African ethno-nationalist movements are demands for regional autonomy, greater political freedom within a federation, resource control and outright secession on the basis of self-determination. Most ethno-nationalist movements invoke ethnic sentiments based on common ancestry, religious identity, presumed racial discrimination and past injustice for mass mobilisation. Ethno-nationalist movements tend to express relatively

modest goals or reforms within an existing political structure. Their demands are usually on the platform of civil and economic rights, which are directed to constituted state authorities (Agbu 2004: 11ff).

Given the above conceptualisation, it is obvious that ethno-nationalist movements in Africa did not emerge with the advent of neo-liberal economic reforms. A feature of the nascent African working class populations in the urban areas during the colonial period was their organization into socio-cultural associations. Such associations were important in advancing the interests of their members and, in more instances, in catapulting their members to political positions. The difference between ethno-nationalist movements then and now lies in the expanded mandate of today's associations. The manner in which a particular ethnicity is given an organization form to advance specific political or economic interest is central to this article.

### **Ethno-nationalist movements and political struggles in Africa: A historical overview**

Ethno-nationalism characterised the decolonisation process as various indigenous ethnic movements in many African countries championed the cause of independence against European colonial powers after World War II. The success of nationalist parties rested on their capacity to mobilise and demonstrate mass support, by linking with and articulating the aspirations and grievances of various social movements like trade unions, women's movements, religious groups and ethnic movements.

The initial post-colonial period, from the early 1960s until around the mid-1970s, saw the emergence of a post-independence state often dominated by a centralised ruling party, which now viewed autonomous social movements as a threat to the central project of national development, dominated by the post-colonial state. Given the widely perceived illegitimacy of colonially demarcated borders, the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of European powers, and the precarious existence of nascent independent states, internal decolonization began immediately after independence. These struggles were largely spearheaded by ethno-nationalist movements, which fought for secession or autonomy from their independent states (for example, Biafra, Eritrea, South Sudan and Chad) or contesting the ideological make-up of their countries under the influence of the Cold War rivalry (for example, Angola and Mozambique).

In Ethiopia, ethno-nationalist movements grew immensely during military rule (1974-1991). Apart from the Eritrean nationalist movements, the major ethnic organizations included the Oromo Liberation Front, and Afar Liberation Front; minor organizations included Islamic Oromo Liberation Front, Western Somali Liberation Front and Ogadeni National Liberation Front. By 1991, the Ethiopian army had grown in size, but the regime was overcome by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, OLF and other opposition factions after a long civil war (Welch 1995: 120-123). In South Africa, although the African National Congress and others opposed to apartheid had initially focused on non-violent campaigns, the brutality of the Sharpeville Massacre of March 21, 1960 caused many blacks to embrace the idea of violent resistance. It was in this context that black students formed the South African Students' Organization in 1969, an all-black student group, and from this grew an increasingly militant Black Consciousness Movement. This new movement called for resistance to apartheid, freedom of speech, and more rights for South African blacks.

In the early 1990s, diverse and longstanding socio-economic and political grievances combined with the fall of communism, suddenly made radical political change possible. The transition to multi-party democracy across much of Africa involved both mass protest movements and the mobilisation of existing organizations, particularly trade unions, ethno-cultural organizations and church bodies (Duruji 2008: 75-78). The decline in state capacity and the redirection of external funding to non-governmental organizations strengthened the existing social movements with credible grassroots linkages. The participation of organizations which are rooted in ethno-national agenda in the pro-democracy movements and whose leaders overlap with the pro-democracy movements has always posed a challenge. The activities of ethno-national and cultural organizations sometimes are exclusionary of people of other nationalities thereby promoting sectional or parochial interest that may ultimately hamper collective efforts to achieve nation building.

### **Ethno-nationalist Movements and Political Mobilisation in Nigeria (1990-2003)**

The four ethno-regional organizations examined in this study epitomise the conflicts inherent when sub-national groups seek greater political and

economic clouts and use the language of human rights and the democratisation struggle as 'basis of their campaigns' (Fasehun 2002:10). While these groups operate between the primary units of society and ruling collective institutions on the one hand, on the other hand, they emphasise the collective identity of specific groups, and are willing to use confrontation to achieve their objectives.

The selected period of the study 1990-2003 was one of the most turbulent periods of Nigeria's modern history. There were three successive military rulers between 1990 and 1999 with unprecedented records of human right abuses, economic hardships and political manipulations that culminated in the annulment of the 1993 presidential election. It was not surprising therefore that ethno-nationalist movements blossomed as diverse groups were revitalised to resist military dictatorships and canvass sectional interest. A transition to democracy in 1999 with the election of Olusegun Obasanjo lasted between 1999 and 2003 for his first term in office. The period also witnessed heightened ethnic tension, sectarian violence and ethno-nationalist agitations for devolution of power from the centre to the regions and a renewed call for renegotiation of basis for statehood.

The four selected movements in this section were chosen to show regional variety in the activities of the ethno-nationalist movements in Nigeria. Whereas, MOSOP (Ogoni), Afenifere (Yoruba) and the Ohanaze Ndigbo (Igbo) reflected ethnic specificities and affiliations, the Arewa Consultative Forum is a regional movement that embraces all Northerners, irrespective of ethnic or religious affiliations. The selected movements also started as socio-cultural groups but later became involved in political mobilisation to redress perceived injustice against their own people. The groups also have deep affiliations and support at the grass root due to ability to connect to historical heritage and socio-cultural traditions of their people.

### ***Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP)***

The Ogoni people are an indigenous group that have been known to occupy their present location for about five hundred years (Olarode et al 1998: 72). The people, estimated at over half a million in number, live in an area of about 100,000 square kilometres, making the area one of the most densely populated in Africa. The Ogoni speak four related languages with Khana and Gokana serving as the two major ones. Irrespective of these differences, the people are united in their peculiar environmental reality.

The Ogoni struggle arose from their strategic location in the Nigerian state. Though Nigeria is receiving billions of dollars annually from oil, most of it seems to be disappearing into the national economy and private hands without perceptible benefits to most Nigerians, and particularly to the areas of origin. Few Ogoni profit from jobs, development, or amenities in the oil industry. Instead, they suffered serious environmental degradation that has polluted fishing streams and fresh water sources, poisoned land through spills and blow-outs, and created an atmosphere fouled by decades of flaring natural gas (Olorode 1998: 9f). Thus, the Ogoni struggle was against 'political marginalisation, economic exploitation, and environmental degradation' (Adediwura 2004: 10). The struggle was about 'the emancipation of the people, the re-establishment of the rights of a community as small as Ogoni, and by implication, this stretches to other similar minority groups throughout Nigeria' (Obasa 2002: 5).

The Ogoni struggle clearly illustrates the interplay of politics, economics, and ethnicity. Political and socio-economic changes do not necessarily directly diminish ethnic awareness and identity; they may in fact provoke it. Thus, to assume that ethnicity is primarily the province of the less educated in Africa is mistaken. 'Detribalisation' does not automatically result from greater education, job mobility, or other measures of 'modernisation' (Young 1983: 112). Leadership of ethnically based movements has become a major avenue for aspirant political leaders.

In 1990, MOSOP drafted the 'Ogoni Bill of Rights', which called for 'internal autonomy' for the Ogoni within the Nigerian federation as a solution to their marginalisation. As contained in the Bill of Rights, the Ogoni demanded political control of Ogoni affairs; the right to control and the use of a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development; the right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation, and; to have adequate and direct representation as of right in all Nigerian Institutions (MOSOP. Ogoni Bill of Rights 1990: 2f). While making the demands for 'self-determination', the Ogoni equally re-affirmed 'their wish to remain a part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria' (MOSOP. Ogoni Bill of Rights 1990: 3). The Bill also authorised MOSOP to make representation, for as long as the injustices against Ogoni continue, to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the African Commission on Human Rights and other



international bodies which have a role to play in protecting the rights of a minority group.

In claiming the right to a greater financial share, Ogoni leaders challenged the fundamental principles of centralised government. Control of revenue is the basis of political power in Nigeria. Not to be taken by surprise, on May 5, 1993 the Babangida administration promulgated the Treason and Treasonable Offences Decree, under which the death penalty could be imposed for advocacy of 'ethnic autonomy'.

The Ogoni struggle and the organization of MOSOP were pressed most vigorously by Ken Saro-Wiwa. The Ogoni received sympathetic hearing and interest from the Netherlands-based Unrepresented Nations and Peoples organization (UNPO), and the International Federation for the Rights of Ethnic, Linguistic, Religious and Other Minorities, based in New York. The United Nations sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities also received the petition of the Ogoni people against the Nigerian military regime. In all these international fora, Ogoni materials were widely circulated, and the Nigerian government and Shell Petroleum Development Company were called upon to respond (Welch 1995: 116). The Shell Petroleum Development Cooperation was alleged to be collaborating with the military government of General Abacha to suppress the agitation of the Ogoni People. Apart from being the largest multinational oil company operating in the Ogoni land, Shell was also the biggest culprit responsible for gas flaring, land and water pollution and other environmental degradation in the Ogoniland (Olorode 1998: 13f).

Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni leaders were harassed and detained several times by agencies of the federal government between 1993 and 1994. However, it was General Sani Abacha who subsequently arraigned Saro-Wiwa and others before the Civil Disturbance Tribunal in February 1995, having implicated them in a murder charge preferred against them by the state. They were eventually convicted and sentenced to death by hanging. The sentence was hastily confirmed by the armed forces ruling council and disregarding international calls for clemency, the Ogoni leaders were hanged on November 10, 1995 during the Commonwealth Conference in Auckland.

In spite of the brutal suppression of the Ogoni struggle by the military government, the activism of Ken Saro-Wiwa has had a profound impact on ethno-regional struggles and environmental campaign in Nigeria. The

establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission and the Ministry of Niger Delta Area were indirectly part of the legacies of the Ogoni struggle. The Commission and the Ministry were established to oversee the disbursement of funds and execution of projects in the oil producing areas. Also, the government has increased the revenue allocation of the oil-producing area from one to thirteen percent of the total national revenue.

The most enduring legacy of MOSOP is the continuous struggle of the people of the Niger-Delta region, particularly the youth. Drawing inspiration largely from the Ogoni struggle, there have been proliferations of other/further? ethno-regional organizations and violent struggles in the Niger Delta area. Rampart youths have been kidnapping expatriate workers of the notable oil companies operating in the area, using them as bargains to win concessions from the companies and the government.

### *Egbe Afenifere: the Pan-Yoruba Socio-cultural Organization*

#### *Historical background of Yoruba Nationalism*

Yoruba nationalism arose from the intense Yoruba/Igbo rivalries between 1940 and 1947 when the leadership of the Yoruba in the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), was directly challenged by the emergence of Nnamdi Azikwe, who became the symbol of Igbo achievement and emancipation. These rivalries precipitated a crisis within the ranks of NYM that eventually led to its collapse, losing all its Igbo membership. Before its collapse, NYM had championed the struggle against colonialism at the initial stage. Though, the most important political activities of that period were initially confined almost exclusively to Lagos and led mainly by the Yoruba intelligentsia, the leaders were national in their outlook.

As a result of the collapse of NYM, Chief Obafemi Awolowo<sup>1</sup> and other prominent Yoruba members of the NYM were disillusioned and concluded that the realities on ground did not support their original idea of a 'pan-Nigerian nationalism' (Arifalo, 2001: 23). This development, to some extent would later influence Awolowo's ideas on federalism. Also, it was this development that led to the formation of an organization that would weld

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<sup>1</sup> Chief Obafemi Awolowo was a foremost Nigerian nationalist and a revered Yoruba leader. He was the first Premier of the defunct Western Region of Nigeria and his political ideals of state welfarism and true federalism still shape the contemporary politics of the Yoruba.

together the Yoruba speaking people as the first practical step to the building of a lasting national unity. The organization was formed in London in 1945 and was known as 'Egbe Omo Oduduwa'. It was initially formed as a socio-cultural organization to promote political awareness and a rallying forum to protect the interest of the Yoruba.

The fundamentals of Yoruba nationalism were based on a liberal democratic state governed by a competent, widely-respected leadership; founded on social justice, equity, equality, enlightenment and freedom (Arifalo 2001: 10-13). The goal was true federalism reflected in regional autonomy and a total devolution of power from the centre to the region.

Expounding his thesis on federalism in 1946, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the first secretary of the Action Group (AG)<sup>2</sup> argued:

Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no Nigerians in the same sense as there are English, Welsh, or French. The word 'Nigerian' is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not. (West African Pilot 1946: 23)

For Awolowo, the differences among the varying ethnic groups in languages, social organization, religion and educational advancement slowed down progress in certain sections and thereby caused frustration among more ambitious groups. He argues that each of the constituent units of Nigeria was 'a nation by itself with many tribes and clans', and they should be allowed to solve their problems, according to their peculiar traditions and ideals (Awolowo 1947: 67f). Thus, the basis of Yoruba nationalism like the Ogoni struggle is rooted in 'self-determination' within the Nigerian state.

The aims and the objectives of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa were to unite the various groups in Yoruba land, and to create and foster the idea of a single nationalism in Yoruba land. This was clearly spelt out in the constitution of the society thus:

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<sup>2</sup> The Action Group, a left-leaning political party, formed in the 1950s was supported largely by the Yoruba population of the then Western region of Nigeria. It also had appeal in the later Mid-Western and Middle Belt regions of the country.

The Egbe, as a cultural organization would study the political problems of Yoruba land, combat the disintegrating forces of tribalism, stamp out discrimination within the group and against minorities, and generally infuse the idea of a single nationality throughout the region. (Arifalo 2001: 85).

When the colonial officers could no longer treat the nationalist movements and the demands for self-determination by Nigerians with hubris, constitutions that sought to balance the cultural diversity of the people were promulgated and elections were held under them. The constitutional development was partly a response to growing ethnic consciousness, which was fastly determining political groupings. It was in this context that Egbe Omo Oduduwa formed the Action Group (AG), the political party that maintained a firm hold over the Western region from the early 1950s until its proscription by the military government in 1966. Thus, Egbe Omo Oduduwa became the platform for the propagation of the ideology of the party and also a vital link between the party and the traditional rulers. For the ordinary people in the rural areas of Yoruba land whose political and cultural interest were almost inseparable, there was no clear distinction between Egbe Omo Oduduwa and Egbe Afenifere, the Yoruba name for Action Group.

### **The Revival of Yoruba Nationalism in the 1990s**

The revival of Yoruba nationalism in the 1990s was anchored in opposition to decades of military autocracy, and the Northern oligarchy's claim to power, and the struggle for the realisation of the presidential mandate of Chief Moshood Abiola in the June 12, 1993 presidential election. It was for the realisation of these objectives that the Egbe Afenifere was revived on the basis of the original structures of the defunct Egbe Omo Oduduwa. It was largely made up of political associates of the late Obafemi Awolowo and other Nigerians who believed in his political ideals. The group had organised under the umbrella of 'Owo Meeting' before the adoption of the name 'Egbe Afenifere' in January 1993.

The core values of Afenifere are rooted in the political philosophy of Obafemi Awolowo. Afenifere was largely instrumental in rallying together all the progressive groups in Nigeria during the democratisation struggle. For example, the group was responsible for the formation of the People Solidarity Party (PSP) that was not registered alongside others by former

president Ibrahim Babangida regime. Afenifere also played a crucial role in the coalition that was formed by pro-democracy movements to resist military dictatorship. As a group, Afenifere became the rallying point for the Yoruba at a crucial time. For a people known for their frontline role in the struggles for freedom, justice and good governance right from the colonial era, Afenifere was a ready platform in the struggle for the actualisation of the annulled 1993 presidential election. It was not surprising therefore that under the leadership of Afenifere, the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), a coalition of pro-democracy groups, became a formidable force against pro-longed military rule.

In the transition programme of General Abdusalam Abubakar, Egbe Afenifere together with other sixteen progressive unions established the Alliance for Democracy (AD), thus following the footsteps of Egbe Omo Oduduwa. The Alliance for Democracy subsequently became the political platform on which Afenifere propagated and protected the interest of the Yoruba. For the Afenifere, only a pan-Yoruba political party could offer the legitimate platform to canvass for the core values they stood for, particularly, true federalism and national restructuring.

### **Ohanaeze-Ndigbo (Igbo Citizens Assembly)**

A parallel organization that operated in a similar way to Afenifere is Ohanaeze-Ndigbo, which was established after the Nigerian civil war to champion the cause of Igbo nationalism.

The Igbo predicated their demands on their perceived marginalisation in the nation's power calculation by the successive governments after the war. According to their persistent argument, they have no visible presence in the power hierarchy of the federal bureaucracy, in the armed forces, and in the commerce and industry sector. They also contend that they are deliberately being screened out from positions of political power. This is apart from what they perceived as the deliberate refusal of successive governments to develop and renovate the infrastructural facilities in the South East zone, which over the years remain the woes of Ndigbo.

The Igbo seem to have a valid case in their claim for marginalisation. Successive military governments appeared not to have forgotten the 'experiences' of the Biafra war. Rather than implementing the post-war slogan of 'reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction', the Igbo would not be entrusted with sensitive and strategic positions, either in the military

or the government bureaucracy. Through deliberate and covert government policies like the quota system and ethnic balancing within the federation, Igbo republicanism has been repressed.<sup>3</sup> Individuals, who would have normally been promoted within the military, the ministries, and the universities through self-effort and merit, have been systematically passed over. These failures and hindrances have given rise to a collective feeling of abandonment, betrayal and frustration; which led to the revival of Igbo nationalism, championed by the Ohanaeze-Ndigbo.

Literally, 'Ohanaeze' means 'community, the people and their leaders'. It is an appealing nomenclature that captures the essence of governance in Igbo land. The leader (Eze) is a mere messenger, delegated by the people (Oha) to do their bidding, as his potentials would allow, but the central authority remains with the gathering of the people (assembly). Ohanaeze was expected to serve as a focal point of reference, direction and to provide a collective leadership in matters affecting the interest, solidarity and general welfare of Ndigbo in the context of the Nigerian state. It was also to 'promote, develop and advance Igbo language and culture, and to inspire confidence and pride in Ndigbo, and encourage their achievement orientation in various aspects of life' (Olayode 2004: 189). As a non-partisan, non-sectarian organization, Ohanaeze committed itself 'to the principles of freedom, equality, justice, free enterprise and the struggle to preserve the Igbo corporate existence that is free from rancour and submissive to the will of God' (Ohanaeze 2003: 1f). The Igbo question in Nigerian politics is basically centred on the enthronement of social justice, equity, mutual participation and integration. From a wider viewpoint, the Igbo question is an 'integral part' of the unresolved 'national question'.

Although established as a 'socio-cultural' organization, Ohanaeze-Ndigbo has been using 'cultural renaissance' for creating political awareness, grassroots mobilisation, and to draw attention of governments to the 'alleged injustices' against Ndigbo by successive governments since independence. For example, Ohanaeze presented a petition before the

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<sup>3</sup> For example, since the end of the Biafra war until 2011, no officer from Igbo origin was appointed as service chief in the Nigerian armed forces while it was only in 2010 that the first Inspector-general of police from Igbo origin was appointed. Also since the end of the civil war, Nigeria has not elected a president from Igbo origin unlike the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba who have had their turns in ruling Nigeria.

Oputa Panel on human rights violations.<sup>4</sup> The representation of Igbo by Ohanaeze legitimised the organization as the authentic voice of the Ndigbo. Ohanaeze's petition was hinged on the thesis that the North, working in concert with some other parts of the country had embarked on a 'deliberate programme to marginalise and exterminate the Igbo' (Onwubiko 2001: 23). Ohanaeze defines marginalisation as 'a purposeful denial of rights of some members of a given unit by some other members of the group who control the power of allocation of resources' (Onwubiko 2001: 14).

The remedies Ohanaeze sought include financial compensation for the bereaved and dismissed Biafran officers; compensation for the scorched earth policy during the war and reversals of economic marginalisation and restitutions where possible. Apart from demanding a 'national apology' for the injuries inflicted against Igbo people, Ohanaeze also sought an assurance of '*Ozomena*' - a national vow that Ndigbo will never be an object of victimisation in Nigeria again.

While making suggestions on how to move the nation forward before the Oputa Panel, the group asserted that the constitution must address more explicitly and unequivocally the foundation question of the character of the Nigerian state. It therefore demanded a sovereign national conference of all the ethnic groups as the proper and effective forum for resolving the national question (Nwabueze 2001: 4f).

However, the weakness of Ohanaeze as a socio-cultural organization was clearly exposed by its venturing into partisan politics. Unlike the Afenifere, Ohanaeze does not have a political structure to propagate and realise its political vision for the Ndigbo. Also, it does not have charter or moral position that empowers it to sanction its members that are putting personal and party interests over and above collective aspiration of the Ndigbo. In other words, Ohanaeze is a voluntary cultural organization without any power of chastisement or enforcement. It can only make moral propositions to the individual politicians, which they are at liberty to accept or reject.

Despite its shortcomings, Ohanaeze Ndigbo has made impact in raising political awareness among the Igbo and articulating a common political objective. They have also made some progress in closing the cracks among

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<sup>4</sup> The Oputa Panel modelled after South Africa's Truth and Conciliation Commission was set up by the regime of President Obasanjo in 2001 to investigate cases of abuse of power by successive military regimes.

the Igbo, thereby enabled them to be more assertive in their demands for equity within the Nigerian nation.

### *Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF)*

The Hausa and Fulani are often grouped together by historians in connection with the Islamic Jihad of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the foundation of the Sokoto Caliphate and some independent Emirates. Especially since then many Fulani adopted the Hausa language and culture and intermarried with them to such an extent that the two groups have become difficult to distinguish. This group has two cultural elements that most sharply distinguish them from the Igbo and to a lesser extent, the Yoruba: a deep but diffuse Islamic faith and a tradition of large-scale rule through centralised authoritarian states.

The structure of Emirate power was highly centralised. The Emirs appointed the administrative elites, conferred aristocratic titles, and directly or indirectly controlled all offices down to the village chiefs and ward heads. The scope of Emirs' authority was immense, primarily because it was theocratic, resting on a deep religious foundation. Tolerance of opposition was antithetical to the autocratic political style of the North. Almost absolute power produced an equally absolute duty of obedience on the part of the mass of the citizens, a duty which was in no way abated by Islam injunction (Dudley 1968: 34).

At a meeting of the Northern educated elites in Kano on December 1948, a 'cultural organization' known as 'Jamiyya Mutanen Arewa' (the Northern People's Congress) was formed, apparently influenced by the political activities of ethno-regional groupings in the South (Kwanashie 2002: 12). The stated objectives of the organization, 'to combat the three fatal evils, namely: laziness, corruption and political ignorance' clearly showed that its interest went beyond cultural affairs (NPC 1963: 8). In 1951, the Congress was converted to a political party with the slogan: 'One North, One People, Irrespective of Religion, Rank or Tribe'. Unlike the other parties that developed at the period, the Congress's conception of the North was monolithic, both territorially and culturally. It aimed to represent all communities and all social classes within the region. The party built up an active membership that has been described as representing 'a coalition of interests that included hereditary rulers, traditional chiefs, the western educated elites, the merchants, peasants and the malams' (Clifford 2003: 8).



In contrast to Afenifere, MOSOP and Ohanaeze-Ndigbo which represented definite ethnic groups, Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) is a regional political pressure group that emerged as countervailing force to the resurgence of ethno-regional groupings in the South. It was a realignment of forces to revive the idea of 'monolithic North', which was championed by the defunct Northern People's Congress (NPC) under the leadership of Ahmadu Bello.<sup>5</sup> According to its constitution, the aims and objective of the Forum were to foster and strengthen the foundation of Northern unity in the context of one Nigeria and set up machinery for regular dialogue to ensure that issues likely to cause breach of the peace are settled amicably (ACF 2001: 2-3).

Ironically, the ACF that championed the candidature of a Southerner for the presidency in 1999 has been most vocal in its accusation of 'marginalisation' against the president since his inauguration. Thus, the ACF decided to champion the 'perceived northern agenda' in the 2003 general election – snatching power back to the North and installing a president that respects and guarantees the interests of the North'. Mohammed Buhari, who was generally perceived as the ACF candidate, contested and lost to Olusegun Obasanjo in the 2003 presidential election.

While the marginalisation cry of the North may seem bogus within the larger context of national spread of political appointments and resource allocation, the ACF has been the rallying point of the Northern elites in its opposition to promote and articulate the interest of the North.

### **Ethno-nationalist Movements and Conflicts in Democratic Nigeria (1999-2003)**

The restoration of democracy to Nigeria in 1999 after sixteen years of unbroken military dictatorship raised hope for a peaceful resolution of the unresolved issues of the national question. Democracy thus opened up the space for the revival of ethno-nationalist sentiments, which had been suppressed by repressive military rule.

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<sup>5</sup> In the 1959 independence elections, Ahmadu Bello led the NPC to win a plurality of the parliamentary seats and forged an alliance with Nnamdi Azikiwe's NCNC (National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons) to form Nigeria's first indigenous federal government which led to independence from Britain. In forming the 1960 independence federal government of the Nigeria, Bello as president of the NPC, chose to remain Premier of Northern Nigeria and devolved the position of Prime Minister of the Federation to the deputy president of the NPC.

With a relative liberal environment that opened up the space for freedom of association and expression, a new form of ethno-nationalism has emerged in Nigeria through militant and violence-oriented movements who are not afraid to engage security forces in open armed confrontations. Some of these ethno-nationalist sentiments have manifested in the emergence of militant ethno-nationalist movements, especially in the Niger Delta region under the umbrella of the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), the renewed demand for defunct Republic of Biafra spearheaded by the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the incessant clashes among minority groups in the Middle Belt region and the frequent religious disturbances and Sharia-instigated riots in the North (Duruji 2010: 1f). Other militant movements that emerged are the Niger Delta Volunteer Force, Egbesu Boys of Africa, Oodua People's Congress and Bakassi Boys, among others. The activities of these organizations provoked spontaneous ethno-religious crisis outside the confines of the law.

The capability of the new democratic government to address the issues of the national question was however, constrained by its institutional weakness, which was a fall out of decades of military dictatorships. For example, the party-structures and the legislatures that were non-existent during military rule emerged too weak and inexperienced to respond to the challenges of post-transitional conflicts. Also, the police and the judiciary had been greatly enfeebled and subjected to government manipulation during the military era, thereby lacking the public credibility and popular confidence to arbitrate on conflictual issues (Olayode 2009: 24f). The inability of the state to manage these crises effectively endangers the nascent democracy and weakens the fabric of the state.

In the first four years following the era of democratic rule in Nigeria (1999-2003), about 10,000 people were killed and over 750,000 people have been displaced in ethno-religious violence across the country (Olayode 2009: 31). The concern of most Nigerians with the escalation of ethno-religious crises is its impact on democratic consolidation. In the face of escalation of ethno-religious violence in the country and the seeming impotence of the police to maintain peace, the government relied heavily on the military to bring the situation under control (Olayode 2004: 222ff).

The heavy reliance on the army by a democratic government for the maintenance of peace has raised doubts about subordination of military to civil authority. Beside the threat of the military, the growing domestic

instability and turmoil seriously negates the ideals of democracy. Hence, democratic consolidation in a context of heightened inter-ethnic rivalry, division and distrust seems quite unlikely. The strangulation of public space by successive military dictators, repressive one-party state and intolerant civil rulers have largely prevented social movements from playing more active roles in political mobilisation. In many cases, social movements have been forced to operate from underground and in a very hostile environment characterised by repression and intimidation.

### **Conclusion**

The organizations examined in this article differ in many respects from conventional civil society organizations. They started initially as socio-cultural groups and later involved in political struggles; sought major restructuring; focused on collective grievances; and were highly selective in their use of human rights language. The basis of their struggle is 'self-determination' within a national entity. They often utilised traditional symbols and cultural solidarity for grassroots mobilisation. Their sense of unity to a large extent was defined by resentment against exploitation by 'outsiders' – even though these 'outsiders' were citizens of the same country (Welch 1995: 131).

For instance, the Ogoni and Igbo nationalism were motivated by deep-seated feelings of economic injustice and political marginalisation. Almost the same logic drove the Afenifere's resolve to roll out a political party. Perhaps, more than the Igbo, the Yoruba felt a sense of political marginalisation in the deliberate frustration of their past attempts to capture federal power, especially with the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election.

Thus, the struggle for power sharing in Nigeria was reduced to a struggle for hegemony among the three major ethnic groups, namely the Hausa/Fulani, the Yoruba and the Igbo. The over three decades of military dictatorship resulted in an increasing hegemony of the Hausa/Fulani faction to the near- exclusion of the other two contenders for power. The Southern minority groups as typified by the Ogoni also believe that they deserve to have a substantial control of oil revenue, which is extracted from their communities instead of the 'tokens' they receive as revenue allocation from the federal account.

From the analysis of the four ethno-regional organizations, there were fundamental differences in the context and political aspirations of the leaders of the North and South. In the South, though in some cases traditional chiefs have been co-opted by the ruling class to provide legitimacy and popular acceptance; political leadership largely sprang from the people, that is, from the grassroots. In the North, however, the ruling class made up of the sons and kinsmen of the Emirs took over the political leadership of the people. They expectedly would represent their own class interests, rather than the popular will of the people. While opposition was not tolerated in the North, the South by contrast, had cultural tradition of opposition emanating from the wider dispersion of authority: a certain respect for rights of criticism and opposition, stemming from the limits of centralised authority. Also, in the North, power was used to preserve the position of a traditional dominant class, which incorporated rising commercial and professional elements in a subordinate role. By contrast, in the South, the ruling parties were engines of class formation, inaugurated and controlled by modern professional and business elites, who entrusted the traditional rulers in subordinate positions.

Although, the ACF, like the Afenifere, MOSOP, and Ohanaeze, believes in the corporate existence of Nigeria as a nation, it disapproves of the clamouring for 'national restructuring, resource control, rotational presidency and federalism', the issues that form the basis of ethno-regional nationalism in the South. Apart from ACF, other northerner opinion leaders are clearly opposed to any form of political restructuring of the country or a Sovereign National Conference. This opposition may probably be due to the fear of losing out its structural dominance, which has been the basis of political hegemony since independence.

The background to the emergence of ethno-nationalist movements was the utilisation of ethnic solidarity by the governing elites across the various regions as means of bargaining for political power and gaining economic concessions from the centre. However, while the elite factor is a major impetus for ethnic mobilisation, it is important to emphasise that ordinary people also participate actively out of a feeling that they will benefit from the expressions of ethnic mobilisation, which they usually perceive as the best way to advance their interest. Many scholars have discussed ethnicity

as 'bargaining tool' in the struggle for economic accumulation and political power.<sup>6</sup>

The Nigerian experience is a reflection of the general trend. African political struggles remain severely divided by ethno-nationalism. Transitions away from authoritarian rule provide some opportunities for trans-ethnic co-operation, but in the near term and on the whole, they have the opposite effect. Africa continues to demonstrate a range of political vectors with regard to ethnicity and political mobilisation.

As demonstrated from the Nigerian experience, there has been a change since the early 90s in the character of socio-cultural movements from non-partisan to political movements. As a result of the harsh political environment under successive military dictators, socio-cultural movements were deeply involved in stirring up opposition to military rule and grassroot mobilisation for democratisation in Nigeria. This new trend is a remarkable departure from the 'welfare and leisure' preoccupations characteristic of the colonial and immediate post-colonial socio-cultural 'clubs'. Thus, many old and new associations are striving to enhance their capacity to direct their own affairs. They are also rejecting traditional roles assigned by the state and are addressing issues of emancipation, empowerment and social transformation. In some cases, their independence has put them on a collision course with government.

Apart from changes in the content of associations, the new trend is a manifestation of the consolidation of an autonomous socio-political space between the state and family structures within which cultures, traditions, politics, and interest articulation prevails. The inability of the various groups to resolve or agree on some of the issues related to the 'national question' is primarily responsible for the fragmentation of social movements in Nigeria along ethno-regional lines. Rather than view these divisions as a 'drawback' or the absence of a genuine social movement in Africa, they are part of the process of its growth and the resolution of the lingering national question.

As revealed in the study, the activities of MOSOP, Egbe Afenifere, Egbe Omo Oduduwa, ACF, and the Ohanaeze-Ndigbo have deepened Nigeria's democratisation, and promoted pluralism in the society. However, the potential for withdrawal from the state also exists within these

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<sup>6</sup> Among others, see Nnoli 1980; Osaghae (1994).

organisations. These associations operate in the so-called 'primordial, public realm', and thus not additives in their contribution to a common concept of individual liberty. Kinship, on which much of the strengths of the ethno-nationalist movements are ultimately based, is intrinsically segmentary. Most of the ethno-regional associations in Africa are primarily concerned with the welfare of their own kinsmen.

Therefore, the socio-cultural structures of a society affect the way in which civil society configures, and interacts with the state. Africa has had a long history of socio-cultural groupings along ethno-regional lines. As argued in this paper, this salient feature has not been significantly diminished by 'modernisation'. In the struggle for decolonisation, cultural organizations, religious groups and ethnic unions featured prominently. Likewise, in the third wave of democratisation of 1990s, ethnic solidarities were often utilised for grassroots mobilisation against dictatorships, and for political mobilisation. Thus, contrary to the conventional views, 'ethno-nationalist movements' operate independently and relatively free in the public domain, without undue interference from the state. They therefore qualify for inclusion into the arena of social movement.

The most noticeable feature of African ethno-nationalist movements is that they are primarily social and cultural and only secondarily political in orientation. Ethno-nationalist movements are located in the cultural sphere as a major arena for collective action rather than instrumental action in the state. Moreover, with little concern to directly challenge the state, these groups resisted incorporation in institutional levels. They tend to focus on a single issue, or a limited range of issues connected to a single broad theme such as marginalisation, peace, resource sharing and environment. Ethno-nationalist movements set their focus on grass-roots with the aim of representing the interests of marginal or excluded groups. Paralleled with this ideology, the organization's mobilization strategy is also locally based, centred on small social groups and loosely held by personal or informational networks such as radios, newspapers and posters. This 'local-and issue-centred' characteristic which does not necessarily require a highly agreed ideology or agreement on ultimate ends makes these movements distinctive from the 'old' labour movement with a high degree of tolerance of political and ideological difference appealing to broader sections of population.

**Abstract:**

Gegenwärtige Soziale Bewegungen in Afrika schütteln staatliche Patronage ab, um die Inhalte und Ausrichtungen lokaler Entwicklung neu zu gestalten. Sie werfen Fragen von Emanzipation, Empowerment und sozialem Wandel auf. Die Mobilisierung marginalisierter Gruppen für politische Kämpfe, der Widerstand gegen vorherrschende Gruppen innerhalb des Staates und die Bedeutung, die partizipatorischen Handlungsmodellen beigemessen wird zeigt, dass afrikanische soziale Bewegungen zunehmend politisch werden. Vor diesem Hintergrund werden in dieser Studie vier ethno-regionale Organisationen in Nigeria untersucht. Diese sind das Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP); Egbe Afenifere (Society of the lovers of good things); Ohanaeze-Ndigbo (Igbo Citizens Assembly) und das Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF). Die Studie versucht, folgende Fragen zu beantworten: Wie stark beeinflussen ethno-nationalistische Bewegungen die Richtung politischer Kämpfe? Stärken ethno-nationalistische Bewegungen eine gesellschaftliche Partizipation durch die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Staat oder befreien sie ihre Mitglieder von staatlicher Hegemonie? Welche sozialen Klassen werden während politischer Kämpfe mobilisiert? Der Artikel basiert auf Feldforschungen in Nigeria und folgt einem qualitativen Ansatz der auf Interviews, Teilnahme an lokalen Debatten und Archivmaterial zurückgreift.

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