

OHANAEZE NDI IGBO AND THE RE-BIRTH OF IGBO NATIONALISM 1976- 2015

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Abstract

This study examines contemporary Igbo ethnic nationalism in Nigeria through the lens of Ohanaeze Ndigbo, the foremost socio-cultural organisation representing the Igbo people. Beyond documenting the movement's ideological foundations, the research critically assesses Ohanaeze's performance in advancing its objectives and analyses the major structural, political, and internal constraints limiting its effectiveness. The study adopts a mixed methodological approach combining primary and secondary sources. Extensive fieldwork involved in-depth interviews with senior Ohanaeze officials as well as prominent Igbo and Yoruba leaders across various sectors. Data from documentary sources and oral testimonies were subjected to rigorous content analysis and critical interpretation, underpinned by a thematic historical framework. The findings reveal that, despite significant challenges, Ohanaeze Ndigbo has played a constructive role in promoting good governance and fostering inter-ethnic relations. The organisation was instrumental in the emergence of influential pan-regional platforms such as The Patriots, the Southern Senators Forum, and the Southern Governors Forum. By convening elites across ethnic lines and aligning their political interests, Ohanaeze helped moderate inter-group competition and reduce ethnic rivalries. Its consistent advocacy for national unity has also contributed to de-escalating communal tensions and discouraging militant mobilisation by sectional groups. Ultimately, the study lends empirical support to scholarly arguments that ethnically based socio-cultural organisations can serve as effective "bridges" in deeply divided multi-ethnic societies when they channel particularistic identities toward broader national cohesion. However, persistent internal weaknesses and external political pressures continue to constrain Ohanaeze's capacity to fully realise this bridging potential.

Keywords: Igbo, Ethnicity, Nationalism, Ethnic Unions, Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo

Introduction

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic state with over 250 ethnic groups of various sizes and populations.¹ The diverse nature of the Nigerian state as a result of ethnic differences laid the foundation for the exploitation of what still goes on in the country. This is predicated on the fact that these ethnic groups, though assembled or found in one country, do not have the same needs, objectives and aspirations. Based on these diverse ethnic inclinations, it seems cumbersome to discuss the Nigerian project without considering the ethnic formation of the country.

Ethnicity, therefore, has become a strong factor in the political life of Nigeria. Most often, ethnic sentiments are used to replace merit and skills, such that round pegs are no longer found in round holes. The result is that most Nigerians see themselves first as Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Ijo, Kanuri, Ibibio, Idoma, Fulani, and so on, before they see themselves as Nigerians. This is why ethnic organizations still play vital roles in the country's social, economic and political development. Practically, all ethnic groups that make up the Nigerian nation have their own ethnic organizations that seek to protect and advance their interest in different areas.

The origin of ethnically-based unions in Nigeria is traced to migrants who conglomerated in the colonial urban environment which was then unfamiliar, unfriendly and insecure.² The scarce social, economic and political opportunities in the colonial urban environment compelled the residents to require the assistance of members of their respective ethnic groups to survive and advance. To protect the interest of their people, elite

nationalists formed ethnically-based organizations.³ These ethnic unions later became powerful to the extent that they started responding to the needs of their members beyond what the government could do for them.

Some of these unions were the Ibibio State Union (for the Ibibio), Idoma Hope Rising (for the Idoma ethnic group); the Egbe Omo Oduduwa (for the Yoruba ethnic group), the Tiv Progressive Union (for the Tiv ethnic group), Jamyyan Mutanen Arewa (for the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group), Ibo State Union (for the Igbo ethnic group), among others. These organizations aimed not at the development of ethnic exclusiveness, but at promoting the successful adaptation of their members to modern urban conditions. Their aims also included providing members with mutual aid, including support while out of work, sympathy and financial assistance (in the case of illness), and responsibility for the funeral and the repatriation of the family of the deceased (in the case of death). The *raison d'être*, however, was fostering and keeping alive interest in ethnic cultures and traditions, and thus maintaining a person's attachment to his native town or village and to his lineage there.⁴

As the ethnic groups grew stronger and more cohesive, their activities adversely affected the idea of national consciousness and truncated the development of a strong sense of national identity. Sensing the dangers of these parochial associations Eyo Ita had, in 1945, warned Nigerians to, "...seek coordination among the ethnic unions in a way that will help build a strong national consciousness".⁵ This conflict of economic interest set the stage for the series of events which propelled the country into the politicization of ethnicity. Thus, ethnic organizations originated in the colonial urban centres during the twentieth century to provide a sense of security for the new immigrants.

Ethnic organizations in Africa represent an attempt to attain some form of accommodation with modernity. It was among the first specifically African voluntary organizations to be established without sponsorship from either the colonial administration or the church.⁶ Audrey Smock has observed that ethnic unions in Africa resemble other modern voluntary organizations in many ways. For instance, they model their structure and procedures on typical voluntary organizations by electing officers, forming committees, scheduling meetings, and keeping minutes.⁷ Unlike such organizations, however, ethnic associations confine their membership to groups defined by ascriptive boundaries – usually an ethnic group, or geographical unit. Although ethnic organizations are based on ethnic origin rather than interest or occupation, membership is usually voluntary. Associations do not automatically confer membership on all persons in the community but, like other voluntary organizations, require an explicit commitment to join. Moreover, the multiplicity of ethnic unions, representing varying levels of inclusiveness, sometimes presents individuals with a choice between membership in two or more of them.

In a review of the modernization theory, Robert Melson and Howard Wolpe have asserted that:

Inter-group conflict is seldom a product of simple cultural diversity and, in the Nigerian case; there is little that is 'traditional' about the contemporary pattern of political divisions. On the contrary, Nigeria's political crisis is traceable directly to the widening of social horizons and to the process of modernization at work within the national boundaries.⁸

The study further demonstrates that rather than eliminating ethnicity, modernization managed to make and strengthen it. James Coleman has shown how the desire of the Igbo-speaking people for education was seen as threatening the *status quo*, by the Yoruba-speaking people, who had earlier contacts with western civilization, dominated the colonial service. He also highlights how the rising profile of Nnamdi Azikiwe (an Igbo) in the nationalist movement aroused rivalry among the Yoruba elite, leading to the formation of alternative political platforms.⁹

Ethnic unions in Nigeria were banned by the military government of Aguiyi-Ironsi for their alleged involvement in partisan politics during the First Republic.¹⁰ But they did not vanish entirely after the ban. They merely transformed their identities through changes in name, and concerned themselves with immediate communal issues. While pan-ethnic unions vanished, homeland associations continued to flourish. Pan-ethnic unions only became useful in the Diaspora where homeland associations could hardly be effective as a result of their insignificant membership. It was such dormant unions that were revitalized in the context of the ethno-religious conflicts of the mid-1980s.¹¹

It should be noted that the roles of ethnic unions in Nigeria have evolved over time, and have proved chameleon-like: featuring new colours and a different guise. This has provoked new questions and debates as to their true nature and impact on the Nigeria project. For instance, in the colonial and early post-colonial times, ethnicity was negatively viewed in two ways: firstly, as an antithesis to progress, an artifact of traditionality in the African countryside which modernizers wanted to contain at the social margins, and secondly as a divisive and fissiparous force which posed great danger to the consolidation of new states. During this period, people were ashamed to associate themselves with ethnicity, let alone ethnically-based unions. Between 1986 and 1990, the profile of ethnic organizations in self-help development, both in the rural and urban areas, increased following

the withdrawal of the state from involvement in major areas of public life as a result of the Structural Adjustment Programme.

In a very fundamental way, therefore, this study is about Igbo ethnic nationalism in Nigeria, using the Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo as a case study. The Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo was established in 1976 to serve as a unifying apex organization for the Igbo and to also assume the role of the former Igbo State Union (ISU) in the post-civil war Nigeria public space. It is important to establish that this work is not trying to study ethnic unions that demanded self-determination or administrative control over a territory within Nigeria, such as the Odua People's Congress (OPC), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger-Delta (MEND) et cetera. On the contrary, it examines an ethnic organization whose aims include promoting the interest and development of the ethnic group as well as promoting peaceful coexistence with members of other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria such as Afenifere (for the Yoruba), Arewa Consultative Forum (for the Hausa-Fulani), and Ohanaeze (for the Igbo), among others.

Definition of Terms

The term 'nationalism' takes note of the fact that a nation must be in existence before the phenomenon can manifest itself. It is, therefore, apt to define the concept 'nation' before proceeding with the definition of nationalism. *Nationem*, the Latin word for nation, refers to units much more like 'tribe', 'clan', or 'family' than the large, territorially based grouping which we think of as nations today¹². According to Q Wright, "The word 'nation', suggests a considerable group of people, united by common culture, values, standards, and political aspirations, usually occupying a definite territory"¹³. A nation, therefore, refers to a group of people within a defined territory and who are held together by common culture, a strong historical experience, and have a common destiny for the future. Examples of a nation include the Igbo, the Yoruba, the Hausa, the Efik, et cetera.

We now turn to the term 'nationalism'. O. E. Ezeani defines nationalism as "a movement with ideological undertone, spurred by certain sentiments and aspirations prevalent among a group of people who share some or all of the following: a common territory, ethnic unity, language, religion, race, government and culture"¹⁴. It is a fundamental error to equate nationalism with a feeling of loyalty to the state rather than with loyalty to the nation. In a modern pluralistic state like Nigeria, 'nation' can be equated with ethnicity. Thus, nationalism can be seen as ethnic nationalism. According to Ejitu Ota, "Ethnic nationalism is a situation in which the ethnic groups of a modern pluralistic nation-state prefer to retain their own individual group identities and loyalties and indeed identify reluctantly with the nation-state"¹⁵. Thus, nationalism refers to the ability of the citizens of any given nation (ethnic group) to identify their hopes and aspirations with those of their nation.

Igbo Ethnic Nationalism during the Colonial Era: Ibo State Union

The birth of the Ibo Union in Lagos in 1935 marked the commencement of a pan-Igbo organization. The Union, which was a federation of other less-inclusive Igbo clan unions in Lagos, was established in the wake of a reception held in honour of S. E. Onwu who returned from England in 1936 as the first Igbo medical doctor.¹⁶ During the succeeding twelve (12) years, the Ibo Union metamorphosed into a strong pan-Igbo organization, the Ibo Federal Union with headquarters in Lagos. It was given the mandate to build and run thirty secondary schools in Igboland and to establish an Igbo National Bank."¹⁷ The following people held the office of president of the Ibo Federal Union: Mr. L. A. Nkediye (1944-1945), Justice H. U. Kaine (1945-1946), Mr J. I. Okoye (1946-1947) and Mr. Z. C. Obi (1947-1948).¹⁸

In the meantime, efforts were made to involve Igbo rural dwellers in the activities of the Union through the traditional rulers and to relocate the unions' headquarters to the East.¹⁹ In December 19, 1948, at a Pan-Igbo conference held at Aba, the Ibo Federal Union was converted into the Ibo State Union, with Port Harcourt as its headquarter. The name "Ibo State Union", according to Ejitu N. Ota, was "coined by replacing the word 'federal' with 'state' since Nigeria was, after all, a federation of ethnic states, and Igboland was one of the ethnic states".²⁰ According to Z. C. Obi:

The Union is a supreme social organization of the entire people of Ibo descent. It exercises protective influence over the Ibo Communities abroad that is outside Iboland, and acts as watchdog over the welfare and the well being of all the Ibos. It also ensures that Ibos wherever they sojourn, prove themselves good and law-abiding citizens and enjoy unhampered their social and political rights. Its branches at places act as a liaison between Government and Ibo Communities and, in some cases, for the whole community. It has over 200 branches in Nigeria, Cameroons, Fernando Po, French West Africa, London, etc.²¹

The motto of the Union was "Unity, Service and Progress".²² The objectives of the Union include the following; to devise ways and means whereby all the sons and daughters of Igboland, at home and abroad, shall be brought

together under one Union; to promote cultural understanding among the various groups in Igboland and abroad; to encourage educational, religious, social and political progress of the Ibos at home and abroad; and to seek better understanding between Igbo and other linguistic groups in Nigeria among others.²³

The foregoing is a necessary brief history of how the Ibo Union Lagos metamorphosed into a pan-Igbo organization called "Ibo State Union". The pioneer leaders of the Union included Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who was elected its president, Barr. A. C. Nwapa who was elected the Deputy President, Mr. Raymond A. Njoku and Mr. M. O. Ajegbo who were elected first and second vice-presidents, respectively. Others included; Mr. (later) Justice H. U. Kaine (Third Vice-President), Barr. (later Dr.) J. A. Wachuku (Principal Secretary), Mr. B. O. N. Eluwa (Permanent Under-Secretary), Mr. M. I. Onwuka (Treasurer), Mr. (later Dr.) Nwafor Orizu (Political Adviser), Mr. Mbonu Ojike (Economic Adviser), Dr. Akanu Ibiam (Medical Adviser), Dr. K. O. Mbadiwe (Cultural Adviser) and Mr. E. J. Oli (Educational Adviser).²⁴

In 1951, Raymond A. Njoku succeeded Azikiwe as the president of the Union, and in 1954, the mantle of leadership fell to Chief Z. C. Obi, a Port Harcourt-based businessman from Nnewi.²⁵ The Ibo State Union contributed immensely to Nigeria's march to nationhood. For instance, in 1958, the Union was one of the many ethnic-based associations that presented a memorandum to the commission appointed by the British colonial government to investigate the fears of minorities in Nigeria and to propose means of solving them.²⁶ The Union also played a role in the agreement signed by the Government of the Federation and of the Eastern Regional Government with the Spanish Government on 14 September, 1957, ameliorating the conditions of service of Nigerian labourers working in the Spanish island of Fernando Po of which Igbo were in the majority.²⁷ The Federal Military Government in May, 1966 proscribed the Union and other ethnic associations, for fear of working against the unity of Nigeria.²⁸

Igbo Ethnic Nationalism Since 1976: The formation of Ohanaeze Ndigbo

The journey towards what we now call Ohanaeze Ndigbo began in 1976, when some Igbo leaders, in a bid to articulate and evaluate their positions in the pre-and-post Nigerian civil war came together to form the 'Igbo Forum'. Akanu Ibiam was the first chairman; Daddy Onyema was the Vice-Chairman of the Forum while Jerome Udoji and J. U. Agwu were the Secretary and Deputy-Secretary of the Forum, respectively. Nnamdi Azikiwe was the patron and incidentally the only patron Ohanaeze has ever had.²⁹ Other members of the Forum included M. I. Okpara, Pius Okigbo, Dennis Osadebay, K. O. Mbadiwe, Nnanna Kalu, M. N. Ugochukwu, and Ben Nwabueze. The first meeting of the Forum was held in Dr. Akanu Ibiam Enugu residence.³⁰ According to Ben Nwabueze:

I was the youngest member and perhaps the least qualified for inclusion in such an august company, although I had even then by no means undistinguished record as a fighter for the Igbo cause, which dated back to the University of Lagos crisis in 1965.³¹

Apart from the executive organ of the Forum, it has the 'Summit', which was the premier decision making organ of the Forum. The Summit was made up of nine leaders which initially included Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nnanna Kalu, Dennis Osadebay, Akanu Ibiam, among others. When in the 1980s, following the crisis that engulfed Ohanaeze, Nnamdi Azikiwe pulled out from the Summit, Odumegwu Ojukwu replaced him.³²

It was through the activities of the Forum that Igbo leaders realized that they had lost all their positions in the affairs of the country and that the 'No Victor, No Vanquished' pronouncement of General Gowon after the war was a mere political rhetoric to calm frayed nerves at that moment. The Forum also observed that the defeat in the Nigeria-Biafra war, 1967-70, had "left the Igbo psyche in a state of near comatose wallowing in self-delusion".³³ Following this development, they decided that there was need for the Igbo to have a common front to articulate, propagate and protect their interests in the affairs of the country. In the words of Nwabueze:

A first step in the effort to salvage the situation is to forge and develop effective, credible organizational structures commanding not only the mandate and respect of the overwhelming majority of Ndi Igbo, but also undisputed authority to enforce discipline and a unity of purpose, acknowledged by everyone to be imperative necessity. For without such an organization, we will remain rudderless and directionless, a pawn amenable to be used and discarded by others as suits their purpose.³⁴

To this end, in 1979, after the military had handed over power to the civilian government, the Forum changed its name to Ohanaeze Ndigbo, and membership of the organization was broadened to include every adult Igbo, in line with the new name of the organization. The name "Ohanaeze" is a combination of two Igbo words "Oha" and "Eze". "Oha" refers to the people or public, while "Eze" refers to the king or leaders. Ohanaeze, therefore,

connote the people and kings of Igboland, that is the ‘General Assembly’ of the Igbo people. According to Ohanaeze Ndigbo draft constitution, Ohanaeze is:

A non partisan, non sectarian organization where ndi Igbo, wherever they may be, whether within or outside Nigeria, may come together for the purpose of nurturing better understanding and harmonious relations among ourselves and with other ethnic groups in Nigeria, whose opinion and advice shall be sought and respected, not only by ndi Igbo, but also by governments and other nationalities who may want to consult with the Igbo nation, and committed to the principles of freedom, equality, justice, free enterprise, and the struggle to preserve our Igbo corporate existence that is free from rancor and submissive to the will of God.³⁵

In the same year (1979), the organization elected new officers, with Mathias Ugochukwu as President, and in 1983, the leadership of the organization fell on Ben Nwabueze. Unfortunately, the organization was proscribed by 1984 Decree of the Federal Military Government, which dissolved “all movements and organizations (however known or designated) established for the creation of more states or local governments in Nigeria or for boundary adjustments or otherwise meant to promote ethnic differences or likely to destroy or disrupt the unity of the Federal Republic of Nigeria”.³⁶ However, the Buhari-led military government was overthrown in August, 1985, and General Babangida became the new military Head of State. When the Babangida regime lifted the ban on political parties and ethnic-based organizations, Ohanaeze Ndigbo participated actively in nation-building. For instance, it was involved in the National Constitutional Conference held between June 27, 1994 and June 27, 1995, where it presented a Memorandum on behalf of the Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria.

In 2001, efforts were made to re-structure Ohanaeze to effectively bring the organization down to the grassroots, and to draft a new constitution for it. Stakeholders argued that the organisation should stand on the bipodal platform as its name clearly and correctly implies. The organization was meant to function from the grassroots to reflect its name Oha (public). According to Joe Irukwu:

The actual process of democratization of Ohanaeze started in the year 2001 when a serious effort was made to introduce the concept of a President-General and a national executive committee to work with the Secretary-General...some members suggested that he (Ben Nwabueze) should take up the position of President-General so that a younger person can be given the post of Secretary-General during the interim transition period from the old system to a democratic Ohanaeze. This suggestion which was made at an Imeobi meeting...was rejected by Prof Ben Nwabueze.³⁷

An Interim National Executive Committee, under the leadership of Justice Eze Ozobu, as President-General and Ben Nwabueze as Secretary-General, was inaugurated in 2001 to nurture Ohanaeze “to an all-embracing democratic grassroots organization that would be truly unifying and effective in dealing with issues affecting the progress, unity and development of Ndigbo and Igboland”.³⁸

On November 30, 2003 Professor Joe Irukwu and Joe Achuzia were elected the President-General and Secretary-General, respectively, of Ohanaeze. In 2006, Dozie Ikedife was elected the President-General, and in 2008, a new election of Ohanaeze took place with Ambassador Raph Uwechue, from Ogwashiuku, Delta state, as President-General. He was succeeded by Chief Enwo-Igariwey on January 12, 2013. The Enwo-Igariwey led National Executive’s tenure expired on January 12, 2017. A new election was conducted and Chief Nnia Nwodo emerged as the President-General. He was subsequently inaugurated. Table I shows Ohanaeze Ndigbo leadership and succession since its establishment in 1976.

Table I: Ohanaeze Ndigbo Leadership and Succession 1976-2016.

S/N	DATE	NAME	DESIGNATION
1	1976-1978	Dr. Akanu Ibiam	Chairman
2	1979-1983	Chief Mathias Ugochukwu	Chairman
3	1984-2000	Prof. Ben Nwabueze	Executive Secretary
4	2001-2003	Retired Justice Eze Ozobu	President General
5	2004-2006	Prof. Joe Irukwu	President General
6	Nov., 2006-2007	Dr. Dozie Ikedife	President General
7	Nov., 2008-2012	Amb. Raph Uwachue	President General
8	2013-2016	Chief Enwo Igariweh	President General

Sources: Author’s compilation.

The Activities of Ohanaeze:

The activities and programmes of Ohanaeze Ndigbo were social, cultural and political in nature. The social and cultural activities included Igbo National Day Celebration, Igbo Summit and the Promotion of the Igbo language. The Igbo National Day was conceived as an annual event to celebrate the rich cultures of the Igbo; to rally them together as one people with a common purpose, to enkindle in them a pride in their being Igbo, and to inspire them with zeal and fervor to rescue themselves and their psyche from their state of degradation.³⁹ It started in 2000 and was carried out on 29 September each year in the states that constituted the umbrella organization. These states are: Abia, Anambra, Delta, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and Rivers. The date of the celebration was very symbolic to the Igbo.

The convoking of Igbo Summit was another major activity of Ohanaeze Ndigbo, and this was instituted in 2001. The aim was to bring together Igbo leaders from all walks of life to evolve an action plan for the development of Igboland and its people. The summit gave the Igbo the opportunity in stock-taking and re-positioning within Nigeria.⁴⁰ The group also had programmes and activities that promoted the Igbo language. They advocated the speaking of Igbo as the official language at every public function involving Ndigbo. The group, in addition, sponsored television and radio programmes that promoted Igbo language and culture through the state chapters of the organisation. For instance, the Enugu state chapter sponsored a television programme in Igbo titled '*Oganiru Ndi Igbo*' (the progress of the Igbo). *Oganiru Ndi Igbo* was designed for the promotion of the language and cultural values of Igbo people across the nation. The programme was televised on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Enugu, every week.⁴¹

The political activities of Ohanaeze Ndigbo also included the group's role in political transition, Ohanaeze political alignments with other ethnic nationalities and unions and its positions in major national questions. National question covered issues bordering on the structure of the nation, and how the federating states should share the "national cake" without any one feeling cheated. It also included issues such as citizenship, state creation, revenue allocation and minority question. The organization played a significant role in the transition processes under various military regimes, as well as in civilian/democratic rule. The group was deeply involved in the 1975 Constitutional Drafting Committee (CDC) and the Constituent Assembly held in 1977, during the Murtala Muhammed/Olusegun Obasanjo regime. During the Babangida regime, members of Ohanaeze Ndigbo participated in the elections that produced the four South East governors in December 1991, who were equally staunch members of Ohanaeze leadership. The organization also played some vital roles in the Abacha regime. In the National Constitutional Conference, the Ohanaeze articulated, among others, the issue of the zoning system and rotation of political offices particularly the presidency which was considered as a mechanism to break the perceived monopoly of the centre by the North. Ohanaeze argued that true nationhood in a multi-ethnic state is impossible without fostering a sense of belonging among all the units. In its proposal, six geopolitical zones were put forward by the Ohanaeze – North-east, North-west, North-central, South-east, South-west and South-south. Understandably, the Ohanaeze's six zonal structure was viewed to be a strategy for the Igbo to be able to produce a president in the future after the political and economic setback of the Nigeria-Biafra war. It was probably for the same reason that the Yoruba embraced the formula as the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election which Abiola won was still fresh in their memory. Arising from this, the six-zone system was used as a guide for the creation of new states in 1996 by the Abacha administration.⁴² The group worked against the self-succession bid of Sani Abacha, although some members of its leadership, supported the tenure elongation of Abacha. Furthermore, the Ohanaeze Ndigbo played some role during the Abdulsalami Abubakar transition programme. A number of the recommendations which the group made were accepted by the regime. They included the release of all political detainees; the dissolution and re-constitution of transition agencies; and the dissolution of exiting five political parties.⁴³

The Ohanaeze Ndigbo actively participated in the Fourth Republic's transition to civil rule programmes, including the 2003 general elections in Nigeria. The organization, had in 2001, organized an Igbo Political Summit where it made a case for a Nigerian president of Igbo extraction. Ohanaeze, however, never endorsed any presidential candidate in 2003, but the Igbo voted massively for Chukwuemeka Ojukwu of the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), who came third in the presidential election. The organization also played a role in the 2007 general elections. The third-term aspiration of then President Obasanjo split the organization, as the President-General of Ohanaeze, with some members of the National Executive Council supported the tenure elongation of President Obasanjo. Others, such as Uche Chukwumerije, Orji Uzor Kalu, and Dozie Ikedife worked tirelessly against the tenure elongation. While the pronouncements of the President-General of Ohanaeze supporting tenure elongation put a dent on the image of Ohanaeze Ndigbo, the roles played by some Ohanaeze chieftains to forestall the tenure elongation bill boosted the image of the Igbo.⁴⁴

The Ohanaeze Ndigbo made use of political alignments with other ethnic nationalities, regional groupings (geo-political zones), and ethnic associations, as a tool to achieve Igbo political goal. For instance, on August 2, 2005 Ohanaeze Ndigbo had a leadership dialogue with the Middle-Belt in Abuja, and in November,

2005, the organization initiated a one-day partnership conference of the South-East and South-South leaders in Owerri. This was aimed at awakening and strengthening the earlier relationships of goodwill that existed between the people of the Southeast and South-South geo-political zones before the infusion of ethnic politics in Nigeria in 1952. There was also a one day summit of the South-East and South-West leaders christened “Handshake across the Niger”, held in Enugu in January, 2018 with a call for stronger regional cooperation between the two zones.

The Organisation, in 2011, endorsed President Goodluck Jonathan’s election bid. This was the first time the organisation was endorsing a presidential candidate since 2000. The group also mobilized the Igbo to vote *en-mass* for Jonathan who eventually won the presidential election. The group’s support for Goodluck Jonathan was for a South-South presidency in a rotational process that would help to qualify the South East zone to take over the baton after the Jonathan presidency.⁴⁵ Ohanaeze similarly played a significant role in the 2015 general elections. The organisation actively participated in the 2014 National Conference held in Abuja. During the presidential election, the Ohanaeze, again endorsed President Jonathan for a second term in office as president.

The Ohanaeze contributed immensely to major national questions. The group considered the equality of men, justice, freedom, equity and sense of belonging to the nation-state by the component units as a vital principle in nationhood. The organization outlined twenty constitutional provisions for the restructuring of the country. These included true federalism in which they specifically advocated that Nigeria should be restructured into six regions, namely, South-East, Northeast, South-South, North-East, South-West and North-West; decentralization of power; citizenship rights; tenure and rotation of chief executives at federal, regional/state levels; reorganization of the Police; Nigeria Armed Forces; Political Party Reforms; Electoral Reforms; Civil Service Reforms; Federal Character Principle; Non-Adoption of State Religion, among others.⁴⁶ The Ohanaeze canvassed the need for restructuring in order to create a true federation that would meet the aspirations of most Nigerians and ensure national stability. Restructuring of the Nigerian political structure was the major demand of the National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) of 2005. However, an opportunity of carrying out the necessary constitutional amendments was abandoned by the nation’s political leaders on the altar of the tenure elongation proposal in 2006. The tenure elongation proposal, one source alleged, was deliberately played up to divert attention from the constitutional amendments by those who wanted the *status quo* maintained.⁴⁷ This is why it was easy to jettison the people’s constitutional amendment and restructuring proposal, which Nigerians had been clamouring, along with the less popular tenure elongation proposal. Otherwise, they could have abandoned the tenure elongation proposal while accepting the other constitutional amendment proposal. The Igbo lost the opportunity to have in 2007 the one state ‘donated’ to them by the NPRC along with other key benefits as they became victims of the tenure elongation proposal fear.

The Constraints to the Activities of Ohanaeze Ndigbo

There were constraints to the activities of Ohanaeze Ndigbo. These limitations were internal and external in character. The internal constraints included finance, irregular attendance to meetings, leadership and constitutional crises. The organization lacked financial independence and depended on the goodwill of the governors of the Igbo-speaking states of South-East of Nigeria. Most members attended meetings when they felt they had something of interest to protect or achieve. Leadership and constitutional crises weighed down the organization and threatened the unity of Ndigbo. The organization was also constrained by recurring litigations. This affected the organization in many ways. For instance, the meager resources of Ohanaeze which should have been used to execute the various programmes and activities of the group, had often been used in court. Litigations had projected a bad image of the organization and of the Igbo.

The external constraints were forces and other extraneous interests working against the progress of Ohanaeze Ndigbo. These forces it has been claimed, fear that Ndi Igbo, by uniting in purpose and action, would achieve as much social and economic progress as they did in the past. The forces were, therefore, bent on destabilizing Igbo ethnic nationalism. Their modes of operation included sponsoring their proxies into political offices in the Igbo speaking states and Ohanaeze leadership, and backing a faction of Igbo or Ohanaeze leadership during crisis situations, with the aim of dividing the Igbo people and weakening the influence of Ohanaeze. Most Ohanaeze crises, such as the issue of tenure elongation and constitutional crisis are believed to have had external backings.

The Achievements of Ohanaeze Ndigbo

The organization made significant impact in the context of Nigerian politics. It submitted a petition to the Human and Civil Rights Investigating Commission (HRIC) (also known as Oputa Panel), where it articulated the injustices and atrocities meted out to the Igbo before, during and after the Nigeria-Biafra war, 1967-1970. The petition also demanded reparations or restitutions for fundamental rights of the Igbo which were infringed upon and abused in the 35 odd years between 1966 and 1999. It also demanded for an assurance of ‘Ozo emena’ (Never

Again) – a national vow that Ndigbo would never be an object of victimization in Nigeria again.⁴⁸ The Ohanaeze, also, went to the Oputa Panel to canvass for the de-marginalisation of the Igbo in Nigerian politics. The group wanted the federal government to revisit the revenue formula, which did not make for equitable distribution of public wealth, and had impoverished the Igbo more. For in the words of Justice Chukwudifu Oputa who was quoting the Merchant of Venice, “Leaving the life for Venice while the king took all his property, Venice argued, was equal to taking his life away since it is his property that sustains his life”.⁴⁹ Therefore, sustaining and intensifying the policy of marginalization, was tantamount to debasing the quality of life of the Igbo.

The Ohanaeze Ndigbo severally played an important role in the promotion of good governance and democracy, as well as helped to demand for strict adherence to constitutionalism in Nigeria. The group was among the civil organizations that fought Abacha’s self-succession plot. Also, following the protracted illness of President Umaru Musa Ya’Adua in 2009, the group through press releases, called for the immediate confirmation of the then Vice-President, Goodluck Jonathan, as acting president following the inability of the sick president to perform his duties.⁵⁰

In addition, the group made suggestions in burning issues in Nigeria such as the fuel subsidy crisis of January, 2012, Ohanaeze issued a press statement, calling on the Federal Government to re-consider the position of Labour and find an amicable solution to the perennial fuel crisis that nearly paralyzed the country.⁵¹ Similarly, during the Sharia issue, Ohanaeze and other sister organizations, such as Afenifere and the Union of Niger Delta, under the umbrella of Southern Leaders, met and rejected the Sharia legal code. They reaffirmed Nigeria’s secularity, saying that the adoption of Sharia was an affront on the supremacy of the Constitution.⁵² The introduction of the Sharia reflected that all was not well with the Nigerian polity. People still consumed alcohol in the sharia states; prostitutes were seen everywhere there and the menace of street begging by beggars popularly called ‘*almajiris*’ was not at all abating. People thought Islam could be developed without introducing the divisive measures. Moreso, people argued that the sharia states did not see anything wrong, getting revenue from Value Added Tax (VAT), including VAT derived from alcoholic drinks. One source alleged that the introduction of sharia was simply the reaction to power shift in Nigeria by the Muslims either to forcefully bend the hand of Obasanjo backwards to their advantage or to perhaps, create an environment for the emergence of a pro-Northern change of government.⁵³

Conclusion

The work set out to examine the re-birth of Igbo ethnic nationalism, using Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo as a case study, looking at the objectives and examine major constraints, evaluating its contributions to the status of the Igbo.

It found out that Ohanaeze Ndigbo was established in 1976 to assume the role of the former Ibo State Union (ISU) in the post-civil war Nigerian public space. It was also observed that the Ohanaeze, through its activities, helped immensely in lifting up the Igbo psyche from its state of frustration and perhaps degradation. The Igbo psyche was degraded as a result of the devastating effect of the Nigeria-Biafra war, and the continued marginalization of Ndigbo since the end of the war. A sad demonstration of this was the renunciation of their Igbo origins by some Igbo-speaking communities and individuals, notably in Delta and Rivers States. Being Igbo became a social stigma and an economic as well as political liability. The irony in the Igbo-Nigerian politics was that though they were the innocent victims, they were intimidated to believe they were the guilty ones. Reacting to how the Igbo responded to sporadic killings of the Igbo in the northern part of Nigeria, one source said that Igbo were still suffering from defeat syndrome. It was said they would prefer to shy away from making appropriate statements or responses when their rights were threatened so that they would not be accused of instigating disunity.⁵⁴

The position would appear changing in Delta and Rivers states as they were becoming proud of their identity. Ndi Igbo now fight for their rights in Nigeria, unlike when they would be lamenting in silence thinking, according to Lamido Sanusi, “they brought it upon themselves.”⁵⁵ For instance, the Igbo kept silent on the non inclusion of even a single Igbo in the original membership of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) announced at the advent of the General Buhari military administration in 1984. The omission was subsequently made good by the appointment of one Igbo military member but only after it had been taken up in the foreign press.⁵⁶ Equally, in 1991, the Igbo were begging, instead of fighting for their right, for the creation of more states in Igboland. They went to the extent of conferment of chieftaincy title of *Ogugua Ndigbo* on President Babangida. “*Ogugua*”, literally means one who placates, soothes or pacifies. But with time, Ndi Igbo effectively protested marginalization or neglect. For example, the Igbo effectively protested the exclusion of Imo and Abia States as part of the Niger Delta Development Commission.

Equally, the organization re-established cordial relationships between the Igbo and their immediate neighbours in the former Eastern Region. The Ohanaeze initiated a one-day partnership conference of the South-East and the South-South leaders in Owerri, in November, 2005, aimed at awakening and strengthening the

ancient bonds and friendship between the South-East and the South-South geo-political zones before the systematic introduction of ethnic politics in Nigerian politics in 1952. The rallying of Igbo support for President Jonathan during the presidential election of 2011 was clearly an outcome of this cordial relationship. Furthermore, they established a degree of relationship among the peoples of Southern Nigeria and the Middle Belt. The Patriots, the Southern Forum, and the Southern Governors Forum were all products of the Ohanaeze's initiative. By integrating elite from different ethnic groups and their political interests, they reduced the degree of inter-group competition and rivalries among Southern and Middle Belt Nigerians. Moreover, the Ohanaeze's appeal for national unity among the country's population equally helped to reduce the communal violence or militant mobilization by specific groups.

This strongly supports the views of scholars who have pointed to the potential of ethnically-based organizations to build bridges across multi-ethnic societies.⁵⁷ It is important to situate this within the context of the Nigerian political space. The significant point, therefore, is that the Igbo should surely shun ethnocentrism, though one cannot abolish the ethnic group anymore than one can abolish the individual existence of the Igbo. In the words of Arthur Lewis, "National loyalty cannot immediately supplant ethnic loyalty; it has to be built on top of ethnic loyalty by creating a system in which all the tribes feel that there is room for self-expression".⁵⁸ According to Ben Nwabueze:

I believe that tribal or cultural associations fulfil a useful societal role. They are not really a danger to the unity of the country. On the contrary, they do provide strong support for Nigerian unity. They may have exerted pressures on government on behalf of their respective groups, but such pressures would be there and have indeed continued without the tribal unions.⁵⁹

The findings of this work support this conclusion.

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