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## **Contemporary Igbo Nationalism and the Crisis of Self-Determination in the Nigerian Public Sphere**

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## **Introduction**

One recurrent feature of politics in recent times is the demand of various ethnic nationalities to be politically recognised and affirmed as distinct identities in a plural society. This politics of recognition, which takes the form of ‘nationalism’ or ‘ethno-nationalism’,\* has gained momentum with the resurgence of nationalist claims on a global scale. As an outcome of shifting political, social and economic contexts globally, nationalist identities are constantly emerging, re-created and re-defined as groups negotiate their identities and interests in the quest for self-determination. While these tendencies pose grave challenges to the security and sovereignty of the nation-states in which they occur, in some quarters they are positively viewed as legitimate movements for minority rights and self-determination. This is reflected in the manner in which global developments and the crisis of the post-colonial African state opens up the state for interrogation and continues to shape nationalist resurgence and the quest for self-determination. The dominant phenomenon in post-colonial Africa states involves the clash between a homogenizing (Western style) nation-state project characterized by the unresolved crisis of state ownership and contested citizenship on the one hand; and one that advocates a national unity project that upholds the rich multiplicity of plural identities based on negotiation, equity, popular sovereignty, local autonomy, and equal access to power and resources on the other hand. These are the core issues in nation-building and remain the essence of the ‘national question’ in many post-colonial African states. The nature of Nigeria’s faltering federalism upon which the ruling elite is built and reproduced, the disconnection between the ruling class and the citizens, the absence of a public space for legitimate expression of grievances, and the retreat of the state under the rubric of economic adjustment and crisis in recent times have all combined to intensify the struggles over the ‘public sphere’ and have elicited the transformation of the ‘public sphere’ into a contested space and an arena for struggles and claim-making.

The relevance of the ‘public sphere’ as a realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed opens it up to contestations by various social actors and processes that are associated with it. The challenge confronting the public sphere theory today is that it has

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\* I shall use these concepts more or less interchangeably, as well as a third concept ‘ethnicity’.

remained exclusively attached to the academic moment and environment of its emergence; as a consequence, it remains fixated to a limited scope that shuts out a broader articulation of the theory. In spite of Habermas' key intellectual engagement with the 'public sphere' and its application across disciplinary boundaries, the largely nation-centred arrangement initially envisaged has been radically altered. This alteration stems from the emergence of contemporary scenarios initiated by the pressures of globalization, and how this has restructured the public sphere and reshaped its structure, dynamics and mode of articulation. Prominent contributors to the public sphere theory have recently addressed the ways in which the contours of the nation-state and its semblance of a public sphere is shifting, but it is apposite to engage thoroughly with the implications of these developments for the current status of the public sphere and its democratic prospects within national boundaries.

The foregoing provides the backdrop against which contemporary Igbo nationalism is explored within the Nigerian public sphere. Rooted in the aborted secessionist attempts of the Igbo nation in the 1960s, the resurgence of Igbo nationalism in Nigeria marks a radical departure from the literature on self-determination in Nigeria which has largely been associated with minority ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta, or the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) of Yoruba extraction (prior to its deconstruction by the Obasanjo administration). Emergent forms of Igbo nationalism<sup>†</sup> became evident in the first two decades of the twentieth century as part of Igbo resistance to British colonial domination. Based on its egalitarian, individualistic and republican nature, Igbo reaction during this period was not only expressed in terms of complete rejection and opposition, it was also militantly anti-colonial. In the aftermath of colonial conquest and subsequent incorporation into the Nigerian project, the Igbo nation has always sought for an 'elbow room' to assert its nationhood within the contours of the emergent Nigerian formation. The major thrust of Igbo nationalism has been shaped by the need to pursue its own

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<sup>†</sup> The term 'nationalism' is often used to connote two different concepts which are in conflict with one another. First, it is sometimes used to connote identification with, and loyalty to the 'nation' in terms of representing a state structure irrespective of the ethnic composition of the state's population (e.g. American, Nigerian or Indian nationalism). Second, it also connotes identification and loyalty to the 'nation' in the sense of a human grouping which may or may not be essentially coterminous with a state (e.g. Croatian, Scottish, Igbo or Yoruba nationalism). This paper uses the term 'nationalism' in the latter sense.

‘advancement’ and ‘modernisation’ within a plural society. However, these aspirations have been challenged by a combination of historical and social forces in the Nigerian public space, and presently, one can safely conclude that the Igbo nation is at a critical cross-road.

Based on the foregoing, this paper represents an attempt to push contemporary Igbo nationalism in the Nigerian public sphere towards an engagement with the historical and social contexts of its emergence. These contexts are also laden with relations and dynamics of power (locally and globally) that are refracted back into the public sphere making it an arena for resistance, domination and legitimation. This raises some preliminary questions: What constitutes the quest for ‘Igbo-Nigerian’, ‘Nigerian-Igbo’ or ‘Igbo’ citizenship? What is the role of the public sphere in shaping the context of the ‘Igbo question’ in Nigeria? What does this mean in the context of the yet to be resolved national question and the nation-state project in Nigeria? Herein lies the crux of this paper.

This paper is divided into five broad sections. The first introduction sets out the main issues, arguments and positions. The second section delves into a brief recap of the Habermasian concept of the ‘public sphere’, and emerging perspectives on the issue. The third section has three parts, each of which proceeds by placing the historiography of Igbo nationalism within three observable phases in the Nigerian public sphere. The first phase relates to the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial phases of nation-building; the tensions and crisis in the management of Nigeria’s federal experiment which was characterized by ethno-regional marginalization; the emergence of a new Igbo nationalist project culminating in the creation of the secessionist Republic of Biafra and the descent into civil war. The second phase engages the post-civil war phase and the post-war reformation and development policies of resettlement, rehabilitation and reintegration of the Igbos; the state creation phase under which the Eastern region and the East Central State was progressively split into different states; the introduction of SAP and the growing concerns about the marginalization, underdevelopment and disempowerment of the Igbos owing to the hegemonic control of federal power and oil resources; and the

agitation to address the 'Igbo question' and its share of the national patrimony. The third phase captures the emergence of radical grassroots-based critiques of Igbo elite politics, particularly, after the June 12, 1993 debacle and Nigeria's return to civil rule in 1999. This paper contends that the perceived failure and treachery of elite Igbo groups, like *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo* among others, to adequately address the 'Igbo question' has led to the emergence of the Movement for Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) as an alternative to the mainstream elite-led Igbo groups. With the intensification of political contention through diaspora activism, funding and support, transnational Igbo groups and individuals are also investing in MASSOB as an alternative political project, thereby, transforming it into a transnational radical nationalist movement.

### **Beyond Habermas: What is New?**

Habermas' *'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1989)'* has come to serve as a reference point for current trends in public sphere theory and sets the agenda for much of the debate on these issues. Despite the extensive criticisms of his work it has remained a landmark contribution to democratic political theory. In exploring the 'public sphere theory' attempts are made to engage with Habermas, and more importantly, to engage with other theories and frameworks which provide alternative views on how the public sphere can be problematised and explored. First, this requires a brief recap of the Habermasian project; and secondly, it calls for an engagement with the contemporary generation of critical theorists who seek to break new grounds beyond his work.

As conceptualised by Habermas, the 'public sphere' is:

*'a realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed.... and in which citizens can confer in an unrestrictive manner (that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions) about matters of general interests'* (Habermas 1974: 49-53, cited in Held 1981).

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1989) makes two central claims. The first relates to various social changes within three national contexts (Britain, France and Germany) in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries upon which a bourgeois public sphere emerged. Over a relatively short period, the social setting in these contexts stimulated and aided a state of affairs that gave rise to the coming together of a large number of middle class men in their capacity as private individuals to engage in reasoned argument over crucial issues of common interests and concern, creating a 'space' where new ideas, practices and discipline of rational public debate were nurtured. The second assertion relates to the prevailing context which acted as an impediment to weaken this 'public space' almost at its inception, such that the notion of the 'public space' in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century is ridden with antinomies, contradictory inclinations and features.

In the three contexts covered by Habermas the dates and precise details of the advent and decline of the public sphere differed considerably. However, Habermas' over-arching project is to illuminate the influence of the changes in the economic and political systems on the transformation of cultural institutions and practices (Hohendahl 1979). On a general level, Roberts and Crossley (2006: 2-3) note, that:

*'One of the key historical changes facilitating the rise of the public sphere was the increasing differentiation of society, and particularly, a separation of political authority from the sphere of everyday and domestic life. This was constituted, in part, through the centralisation of political power in the national state, a process which made effective power remote, and also by the separation of church and state, and the differentiation of public norms/law and private moral belief consequent upon this separation'.*

As Habermas (1987) later puts it, the state was increasingly 'decoupled' from the inter-subjective fabric of everyday life, and from the prescriptive texture of that fabric. These and other developments combined to generate a collective demand for accountability and agents constituted themselves as publics in a bid to control the state which was both distant and demanding. For Kellner (Not Dated: 5):

*'Habermas' concept of the public sphere thus described a space of institutions and practices between the private interests of everyday life in civil society and the realm of state power. The public sphere thus mediates between the domains of the family and the workplace (where private interests prevail), and the state which often exerts arbitrary forms of power and domination. What Habermas called the 'bourgeois public sphere' consisted of social spaces where individuals gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organise against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public power.'*

For Habermas, these developments had dual implications. First, the emergent bourgeois 'public sphere' fostered a critical rationality and constituted a space in which the dominant force was based on sound judgement. Second, the bourgeois public sphere emerged to be very important and relatively powerful by creating a pressure and a force for change, and a situation in which the critical reasoning of the public constituted an effective steering force in both society and the polity. The foregoing outlines in a broad stroke the breadth and ambition of Habermas' thesis. Although, his account of the public sphere and the context of its emergence have elicited criticisms and analysis, a comprehensive review of his flaws and criticisms would be too numerous to cover within the purview of this paper. For the purposes of this study, it suffices to point out the basic criticisms of his thesis, and examine alternative theories and frameworks for problematising and exploring the public sphere.

One of the major criticisms levelled against Habermas is that his notion of the bourgeois public sphere is based on free and equal access, and upon willing consent between participants. By taking this as an entry point, he tends to ignore the more coercive and power-driven attributes of the bourgeois public sphere (Roberts and Crossley 2006: 11). Habermas is thus accused of idealizing rational discussion as it relates to the public and ignoring 'the extent to which its institutions were founded on sectionalism, exclusiveness and repression' (Eley 1992: 321). This means that rational exchange of thoughts, ideas and information is not an end in itself, but the means to achieve this are significant and

are also potential sources of power, domination and repression (Holub 1991; Negt and Kluge 1993; McLaughlin 1993; Fraser 1992). Secondly, Habermas' invocation of this period as the 'golden age' of media production (Hallin 1994: 6), have drawn criticisms from some writers as being both elitist and culturally snobbish. This owes to the fact that 'media practices' have been inscribed with manipulation and bias, and Habermas does not adequately capture how social groups use and manipulate the media for their own interests (Dahlgren 1995; Hartley 1996; McGuigan 1996; Thompson 1995). The third criticism against Habermas which is often posed in the literature and captures the essence of the pluralist critique, relates to the neglect of other public spheres outside the 'male bourgeois public sphere'. This articulation holds profound consequences for a historical, social and theoretical reflection. In practice, Habermas' failure to examine the exclusion of many social groups from the public sphere impedes a thorough theoretical and empirical articulation of the public sphere (Siltanen and Stanworth 1994).

As the public sphere began to receive renewed attention in the 1990s, Habermas has revisited, elaborated and added to his basic account of the public sphere theory. Habermas (1989: xix) concedes that his initial presentation was a 'stylized picture of the liberal elements of the bourgeois public sphere', and that he should have made it clear that he was introducing an 'ideal type' and not a normative ideal that will be resuscitated and brought back to life (Habermas 1992: 422). In his later work, titled: '***Between Facts and Norms (1998)***', Hirshkop (2006) observes that Habermas drops the normative component to the public sphere in favour of a more 'fluid' and 'mobile' conception of the debate and discussion. Even so, Kellner (ND: 8) affirmatively argues that:

*'precisely the normative aura of the book inspired many to imagine and cultivate more inclusive, egalitarian, and democratic spaces and forums; others were inspired to conceive of more oppositional democratic spaces as site of development of alternative cultures to established institutions and spaces. Habermas thus provided decisive impetus for discussions concerning the democratization of the public sphere and civil society, and the normative dimension helped generate productive discussions of the public sphere and democracy'.*



The problems evident in Habermas' conception of the public sphere have spurred some authors to discard the notion entirely for alternative but similar ideas (Lii 1998). However, some have kept the concept and confronted the challenges, but have theorised the public sphere from different levels in a bid to highlight and articulate the complex social practices occurring within the public sphere. As Kellner (ND: 8) adds, rather than conceiving of one liberal or democratic public sphere, it is more constructive to theorize a multiplicity of public spheres, which may sometimes overlap or conflict. These comprise public spheres of excluded groups or that of mainstream configurations. Of particular importance is the historical and normative construction of the public sphere through the significant exclusion of women, the proletariat and popular culture (Ryan 1992; Landes 1988; Pateman 1988). Different contributions by Zinn (1995) and Goodin (1978) document the presence of oppositional movements and public spheres throughout the United States, and they also reflect on the Civil Rights Movement, the 1960s movements and the continuation of 'new social movements' into the 1970s and beyond. These suggest that Habermas' analysis understates the continuing dynamics and vitality of the public sphere in the last century. Relevant to this is the emergence of a 'counter-public sphere' as 'a space for the invention and circulation of counter-discourses by members of subordinated social groups' (McLaughlin 2006: 160). Within the ambits of a 'counter-public sphere' subordinated groups are not only able to offer interpretations of their identities, aspirations and interests, but they do this in opposition to a comprehensive public sphere that is permeated by dominant interests and ideologies (Fraser 1997: 81; Felski 1989).

These developments have signalled the reconstitution of the social, spatial and historical contexts of the public sphere to include a nation-centred arena and a global or transnational social space. There is no doubt, therefore, that the public sphere can no longer be cordoned off within the boundaries of a Westphalian nation-state, neither can a national frame provide the appropriate context for its critique. Owing to the emergence of alternative public spheres and global restructurings which has strained the capacity of both the nation-state and its semblance of a public sphere, the public sphere has come to

be conceived as a site of information, discussion, contestation, political struggle and organisation (encompassing media, internet and cyberspace activities), as such, requiring a reformulation and expansion of the concept (Kellner 1995). In practice, this means that the rise of nationalist identities within nation-centred borders in contemporary times are products of local and global flows, interactions and exchanges, as territorial boundaries become eroded by complex economic, political and social factors.

### **The African Public Sphere**

The strength of Habermas' notion of the public sphere lies in its focus on a space of institutions and practices (for rational discussions, debates and consensus) between the realm of civil society and state power. This has generated productive discussions, original and profound insights on issues bordering on civil society and the democratisation of the public sphere in Africa. No consensus exists as to the most appropriate approach for interpreting the incipient changes occurring in the structure, content and dynamics of African politics. However, the 'public sphere theory' is inextricably linked to the proliferation of different developments in African political thought. Hence, the 'public sphere theory' has a deviant purchase for political developments in Africa.

Drawing on the fractured social and historical foundations of African politics, Ekeh (1975), in his classical coinage, observed the development of 'two public realms' or 'two publics', with which he explains the 'unique' nature of African politics. Underlying the theory of the 'two publics' is Ekeh's (1975) bifurcation of the Africa public sphere. Contrary to expectations that the 'public sphere' in Africa due to its historical intercourse with the West should have manifested the character of a single public, as in the case of the West or in a Habermasian sense, the public sphere in Africa developed as 'two publics' -(the primordial and civic public) rather than one. While the 'primordial public' identified with primordial groupings like ethnic, communal and hometown development associations which express sentiments that collide with public interests; the 'civic public' is 'historically associated with the colonial administration which has been identified with popular politics in post-colonial Africa' (Ekeh 1975: 92). The 'two publics' are products of colonial experience and this emergent bifurcation also shaped the nature of post-

colonial politics in Africa. The contradictory pulls and demands of membership and operation in the 'two publics' underlie the profound problems of ethno-nationalist claims, contested citizenship and state ownership, all of which seeks to explain the pathologies of the post-colonial African state and feeds into the 'national question' in contemporary Nigeria. The foregoing provides the backdrop and context for an empirical observation of Igbo nationalism in Nigeria in its pre-colonial, colonial to post-colonial contexts.

### **'Ndi Igbo' and the Nigerian Nation-State Project: A Historical Background**

Early sources on Igbo traditional culture did not regard the Igbos as a monolithic group until the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Buchanan and Pugh 1962; Green 1947; Forde and Jones 1950; P. Ottenberg 1965; S. Ottenberg 1959). They comprised more than 200 segmented groups which functioned as distinct societies and were organised on the basis of patrilineal clans or lineages consisting of 30 villages or local communities bounded together by a common language, customs and beliefs (Anber 1967: 169). The monolithic kingdoms, hierarchical administrative systems and centralised political structures that existed in the Hausa Emirates of Northern Nigeria and the Yoruba constitutional monarchies of Western Nigeria were not prevalent in Igbo societies. The bulk of the literature in history and social anthropology describe pre-colonial Igbo society as 'stateless', 'acephalous', 'segmentary' and 'individualistic, comprising autonomous villages and village groups ruled by dispersed authority void of formalized, permanent or hereditary leadership positions (Meek 1937; Green 1947; Uchendu 1965). As Lord Hailey (1951: 155) observed, 'the large Igbo community presents perhaps the most outstanding structure in which it is difficult to find any definite seat of executive authority, a characteristic which it has retained up to this day'. Contrary to widely held views, this does not mean that pre-colonial Igbo social formation inherently guaranteed the equal political, economic, social and civil rights of its entire people. Rather, as evidence suggests, pre-colonial Igbo society had its 'slaves' (Ohu) and 'cult slaves' (Osu) on the one hand; and titled individuals (Eze or Obi) who epitomize a special degree of influence and power on the other hand. Some areas of Igboland had lineage heads, influential age-groups, titled secret societies, and while some of these positions were

restricted to elders of certain lineages, others were based on personal achievements, status and power (Harneit-Sievers 1998: 57-70).

The fragmented nature of Igbo society into several autonomous village communities posed a problem for the establishment of colonial rule. Like in most parts of Nigeria, British rule in Igboland was to be imposed by treaties of surrender, trade or protection, which involved negotiation, diplomacy or force, or a combination of all. Eventually, military conquest became the primary means through which British colonial rule was imposed on Igboland. In a string of military expeditions which started in 1849 and lasted up till 1914, the British embarked on the conquest of various villages and communities in Igboland which resisted British occupation openly or passively, but effective conquest and occupation of Igboland did not materialize until 1917. Even then, British troops were still marching throughout the Igbo heartland engaging communities, villages and settlements which considered themselves independent (Afigbo 1980: 410-414). Until the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 and the formal establishment of British colonial rule, the East was part of the Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1885, and subsequently became part of the Niger Coastal Protectorate in 1893 and the Royal Niger Company. The Igbos were militantly anti-colonial and 'Indirect Rule' as a policy of colonial administration which thrived on existing indigenous political formations in other parts of Nigeria effectively broke down in the East because such structures did not exist in Igboland. Within the wider framework of Igbo resistance to colonial rule in Nigeria, the Ekumeku Movement in western Igboland, the Aba Women's Riots of 1929 and the Tax Riots of 1938 marked remarkable episodes. As such, in the 1930s and 1940s local colonial administration in the East came under severe pressure to re-organise and accommodate the existing realities in the East.

Although, marked by initial rejection and resistance, the Igbos settled into the system once colonial rule took root. In contrast to the Hausa-Fulani in the North and Yoruba in the West, the formal establishment of colonial rule in the East spawned an enterprising tendency among the Igbos as they became more mobile, receptive and nationally oriented than other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Anber (1967: 168) identified the unrivalled

pace with which the Igbos advanced faster than all other ethnic groups in Nigeria within a relatively short period to the pace and nature of 'Igbo modernisation' in a plural society. Confronted with internal challenges occasioned by land hunger, impoverished soil and population pressures, the Igbos in search of economic and educational advancement migrated massively to urban areas within their own region and in the North and the West. As Coleman (1958: 76) observed, by the end of World War II the Igbos had constituted a considerable minority group in every urban area in the country and had amounted to 'more than one-third of the non-indigenous population of the urban centres in the Northern and Western regions', and by 1952, the Igbos constituted forty-five percent of the total non-indigenous metropolitan population of Lagos (Government Statistician 1953/54). More so, they formed mutual benefit associations, credit societies and 'improvement' organisations which maintained ties with their rural homelands. These developments led to frictions between the Igbos and the indigenous populations of these regions. However, these tendencies were more pronounced in the North where the enmity between the Igbo immigrants and the Northern indigenes led to the Jos riots 1945 and Kano riots in 1953. The Report on the Kano Disturbances described it as 'so spontaneous, so violent and so widespread that no thinking person could assign to them short-term causes'. Adding that 'the influx of Igbos into Hausaland had transformed the landscape of Kano into a community which represents the meeting place of two contending cultures' (Report on Kano Disturbances, cited in Anber, 1967: 171).

Although, the Igbos migrated into urban areas as traders, shop-keepers, clerks, skilled workers and domestic employees, they soon began to acquire white-collar jobs and began to cultivate intellectual elites comprising educators, journalists, professionals and businessmen. Anber (1967: 171) attributes this to the level to which they responded to Western education in their bid to catch-up with the Yorubas who by virtue of their early contact with Western education had an advantage over other ethnic groups in Nigeria. By the late 1940s, the disparity between the Igbos and Yorubas in terms of Western education had virtually diminished. Coleman (1958: 333) illustrates this with the situation at the University College Ibadan, where they had as many Igbo students (115) as Yoruba students (118) in 1952. By regions of origin the distribution of students expected to

graduate from Nigerian universities in 1965/66 academic year was stated as follows: East: 2,031, West: 1,728, Mid-West: 380 and North: 369 (Anber 1967: 173). More so, Igbos headed the Universities of Ibadan and Lagos as Vice-Chancellors, and with the expected retirement of the foreign Vice-Chancellor at the University of Nigeria, an Igbo was positioned to take-over. In due course, the educational and economic advancement of the Igbos positioned them as administrators, managers, technicians and civil servants in the country, and they began to occupy senior positions disproportionate to their size. This was particularly evident in the Federal Public Service and government statutory corporations where accusations of Igbo monopoly of essential services to the exclusion of other ethnic nationalities held sway (Ibid: 172).

### **The Tri-Polarisation of Nigerian Politics and the Spectre of National Disintegration**

This general trend towards the 'inequality of modernisation' between the Igbos and other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria had implications for the Igbo nation, and it must be situated within the context of broader political developments in Nigeria during this period. The Igbos did not only constitute a formidable ethnic category, Igbo politics during this era coalesced around the influential and charismatic figure of Nnamdi Azikiwe who had just returned from the United States with a collection of degrees. Popularly referred to as 'Zik', he emerged as 'the most important and celebrated nationalist leader' on the west coast of Africa, if not in all of tropical Africa (Coleman 1958: 220). With his provocative and combative brand of journalism he initiated a new era in the nationalist struggle. Prior to the advent of Zik in Nigerian journalism and politics, the Igbos had lacked a symbol and spokesman to articulate their views, this explains why they largely remained at the periphery of the nationalist struggle that was virtually dominated by their Southern rivals- the Yorubas (Ibid: 224).

In Lagos, the competition between the Igbos and Yorubas became intense owing to its centrality as the hotbed of the nationalist struggle. As such, Igbo elites were compelled to articulate their interests within the country with the formation of an Igbo Union in Lagos in 1934. It was expanded in 1943 into a pan-Igbo union to include all Igbo unions country-wide and was called the Igbo Federal Union; and later, it became the Igbo State

Union in 1944. Although, the Union claimed to be pan-Nigerian, and even pan-African, it had an Igbo national anthem, planned to establish an Igbo bank and was closely aligned with the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). By the beginning of 1948, tensions between the Igbo and Yoruba were high resulting into press attacks on Azikiwe and open physical attacks on the Igbos. It was at this point that the Igbo State Union metamorphosed into a partisan political organisation in defence of Azikiwe and the Igbo cause (Uzoigwe 1999: 13). It is argued that the aggressive rise of the Igbos in the 1930s and 1940s colonial Nigeria constituted a threat to the Yorubas. This was because, Azikiwe, the main leader of the Igbos had his base and business in Lagos, a Yoruba city. Hence, the rise of Yoruba nationalism was intended to serve as a bulwark against these perceived threats and stem the tide of Igbo nationalism. This tendency was hatched after World War II in 1945, when Obafemi Awolowo and a group of educated Yoruba elites formed the 'Egbe Omo Oduduwa' a pan-Yoruba socio-cultural group in London, which was later transformed into the Action Group (AG). The *Daily Trust* captured the mood during this era when on October 17, 1944, it reported that:

*'We anticipate..... an era of wholesome rivalry among the principal tribes of Nigeria..... (and), while they must guide against chauvinism and rabid tribalism, the great Yoruba people must strive to preserve their individuality'* (cited in Coleman 1958: 345).

In several statements, some of which demands a recall, the leadership of the Egbe reiterated the need to articulate a Yoruba agenda and safeguard the Yoruba nation against the perceived threat from other ethnic groups in Nigeria. In 1948, Sir Adeyemo Alakija, the president of the Egbe, was quoted as saying that:

*'This Big Tomorrow ..... (for the Yoruba) is the future of our children..... How they will hold their own among other tribes of Nigeria. How the Yoruba will not be relegated to the background in the future'* (cited in Coleman 1958: 346).

This was believed to be a tacit reference to the rise of the Igbos during this period. A rather belligerent remark was credited to one of the leading members of the Egbe, Oluwole Alakija, who stated that:

*'We were bunched together by the British who named us Nigeria. We never knew the Igbos, but since we came to know them, we have tried to be friendly and neighbourly. Then came the Arch Devil (Azikiwe) to sow the seeds of distrust and hatred ..... We have tolerated enough from a class of Igbos and addle-brained Yorubas who have mortgaged their thinking caps to Azikiwe and his hirelings'* (quoted in Coleman 1958: 346).

In reaction to these developments, the animosity between the Igbos and the Yorubas grew worse, and some radical supporters of both groups were said to have mobilised and armed themselves for a confrontation. The Azikiwe-owned *West African Pilot* also mobilised and warned that:

*'Henceforth, the cry must one battle against Egbe Omo Oduduwa: its leaders at home and abroad, up hill and down dale, in the streets of Nigeria and in the residences of its advocates ..... It is the enemy of Nigeria; it must be crushed to the earth .... There is no going back, until the fascist organisation of Sir Adeyemo Alakija has been dismembered'* (Coleman 1958: 346).

These statements captured some of the deep-seated animosities and grievances between both groups, resulting in the intensification of Igbo-Yoruba distrust.

Needless to say, the North made no pretences about their sectional interests. Due to the heterogeneity of the region, the Islamic theology and ideology, and the Hausa language were used as a binding force to hold the region together. Nevertheless, they were relatively less developed economically and educationally, and the existential threat of Southern domination in the event of independence from Britain was real. This threat was further heightened by the rising influx of Southerners (particularly Igbos) into urban centres in the North as railway workers, teachers and colonial civil servants, a situation



which remained even after independence. In a Northern report, titled: *The Nigerian Situation: Facts and Background* (1966: 25), the fear of Igbo domination was expressed in the fact that the Igbos accounted for forty-five percent of the manpower in the public services, 'threatening to reach sixty percent by 1968', while the North was credited with only ten percent of the existing posts. As at 1964, the Igbos occupied 270 out of 430 senior posts in the Nigerian Railway Corporation, and 73 out of 107 of the same in the Nigerian Ports Authority (Ibid: 559). Similar to the situation in the South, the Hausa-Fulani mobilised their sensibilities through the formation of the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC). The NPC's emergence was based on the platform of a socio-cultural organisation known as Jamiyyar Mutanen Arewa (JMA) founded in 1948 in Kano and Kaduna, by R. A. Dikko, Maitama Sule and D. A. Rafih. The membership of the NPC was limited to northerners and the motto of the party was 'One North, One People, Irrespective of Religion, Rank or Tribe'. A major objective of the party was to foster and protect Northern elite interests and aspirations, and to ensure Northern regional autonomy in the politics of the colonial society. As such, the NPC drew massive support and from the political establishment and wealthy traders from the North.

What can be gleaned from the foregoing are not just the roots of inter-ethnic rivalry between the North and South, and between the East and West in colonial Nigeria. But in a sense, these regional divisions had become the framework for colonial politics and had laid the architecture for post-independence politics in the Nigerian public sphere. To be sure, since 1941, the split that occurred within the ranks of the nationalist movement as a result of the Ikoli-Akinsanya dispute in the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) had raised mutual suspicions, antipathy and ethno-nationalist inclinations. The fact that Azikiwe resigned his membership of the NYM with all Igbo members of the movement going along with him raised smacks of an Igbo agenda for domination. Azikiwe's support for Akinsanya's candidacy was not necessarily based on ethnic grounds (since the latter was a Yoruba), but his resignation was informed by an unwelcomed challenge to his ambitions and interests within the ranks of the movement. Moreover, it must also be noted that another contributory factor to the emergent nature of ethnic nationalism in colonial Nigeria was the British colonial policy that cultivated the Hausa-Fulani/Islamist

identity in the North by adopting a policy of 'separate development' for the region and regionalized virtually everything in order to promote mutually exclusive identities (Diamond 1988: 28). This was made worse by the introduction of the Richards Constitution in 1946, and the creation of a new Legislative Council that brought the three Regional Councils together for the first time since 1923. In practice, the regionalization exercise of 1946 set the stage for the regionalisation of the nationalist movement by making the administrative and political units of Nigeria to coincide with the spatial locations of the three major ethnic-nationalities in Nigeria. This served as a milestone in constitutional developments in Nigeria and set the tone for the enduring structure of Nigerian politics. These divisions were further deepened with the introduction of the Macpherson in 1951 which fully recognised each region as a political entity by granting them executive and legislative powers, and the 1954 Constitution which granted these regions self-government under regional prime ministers. The point has been made that the British did not intend to divide the country with the Richards Constitution, but that the regions were administrative units intended to foster 'unity in diversity' before they were hijacked for political reasons by the nationalists (Olusanya 1980: 528). Still, another position stresses the point that both the British and the Nigerian nationalist elite never intended to work for a crisis-free united Nigeria (Ayandele 1971: 97). But the crucial point remains that the uniting Nigeria was not in the interest of the British colonial enterprise.

As a consequence, the potential of forming a grand coalition against British colonialism finally dissipated leading to the polarization of the nationalist movement along ethnic lines. Coleman (1958: 328) observes that from this point onwards, Nigerian nationalism developed strong regional inclinations which were expressed in socio-cultural movements and political parties in the three regions. The political significance of these developments were crucial to the extent that they accelerated prior cleavages between these groups, or created new ones in some cases. Despite the considerable political awakening that characterised this period owing to the end of World War II, the independence of India and the collapse of British colonial empire globally, the disunity hampered the articulation of a coherent nationalist agenda. But, more profoundly, it raised the spectre of the tri-polarisation of Nigerian politics from 1948 onwards, with

obvious consequences for future political developments. The years between 1948 and 1952 were accentuated by the contentious politicisation of ethno-nationalist identities in Nigeria. The formation of the AG and NPC as bearers of sectional interests in the country, the cross-carpeting incident in the Western House in 1952 and the increasing involvement of the three ethno-regional socio-cultural organisations in partisan politics served to intensify ethnic rivalry, acrimony and disunity as Nigeria inched closer to independence.

A major thrust in Igbo nationalism led by Azikiwe was to mobilise the Igbo into a unified, cohesive and political bloc. At the same time, Azikiwe also aspired to assume the leadership role of not only a pan-Nigerian nationalist movement, but its pan-African version as well. Though, contradictory in terms and mutually exclusive, Azikiwe did not perceive Igbo nationalism and Nigerian nationalism as conflicting goals, but as dual sources of inspiration in the struggle against colonialism. In the light of these developments, his presidency of the Igbo State Union further compounded the issue. In his presidential address at the first Igbo State Union conference in 1949, Azikiwe expressed the 'Manifest Destiny' of the Igbos in the struggle against colonialism in terms that were strikingly hegemonic, when he declared that:

*'It would appear that the God of Africa has created the Igbo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of ages ..... The martial prowess of the Igbo nation at all stages of human history has enabled them not only to conquer others but also adapt themselves to the role of preserver ..... The Igbo nation cannot shirk its responsibility'* (Crowder 1962: 228).

This statement has been interpreted as a clarion call for the 'Igbo said to be without history, without culture and incapable of building large states and empires' to shake off the lethargies of the past and rally together as one people to articulate a future agenda (Uzoigwe 1999: 14). But these remarks marked a watershed in ethnic relations in colonial Nigeria. It was precisely against this background that the link between the extensive 'modernisation of the Igbos', the ensuing ethno-nationalist rivalries between the three dominant groups and the ultimate impact of these struggles for political power was made.

More so, it lent the tri-polar ethnic power struggle a much broader appeal by giving it the face of a zero-sum contest and brought into sharper focus the potential ethno-nationalist rivalries that greeted the country at independence.

At another level, it is important to note that what appeared to be an Igbo-led project or a pan-Nigerian nationalist movement led by Azikiwe was in part elite-based, and in part an accommodation with the colonial project. The nationalist elites saw themselves as 'determinate hegemonic forces' (Fontana 1993: 32) with the ability to transform the power, position and privileges of their groups, but they also relished their place in Nigeria's political future when it became apparent that independence was imminent. Indeed, when the 'Zikist Movement', a small group of crack, dedicated and conspiratorial socialists, who were inspired by Azikiwe and his writings, tried to radicalise the anti-colonial struggle they were disowned by Azikiwe and were effectively crushed by the colonial administration (Olusanya 1966: 331; Okoye 1981, Iweriebor 1996). It has to be recalled the one of the greatest setbacks of the 'Zikist Movement' was the hostility of nationalist elites from every quarter towards their activities, discrediting them as hot-headed and irresponsible youths for the perceived fear of being supplanted by youth. This rejection would have been understandable had it not come from Azikiwe himself who had contributed more than any other person to the development of political awakening at this period, providing the youths with their revolutionary passion and firing them to defend him against his enemies, while he was not ready to thread the 'path of revolution' himself (Okoye 1981: 141). Though, Azikiwe and the nationalist elites (including Awolowo) paid lip service to the socialist ideology, they were core capitalists and professional politicians who had private businesses which they ran at a profit. Hence, their opposition to colonialism cannot be equated as an opposition to capitalism. This largely explains why their brand of politics was characterised by 'accommodation' with the colonial project and an orderly transfer of power from the British to the Nigerian nationalist elites at independence.

### **Post-Civil War Developments and the Place of 'Ndi-Igbo'**

The events leading the Nigerian Civil War are sufficiently familiar to require any re-narration here. But it is important to note that after decades of intense political contestations along ethno-nationalist lines, Nigeria's nation-building project had stalled even before take-off and the structure of its federal experiment had collapsed, ushering in a host of other crisis like the emergency rule in the Western region in 1962, the census crisis of 1962/1963, the election crisis of 1964/1965, and finally, the intervention of the military in January 1966 and a counter-coup six months later. The Igbos paid a huge price for the ethnic sentiments and chauvinism that characterised this period with the loss of lives and properties in different parts of the country. This produced a wave of migration of Igbos back to their homeland in the East. After disagreements between General Gowon and Colonel Ojukwu over the interpretation of the Aburi Accord on what political structure Nigeria should adopt and the suspension of an orderly process of negotiation, the central government lost its effective authority over the Eastern region and the region seceded from the main federation declaring its independence as the Republic of Biafra on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, 1967. The secession was backed by military force and the ensuing conflict ended with the collapse of Biafra in January 1970. This effectively halted the Igbo challenge in Nigeria. Perhaps, in the history of the continent, no independence movement of the proportion and size of the Igbo secessionist movement, and with that level of sacrifice and loss of lives ever ended without achieving its aim.

At the end of the war in 1970, the impact of the defeat of the Igbos was to be cushioned by the 'no winner, no vanquished' mantra of the Federal Military Government (FMG) in power. The institutional agenda of the 'Three Rs – Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction' shaped the post-civil war Nigerian public space. This was marked by the magnanimity of the FMG in pronouncements that guaranteed the personal safety and security of the Igbos and their properties; the right to reside and work anywhere in Nigeria; the re-absorption of public civil servants of Igbo extraction into the civil service and the military; and the granting of general amnesty to the Igbos. This is probably the only armed conflict of its magnitude in history, perpetrated with so much viciousness and bitterness, where no reprisals, trials or execution occurred. On the contrary, the

marginalisation, alienation and distancing of the Igbos from the mainstream of national political and economic processes were observable from events at the national level. In a sense, the institutional and structural context of Igbo marginalisation after the civil war bore semblance to the existence of an ‘unofficial policy’ by the federal government to punish the Igbos for their secessionist attempt in order to forestall a future recurrence from any section of the country. This trend was replete in the FMG-instituted Abandoned Properties Implementation Committee (APIC) which presided over the sale of Igbo properties outside Igboland, and in parts of the former Eastern Region (Port-Harcourt), at ridiculously low prices to indigenes of those states who claimed to have captured them during the war. Of similar importance was the ‘Twenty Pound Scandal’ and the Banking Obligation (Eastern States) Decree of 1970 which did not recognize any deposits made into bank accounts within the former Eastern Region from May 30, 1967 up till January 12, 1970 (Nwabueze 1985). This string of policies came to a head with the Indigenization Decree of 1972 which reviewed the ownership structure and control of Nigerian enterprises, and compelled foreign companies to sell part of their shares to Nigerians at a time when the Igbos had barely recovered from the effects of the war and were still perceived to be economically emasculated. With the implementation of these policies, the balance of power quickly shifted in favour of the two other dominant ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, and thus, the Igbos who constitute a major ethnic group and one vital leg in the tripod prior to 1966 became severely marginalised.

Another prominent feature of Nigeria’s post-war era was the clamour and struggle for greater access and control over state resources by various factions of the power elite. This tendency was instigated by the ‘distributive imperatives’ and re-organisations which occurred through the modification of the Distributive Pool Account (DPA) in 1970. Under the new formula, 50 percent of the DPA resources were shared equally among states, while the other 50 percent went proportionally to their populations, thereby, benefitting those regions that had been split into more states. As such, elite clamour and agitation found expression in state creation, as ‘statehood’ became an important factor in the in the allocation of a wider range of social opportunities in the Nigerian federation (Suberu 1991: 500). Notably, before the eruption of war between the federal government

and the secessionist Eastern region in June 1967, the Federal Military Government had made a tactical move in which the existing four regions (North, East, West and Mid-West) were abolished and replaced with twelve states. Pragmatically, this was a move calculated to undermine Biafra's claims to oil in the Niger Delta. The creation of two states (Rivers and South-Eastern States) out of the former Eastern region effectively staved-off Ojukwu's claims to oil in the region from which he had instructed oil multinationals to 'pay rents, royalties and other affiliates to his government' (Ikein and Briggs-Anigbo 1998: 128).

Clearly, the political rationale for the creation of states that characterised the pre-civil war era was to be compounded after the civil war to reflect distributive pressures, sectional anxieties, partisan conflicts, constitutional controversies and institutional dilemmas, all inter-locking the issue of state re-organisation and an increased share of federal resources within Nigeria (Suberu 1991; Alapiki 2005). After the 1967 state creation exercise, successive demands for the creation of new states also moved beyond the exclusive preserve of minority ethnic nationalities to include demands from various factions of the power elite from the three dominant ethnic nationalities who began to stake their claims in a bid to secure more access and control to federal resources. For the Igbos, there were clamours for the creation of New Anambra, Wawa and Adada from Anambra State; Aba and Njaba from Imo State; Ebonyi from parts of Imo and Anambra States; and Anioma from the Igbo-speaking areas of Bendel State (Suberu 1991: 503). The argument of the Igbo elites derived from a widely shared perception that the establishment of only two Igbo states from the 1976 state-creation exercise, as against the creation of five states each in the Hausa/Fulani (Northern Region) and the Yoruba (Western Region) had put the Igbos at a huge disadvantage in the competition for socio-economic and political opportunities in the federation, and cannot make for peace and harmony in the country. As a leading Igbo constitutional lawyer puts it: 'until this anomaly is corrected to create a fair balance between the three main tribes (of Nigeria) the prospects of harmony and stability in the country will remain shaky' (Nwabueze 1983: 307). Since the last exercise in 1976, subsequent exercises have led to the creation of 21 states (1987); 30 states (1991); and 36 states (1996), still out of 36 states and six geopolitical zones presently in

place, only the Igbo dominated Southeast zone has five states, while the others zones have six or seven states each. Presently, Igbos in the South East have continued to clamour for the parity of states and equal local government areas with other regions, citing an instance where the South East has five states and 95 Local Government Areas compared to the seven states and 188 Local Government Areas in the North West.

The long-drawn global economic recession of the 1970s and 1980s did cast a complexion on the economic conditions in the country, and the introduction of structural adjustment as a response to these crises widened the existing cleavages and ethno-nationalist identities became more conflictive and competitive. This period witnessed an unprecedented surge in the number and activities of ethnic unions in various forms, such as, 'development' unions, 'progressive' unions, 'hometown' associations, social clubs, community development associations, cultural organisations, and 'migrant ethnic empires' which emerged to meet new challenges (Osaghae 1995: 5). These developments could be attributed to the fact that the introduction of the adjustment programme signalled the retrenchment of the state from most areas of private life, and the intensification of ethnic conflicts was borne of struggles over resources, access to power and local autonomy which is intensified under conditions of recession, depression, scarcity and immiseration all of which was captured under the rubric of the adjustment package (Chazan 1986). Certainly, the breadth of the adjustment programme was such that its implementation impacted fundamentally on every area of social, political and economic relations, and ultimately, on ethno-nationalist consciousness which provides a context for these relations.

In response to the famous axiom 'What else is development other than helping your hometown' (Southall 1998), diaspora Igbo organisations, unions and community development associations in urban centres throughout the country began to mobilise capital through self-help efforts to provide social services and amenities for their constituencies. As 'push came to shove' with SAP, diminishing resources and opportunities intensified the competition for jobs, contracts and other benefits, and the



level of ethnic consciousness and ethnic connections became the hallmark of negotiation in the Nigerian public space. The commercialisation and privatisation exercise attendant to the adjustment package reinforced factional struggles for resources and power at the elite level in Nigeria, thereby, fuelling tension, mistrust and conflict between the 'winners' and the 'losers'. This also provided a fertile ground for the resurgence of ethnicity as a mobilising or organising factor in the struggle for the acquisition of state-divested shares of government enterprises. Being aware of the growing concerns about marginalisation, injustice and underdevelopment in East, and the dominance of the hegemonic group(s) that controlled federal power and oil resources, there was a push at the Igbo elite level to address the 'Ndigbo Question' and its share of the national patrimony. Prominent Igbo groups, like 'Ohaneze Ndi Igbo' and 'Aka Ikenga' (a pan-Igbo socio-cultural think-tank), through various fora began to articulate the plight of the Igbos within the unfolding context, and the need to accommodate the Igbo in the Nigerian project.

### **The 'Ndi-Igbo Question' and Contemporary Igbo Nationalism**

This reading of Nigeria's history forms the backdrop for the continued relevance of the 'Ndi Igbo Question' in Nigeria. Since independence, the 250 ethnic nationalities (or more) in Nigeria have continued to experience uneasy relations, and the relations between the supposed 'mega ethnic-nationalities'- the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East- have been central to the tri-polar power struggle in Nigeria's post-independence politics. The expression of ethno-nationalist tendencies has attained maximum intensity in contemporary Nigeria, particularly, since its return to civilian rule in 1999. The renewed tensions, anxieties and agitations by the Igbos draws from a history of complete alienation from the Nigerian nation-state project since the end of the civil war. In a petition submitted by *Ohanaeze Indi Igbo* (the apex Igbo socio-cultural group) to the Human Rights Violations Investigating Committee in 1999, the group lamented the continued marginalization and under-representation of Igbos in the federal government and its agencies, especially, in the armed forces; and the discrimination in matters of revenue allocation, financial aids, federal government investments and other amenities. Apart from these, the marginalization of Ndi Igbo from

oil revenues underscores the centralist mechanisms of control and the zero-sum struggle which characterizes oil politics in Nigeria. Since the end of the civil war the Igbo oil-rich states have been progressively excluded from benefitting from revenues accruing to oil-producing areas. While some Igbo states sit on oil, the tendency has been to treat oil resources in these states as reserves due to the purported high cost of exploring the resources. Thereby, denying them of benefits accruable to oil-producing states. In 2006, the exclusion of Imo and Abia states from the Consolidated Council on Social and Economic Development of Coastal States of the Niger Delta (CCSEDSC) by the Federal Government was largely condemned by all Igbo groups. Pointing out what it refers to as the illogicality of the exclusion, the Aka Ikenga avers that:

*'With what logic can one explain such absurdity of people in Egbema (Rivers State) benefitting from the new policy while their counterpart in Egbema (Imo) will not benefit. Both are oil-producing and the same community, which are only separated by an imaginary state boundary'* (Obiagwu 2006).

The group further decried the plight of other oil-producing communities in Imo and Abia states that were caught in the same situation, such as, Ukwa in Abia and Oyigbo in Rivers. While the Ndoni in Rivers will benefit from the arrangement, Oguta/Izombe communities in Imo where Elf and Agip oil companies are operating are excluded. According to the group, these communities are all oil-producing and were originally one community (Ibid). As such, the phenomenon of Igbo nationalism inevitably tends to dwell on situations, policies and actions that produce grievances, and the overwhelming feeling of the deprivation of 'nationhood' within the context of the present political arrangement in Nigeria. Emergent forms of Igbo nationalism have also drawn from developments and discourses at the global level to empower local claims and resistance. Hence, this paper goes further to place contemporary Igbo nationalism and the quest for self-determination in the Nigerian public space within the context of rapid transformations, both at the national and global levels.

### **The Resurgence of Ethnic Nationalism on the National and Global Space**

Certain developments at the national level were crucial to the emergent forms of Igbo nationalism and quest for self-determination in Nigeria. One of this could be traced to the fact that apart from the social and economic hardships occasioned by SAP and the far-reaching changes it brought to the economic and political landscape in the country between 1986 and 1993, the convoluted democratic transition programme initiated by the General Ibrahim Babangida administration ushered in profound structural and contextual changes in the political system. As part of a grand design to transform himself into a civilian president and hang on to power, General Babangida contrived hiccups and manipulations in the transition process which resulted in frequent disqualification of candidates and cancellation of presidential primaries, and ultimately, the annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential elections. Described as ‘one of the most sustained exercises in political chicanery’ (Joseph 1993), General Babangida’s transition programme did not only expose the attempt by the military to cling on to power, it was also a clear evidence that the geo-political Hausa-Fulani North was not intent to give up or relax its grip on the levers of political power at the national level. A remarkable aspect of this election and its outcome was that Moshood Abiola, a Yoruba Muslim from the South, chose Babagana Kingibe, another Muslim from the North as his running mate, and the fact that an all-Muslim ticket won overwhelmingly in the North and South was hailed as unprecedented. Ake (2000:106) described it as revolutionary in the sense that it ‘demonstrated capacity of democracy to override the parochial identities, especially ethnic, religious and regional identities, which the Nigerian political class had inculcated studiously for nearly half a century to divide and exploit ordinary Nigerians’.

Furthermore, the June 12 1993 elections provided the public space for a realistic articulation of various national issues confronting Nigeria, and its significance was well understood by the military and the Nigerian political elites at large. Following the annulment, a monumental crisis ensued, and the resurgence of ethno-regional conflicts, separatist agitations and apprehensions about the outbreak of a civil war stretched the country to a breaking point. The national impasse that followed the struggle to validate the results of the election pitched the South, particularly the Yoruba West, against the

Hausa-Fulani North. At this point, many Easterners of Igbo ethnic extraction began to make their way to the East in order to forestall the re-occurrence of a similar scenario when many of them were trapped outside their home region prior to the outbreak of the civil war in 1967. The perception that the Hausa-Fulani had resolved to emasculate other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria was enhanced by the self-secession bid of the late General Sanni Abacha who assumed power in a bloodless military coup against the National Interim Government (ING), headed by another Yoruba Southerner, Ernest Shonekan in November of the same year. By the time General Abacha rolled out a new transition programme after aborting General Babangida's unfinished transition, it became apparent that Nigeria had delved into a new phase of military adventurism. In a show of tacit support for the Abacha regime, some Northern politicians were quoted (Ake 2000:107) to have advanced the argument that in the past military regimes in Nigeria had disqualified candidates and cancelled elections, and that if Abiola insists on claiming his mandate, then past Northern leaders (Tafawa Balewa and Shehu Shagari) who had their electoral mandate terminated by coup d'états could also reclaim their mandates. Following these developments, ethnic relations within the country deteriorated badly and ethnicity regained some of the grounds it had lost in the elections. Apart from entrenching the specter of a permanent destabilisation of the 'tri-polar' ethnic power structure, popularly known as 'Wazobia' in the Nigeria parlance, the June 12 1993 debacle set the stage for the emergence of contemporary Igbo nationalism and aspirations, couched in terms of self-determination, as the Igbo nation began to re-negotiate its national identity and re-assert itself in new ways in the Nigerian public space.

To achieve this goal, prominent Igbo groups embarked on broadening the social base of the struggle and connecting to other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria through the Ethnic Nationalities Movement (ENM) which was established in 1994. By placing emphasis on ethnic nationalities rather than regions, the group sought to address the urgent need for plural democracy and balance of power in Nigeria through dialogue among its multiethnic components. While these developments transpired, the visible political asymmetry and the necessity for power shift from the North to the South was heavily reflected in the debate during this period. The historical context for this was based on the

claim that prior to 1999, Nigeria has had ten heads of government out of which the only two that were elected were from the North. Even the so-called military interventions featured military officers of Northern extraction. Discussions about breaking up the federation under the Abacha regime were rife, the situation that was to be remedied by a rare consensus among the political elites from different sections of the country to finally lay to rest the ghost of Northern domination, at least for the time being. What emerged as the price of 'Nigerian unity' was the 'zoning' of the presidency to the Yoruba South, if only to assuage the effects of the annulment of which a Yoruba was a victim and to prevent political disintegration.

The resurgence of contemporary Igbo nationalism in the Nigerian public space also appropriated discourses of self-determination at the global level in their quest to renegotiate the basis of Igbo citizenship in Nigeria. The principle of self-determination emerged after World War I and World War II as justification for some of the most far-reaching political re-alignments in recent international history. With the collapse of empire, the principle was invoked in the quest for the abolition of European overseas possessions in Africa, Asia, Pacific South America and the Caribbean. Although, ethno-nationalist claims for self-determination thrived during the Cold War, the East-West ideological face-off rendered it inconspicuous, and little or no attention was paid to the nature of independent states in Africa and the fate of minority ethnic nationalities within the states. But the debate on self-determination received a new meaning following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe and Soviet Russia. These developments were marked by the disintegration of large federations and multi-ethnic states, such as, the USSR, Yugoslavia and the re-unification of Germany, and resurgence of hitherto suppressed currents of nationalism on a global scale. This wave of nationalist resurgence drew heavily on the right to self-determination to justify the assertion of minority rights within large federations. It was under this aegis that 22 successor states emerged out of the ruins of the former USSR and Yugoslavia, and the Czech and Slovak republics voted to go their different ways.

In Africa, with a reputation of prolonged crises of state legitimacy and governance, the wave of transformations ushered in by the end of the Cold War furnished the global template on which the forces of national and local changes played themselves out. The de-legitimisation of one-party rule and military regimes in the face of a virtual disappearance of super-power rivalries which had previously aligned with these tendencies in the past meant that African states had to open up the political space to accommodate hitherto suppressed groups and forces. These developments were marked by interstices of democracy which threw up contending forces, both revolutionary and reactionary. In some cases, new parties emerged and won power through multi-party elections, while in others, sit-tight and incumbent regimes won elections by manipulating the state and electoral machinery, or by dividing or subverting the opposition. Under this banner the principle of self-determination was invoked in support of the struggles of the oppressed African racial majority in apartheid South Africa, ushering in the first multi-party elections in the country in 1994. In a post-September 11 global setting, the force of nationalism seem not to have exhausted its purchase. This can be gleaned from the wave of nationalist uprisings and the quest for self-determination which have been profound in producing a steady flow of discreet conflicts and in shaping the course of international and domestic politics. This phenomenon weaves through broader global problems like terrorism, failed states, crisis of nation-building, rivalry among great powers, access to natural resources, clashes between the modern and traditional populations played out in religious and cultural conflicts, and conflicts between 'winners' and 'losers' arising from an increasingly globalized world system.

### **MASSOB and the Struggle for Self-Determination**

The changing global context and the reverberations at the national level, especially those associated with political developments which threatened to displace the 'tripod balance theory' led to a new brand of Igbo nationalism in Nigeria. Based on a version of Nigerian political history that places the Igbos in a federation that is structured against their interest, the Movement for the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) was formed in 1999. MASSOB represents a second generation nationalist movement that contests the marginalization of the Igbos since the end of the civil war and intends to resuscitate Igbo

ambitions for self-determination. Its emergence, however, is not unconnected to the opening up of the democratic space and the advent of a civilian administration after the decades of military rule in Nigeria, and the unleashing of a host of hitherto repressed and dormant political forces in the country. It must be noted that the long years of military rule in Nigeria did not eliminate ethno-nationalist consciousness, it only curbed its conflictual manifestations to some extent. The failure of military rule to stem the tide of ethnic consciousness, as Ake (2000: 105) notes, was a consequence of the fact that it blocked democratic aspirations and the space to ventilate group grievances.

Led by Chief Ralph Uwazuruike an Indian-trained lawyer, MASSOB's main objectives include: the actualization of the Independent state of Biafra; supporting all entities using peaceful means to bring about Biafra; encouraging sincere and honest dialogue with all nations in Nigeria aimed at peaceful separation of Biafra; and informing the world about the actualisation of Biafra. Although, the idea of secession is not popular with majority of the Igbos, the pattern of MASSOB's struggle have endeared it to a membership base that include Igbo traders and artisans in different urban centres across the country, and it has won a fanatical following among a new generation of Igbos (youths) born after the civil war. MASSOB claims to be a peaceful movement and has unequivocally stated that the core philosophy in the realisation of its goal is the 'principle of non-violence'. In the words of the leader of the movement, 'Biafra failed because of our violent approach, but this time around we do not want any casualty, yet we are more determined than ever to have our independent Biafra' (Akintunde 2000: 39). He further contends that the condition of the Igbos in Nigeria is unacceptable and calls for the disintegration of the country along ethnic lines, reminiscent of the Soviet experience. As he puts it:

*'What you should understand prima facie is that Nigeria is no good, how Nigeria is being administered is not good. That is why some people are even calling for a sovereign national conference, some people are calling for Biafra and others say self-determination. What I am saying as a person is that I want the Soviet experience to happen in Nigeria. My idea is let Nigeria divide into as many places as possible; let the people go'* (IRIN News 2005).

Essentially, this is an arrangement inclined towards promoting ethnic diversity through a federal system which is explicitly based on ethnicity. The main idea is to grant ethnic groups the right to self-determination or secession, place sovereign rights on ethnic nationalities, give equal recognition to diverse cultural bases and history, and grant a full measure of self-government within their institutions and territories.

MASSOB has an organisational structure which places the leader of the movement at the apex, followed by its national coordinators (or Ministers) and provincial administrators (or Governors) for its 24 provinces. The leadership of the movement has declared 25 stages in the struggle for the actualization of Biafra and each stage will feature a different strategy as the struggle intensifies. Having set its target at inception, in May 2000, in a symbolic hoisting of the Biafran flag the movement officially presented the Declaration of Demand for a Sovereign State of Biafra from the People and Government of Nigeria. Other activities of the movement have included: the formation of the Biafra Security Agency; circulation of the Biafran currency and mobilizing its use for business transactions; rallying of Nigerians of Igbo extraction, mostly traders, to observe a sit-at-home order; mobilizing the boycott of the last census exercise in Igbo states on the grounds that these states were not part of a Nigeria; and organizing the popular Lagos soccer tournament as a means of pressing home its demands and making symbolic declaration of independence during these events. As a group which invokes 'counter-claims of sovereignty', and seeks to create alternative 'spaces' of power and influence, MASSOB has become increasingly involved in communal and civic functions. Some of these include: the enforcement of rules on residence of states considered to be Igbo states or Biafra territories and pegging of rents where it has become exorbitant; enforcement of sanitation laws in urban cities in the East with punitive measures for defaulters; enforcement of the official price of petroleum products in filling stations in Igbo states; forceful seizure of fuel tankers moving from any part of the East to the North as a sign of protest against the non-supply of adequate products to the East; taking on-board security issues some cities in the East (especially Onitsha) and the settlement of disputes between warring groups.



MASSOB has also successfully internationalized its campaign for self-determination in Nigeria. After its emergence in 1999, it sent the Biafra Bill of Rights to the United Nations, and in 2001, it declared open the 'Biafra House' in Washington, DC, to coordinate its international and diasporic activities. Unlike the old Biafran secessionist movement in the 1960s which relied solely on propaganda, support and recognition from foreign countries, MASSOB realised that taking the struggle beyond its national borders in a globalised era required a host of new strategies, tactics, networking and politics. To a large extent, MASSOB is also influenced by the struggles of indigenous peoples in other parts of the Third World who are in a similar struggle against oppressive states. Consequently, it has established a communications outfit that combines a radio station and a weekly newspaper, both known as, the Voice of Biafra International (VOBI) in the United States. The international wing, known as 'MASSOB International' identifies with the goals and aspirations of MASSOB in Europe and US, and MASSOB is allied and funded by the US-based Biafran Liberation Movement (BLM) which was formed in 2003 (Threat Assessment 2004). MASSOB taps into a vibrant transnational network of Igbo groups and individuals many of whom left the country to the US and Western Europe during the long-drawn economic recession occasioned by the adjustment policies of the government in the 1980s and 1990s. These groups perceive the advent of MASSOB as an opportunity to invest in alternative politics, and through the intensification of political contention, diaspora activism, funding and support they have become powerful forces in homeland politics. Indeed, the Igbo diaspora has demonstrated the capacity to substantially influence secessionist struggles at home, and in the history of the Nigeria, never before has a diaspora's impact on the struggle of any ethnic nationality been as potent, effective and direct as that of the Igbo diaspora.

In spite of its pacifism and principle of non-violence, it was inevitable that MASSOB would clash with state security operatives in the course of its activities. In 2006, the leader of the movement and five others were arrested and arraigned by the Federal Government for treasonable charges, and were only granted temporary bail towards the end of 2007. The major cities, towns and villages across the Southeast which serve as the

base for MASSOB activities are always dotted with Biafran flags and are replete with a flurry of publications, including newspapers, magazines and pamphlets disseminating the movement's message. In a recent briefing by the Regional Administrator of the movement, it was claimed that between 22 May 2000 and 22 April 2008, over 2,000 registered members of the movement had been killed by state security personnel in various cities across the country (Njoku 2008). The movement also alleged that so many of its members have sustained various degrees of injuries resulting from gunshots and over 1,000 still remains in detention in Nigerian prisons. As MASSOB leaders and activists are being hounded, arrested and detained at home, the momentum practically shifts to the diaspora community who holds the key to critical support in financial and political matters, and is capable of mobilizing international support and impacting the struggle directly.

While MASSOB is presently locked in a struggle with the Nigerian state, at another level and within the context of contemporary Igbo politics, MASSOB represents an alternative to the treachery of elite-led Igbo groups and their failure to adequately address the 'Igbo question' in Nigeria. This reading of Igbo political history is aptly captured in the role which the apex pan-Igbo socio-cultural organization, the *Ohanaeze Indi Igbo*<sup>‡</sup> and the Igbo elite in general have played since the end of the civil war. A concatenation of events since the end of the civil war demonstrates the failure of Igbo leadership to clearly articulate a common agenda. It must be recalled that during the transition to civil rule in the late 1970s, the Igbos were presented with an opportunity to find their way back into the political mainstream following their relative impotence after the civil war. The 1977 Constituent Assembly was one of such occasions where the 'Igbo Question in Nigerian Politics' was to be brought to the front burner. To be sure, the conference represented the first of its kind since the end of the civil war and was the first time the different ethnic-nationalities met after the civil war to address the post-military order in Nigeria. Igbo members from Imo and Anambra States came to the Constituent Assembly emerged with conflicting visions for the future, irreconcilable interests and the lack of a definition of 'Igbo permanent interests'.

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<sup>‡</sup> Ohanaeze means 'the people and the leaders- the entire community or nation.'

The *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo* was also formed during this period to articulate and push the Igbo agenda just like its predecessor (the Igbo State Union) had done in the years prior to independence. This assumption failed to materialize due to the fact that it was hijacked by politicians of Igbo extraction who sought to align with the ruling party and submit to a subordinate role in the prevailing power configuration. For strategic reasons, the leadership of *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo* became inclined to the ruling Shehu Shagari-led National Party of Nigeria (NPN) at the centre and was largely recognised as the ‘Igbo wing’ of the NPN under a different name. As it seemed then, the leadership of *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo* saw the emergence of Dr. Alex Ekwueme (a fellow Igbo) as vice president under the Hausa-Fulani-led Shagari government, not only as a solution to the lack of leadership in Igboland, but as a means of re-connecting to mainstream politics at the national level. As such, there was a rallying of Igbo positions behind Dr. Ekwueme, and *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo* became strongly opposed to the Azikiwe-led Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP), arguing that Azikiwe and other Igbos in NPP should accord recognition to Dr. Ekwueme as the highest elected official from Igboland. Predictably, the NPP dismissed Dr. Ekwueme, the NPN and *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo* and its leaders as stooges of the North. However, on another front, the political tendencies in Igboland became more complicated with the arrival from exile of Dim Emeka Ojukwu, the ex-Biafran leader. Unwilling to accept the pre-eminent leadership of Azikiwe in Igboland, the new leadership of Ekwueme in NPN and the political agenda of *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo*, Ojukwu was still intent on asserting his political leadership of the Igbos. In a bid to re-enact his leadership this time through the ballot box, Ojukwu launched the ‘Ikemba Front’ in 1983 as partisan political organisation, and tried to use his place in Igbo history to garner votes from his people and seek election into the Senate from where he could challenge the new leadership of Ekwueme. The project met its Waterloo when his Senatorial District in Nnewi, Anambra State, rejected him in 1983.

To be sure, it must be pointed out that the ‘Igbo Presidency Project’ is central to contemporary Igbo politics. Although, issues like citizenship rights, exclusion and marginalisation, both in political and economic terms, all find expression under the ‘Igbo

Question' in Nigeria, the 'Igbo Presidency Project' seem to have become a cardinal negotiating point in the Igbo quest for reinventing Nigeria. This assumption forms the basis of the tripod theory which holds that stability can only be achieved in the Nigerian federation when there is a balance between the three major ethnic groups. But the inability of the *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo* and the entire Igbo leadership to throw up a formidable presidential candidate during the 1989-1993 Babangida transition programme underscores the disarray in Igboland. Instead, some prominent Igbo leaders pursued an anti-Yoruba agenda making themselves instruments of the June 12 annulment, and helped in sustaining the annulment under the Abacha regime. This underscores Ake's (2000: 107) point that within the political class, the annulment of the election was not as unpopular as it seemed and that was why the struggle to reverse the decision and validate the results of the election dissipated gradually.

In the 2003 presidential elections there were several political tendencies in Igboland which were played out in different political parties at the time. Once again, the *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo* failed to articulate a coherent 'Igbo Presidency Project' when it could not advise Igbo political leaders whether to pursue their ambition within the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) or through another party. In the confusion that ensued, there was the emergence of over ten presidential candidates of Igbo extraction, with the prominent ones being Dim Emeka Ojukwu of the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), Ike Nwachukwu of the National Democratic Party (NDP), and Jim Nwobodo of the United National Independence Party (UNPP). The only realistic chance for an Igbo presidency remained with Dr. Ekwueme whose late entry into the race ended with his defeat at the PDP National Convention. Hence, the 'Igbo Presidency Project' was buried partly due to the failure of *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo* to get the entire Southeast to agree to the idea of a single Igbo candidate for the 2003 elections. Ironically, *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo* was also complicit in sabotaging its own self-proclaimed objective of electing an Igbo president in 2003. Its own appointed chairman of the committee to elect an Igbo president, Chief Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu, was alleged to have pulled all the strings and deployed all the instrument of the *Ohanaeze* to campaign for the re-election of Obasanjo in Igboland. Another contributory factor to the collapse of the project had to do with the role of the

Southeast governors who rather than fighting for a common cause and the realising the Igbo presidency dream did the opposite, by immersing themselves in their selfish ambition of securing a second term which created divisions within the ranks of Igbo leadership.

The contradiction between Ohanaeze's position and the realisation of the Igbo presidency was further deepened at the inconclusive Constitutional Conference organised by the Obasanjo administration in 2006. Although, the conference was largely a response to the demand for a Sovereign National Conference by different ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, the Obasanjo administration fashioned out a heavily diluted version of the conference and attempted to use the review to ensure an amendment of the 1999 Constitution that would grant him a third term in office. The third term project finally collapsed at the National Assembly in May 2006. But the role of the leadership of the *Ohanaeze* in this despicable project further discredited the entire organisation and its leadership. At the Abakaliki Zonal hearing of the Constitutional Review Committee, the then president of the organisation, Professor Joe Irukwu, stated that the *Ohanaeze* would endorse a third term tenure for the presidency and other political offices. This was considered a tacit approval of the president's third term agenda and a sell-out by the *Ohanaeze* leadership on the 'Igbo Presidency Project' for 2007.

Apart from *Ohanaeze*'s paradoxical role in contemporary Igbo politics, the organisation is also immersed in a protracted leadership crisis which had effectively robbed it of its status in Igboland. The immediate issue had to do with the tenure of office of the elected executives, which according to the *Ohanaeze* constitution is supposed to last for two years. The Professor Irukwu-led executive assumed office in 2004 was supposed to hand over the affairs of the organisation to a new executive by February 2006. But while in office, Irukwu had cited the existence of a new *Ohanaeze* Constitution which allegedly guarantees a four-year term for the executives, a position that was intensely contested by other interested parties. The expiration of the tenure of the Irukwu-led executive in 2006 set the stage for a prolonged leadership crisis. The governors of the five Southeastern states waded into the crisis by appointing a Care-Taker Committee led by Ndubuisi Kanu

to conduct elections and hand-over to a new executive. Elections were conducted with the approval of the governors and Chief Dozie Ikedife emerged as the President-General of the organisation, while the Irukwu/Achuzia-led executive continued to carry on as the leaders of the organisation. Having lost face among the Igbos due to the third term debacle which he tacitly supported, Irukwu became increasingly unpopular among the Igbos and resigned his position as President-General. He handed over to his deputy, Chief Ifeanyi Enechukwu, who is also contemplating spending four years in office as President-General of the organisation. As it stands, both the Ikedife and Enechukwu factions are in court, and both factions still claim to represent the *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo*. Presently, they seem to be mending fences in order to find a middle ground under the auspices of the Southeast Governors Forum.

Aside the current factional struggles in the *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo*, a closer scrutiny of contemporary Igbo-elite politics reveal a maze of alliances, treachery and failure of leadership at different levels. With respect to the role of the governors and the *Ohanaeze*, there seem to be an attempt to hijack the organisation for their own political ends. This stems from the politicisation of the current leadership crisis in the organisation and the stance of the governors which appears to be an imposition on the organisation. For the Igbo elites within the ruling PDP there seems to be no genuine effort to represent the Igbos in their zero-sum quest for power. This was further exposed by the intrigues and horse-trading that characterised the party's National Convention where the chairman of the party was to be elected in 2008. The various tendencies at play during the elections revealed the clientele disposition of Igbo elites within the ruling party, and how these elites are used to the service of outside interests and abandonment of the Igbo cause. Therefore, what emerges is the existence of a political class whose members never stand for anything that is in the interest of the Igbo. Closely related to the above is the proliferation of socio-cultural platforms in Igboland most of which are elitist in their disposition. Some of these include: Aka Ikenga, Mkpoko Igbo, Eastern Mandate Union (EMU), Odenigbo Forum, South East Movement (SEM), Igbo National Assembly (INA), Ndi Igbo Liberation Forum, Igbo Salvation Front (ISF), Igbo Redemption Council (IRC), Igbo Peoples Congress (IPC) and the Igbo Question Movement (IQM). There are also

youth groups or those dominated by youths, such as, the Igbo Youth Council (IYC), Igbo Youth Movement (IYM) and the Federated Council of Igbo Youths (FCIY)<sup>§</sup>, who display a more vibrant form of ethnic nationalism and are more radical in their approach for equity and justice in Nigeria. The proliferation of these platforms is not unconnected to the resolution of the ‘Igbo Question’ in Nigeria and definitely ties into to the perceived leadership vacuum in Igboland which they all aspire to fill.

It is in the context of the challenges posed by these developments to Igbo politics at the national level that MASSOB has emerged as an alternative project to the elite-based politics in Igboland. By virtue of its character and the frame of its activities MASSOB may have been depicted as a radical nationalist movement, but its grassroots-based critiques of Igbo elite politics and its overwhelming following in Igboland demonstrates a wide antipathy to the Igbo political class. At its inception in 1999, several Igbo groups, legislators and the entire governors from the Southeast geo-political zone whose states fall within the proposed Biafran Project summarily distanced themselves from the movement. The *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo* in particular promptly reminded Uwazuruike that the dream of Biafra died in 1970. The uneasy relations between MASSOB and the *Ohanaeze* were captured in an interview granted by the Secretary-General of the Irukwu-led faction of the organisation, who made the following remarks about MASSOB:

*‘For me as an Ohanaeze chieftain, it (MASSOB) does not convey the type of meaning that should give me joy, for the following reasons: as elders, we believe that since we quit the battle field, all our efforts should now be geared towards winning peace, freedom and total integration for our people. That the youths, because of the severe hardship unleashed in the polity, now feel that they would rather pursue a separatist alternative should not give us joy, because we know the consequences of such a division. Hence, Ohanaeze is still fighting to make sure that there is no more marginalisation’* (Ejinkeonye 2005).

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<sup>§</sup> The existence and activities of these groups since the 1990s were gleaned from Nigerian newspapers and author’s fieldwork. However, some of these groups have ceased to exist (or are dormant) while others are still active.

What the *Ohanaeze* chieftain referred to as a ‘separatist alternative’ pursued by MASSOB underscores the conflicting views on how to articulate the collective struggles of the Igbos within the Nigerian public sphere. While the *Ohanaeze* is basically moderate and conservative, or even complicit in subverting the Igbo agenda, MASSOB has assumed a radical and critical stance, by rejecting the leadership of the *Ohanaeze* and describing them as a group of ‘elderly cowards’ who have aided the marginalisation of the Igbos (Akinyele 2001: 634).

In a culture that is largely characterised by dispersed authority, absence of any seat of executive authority, and enduring republican temperament and tendencies from its earliest times, the ascendancy of ‘youth power’ encapsulated in the activities of MASSOB does not merely interrogate the authority, power and control of a ‘small cabal’ or ‘covert group’, it feeds into the existing revolutionary tendencies and pressures from below which has come to represent the contemporary phase of Igbo nationalism in Nigeria. MASSOB strikes a cord that resonates with most Igbos youths, artisans and traders, who have lost confidence in the leadership of elite-based Igbo groups, like *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo*. In an attempt to link closely to the grassroots and avert being supplanted by youth, the *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo* set up a youth wing, known as the *Ohanaeze Youth Council* (OYC). The OYC has since its establishment positioned itself in the vanguard to forestall any challenge to its parent body and the apex socio-cultural group in Igboland, the *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo*.

### **Conclusion**

Thus far, this paper has tried to provide the contexts and extenuating circumstances under which contemporary Igbo nationalism has emerged as a salient feature of the Nigerian public sphere. This emergent form of Igbo nationalism is hinged on the quest for ‘self-determination’, which is marked by inclinations towards the decentralisation and devolution of power and authority as presently constituted in Nigeria. Despite its internal inconsistencies, emergent forms of Igbo nationalism is fuelled by a large measure of internal consensus and the need to recognise the Igbo nation as viable ethnic category or a lucrative part of the Nigerian system. Certainly, the claim to ‘nationhood’,



'sovereignty' and 'independence' is not so much an act of secession, rather it captures the quest to revert to a system of 'ethnic federalism' where ethnically defined identities are granted sovereign rights within the Nigerian federation. This brings to fore the crucial relations between the Igbo nation and the Nigeria state, and its relations with other ethnic nationalities in the federation.

However, what emerges from the foregoing is that the construction of contemporary Igbo nationalism feeds into the critical juncture in which the Igbo nation presently finds itself in Nigeria. Owing to years of marginalisation within the Nigerian project, radical strands of contemporary Igbo nationalism has not only provided a refuge or platform for the solidarity of oppressed and excluded Igbos, it has also drawn on the 'greatness' and 'achievements' of the Igbo nation in the past to give a political identity and historical appeal to the social forces seeking redress in Igboland, by defining its struggle in nationalist terms. Indeed, current developments indicate that the 'Ndi Igbo Question' cannot be glossed over. This calls for a rethinking of the possibilities of forging a democratic and sustainable nation-state project in Nigeria. If Nigeria must transcend the status of a 'precarious' and 'unfinished' patchwork in perpetuity, the main challenge will lie in its ability to capture the dynamics of ethno-nationalist claims and provoke on a broader scale a process that will lead to an equitable and democratic basis for the resolution of the 'Ndi Igbo Question'.

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