

**ETHNIC MILITIA AND VIGILANTISM IN SOUTH-WEST NIGERIA: A STUDY OF  
THE O'ODUA PEOPLES' CONGRESS, 1999-2012**

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**Abstract**

Ethnic militia is one of the manifestations of national disintegration in Nigeria. It is basically borne out of existential threat in the polity where mutual suspicion and distrust pervade the atmosphere. One of the most influential militia formed along ethnic lines in the country is the O'odua Peoples' Congress (OPC). The militia may pose a threat to Nigeria's unity but strengthens the Yoruba's bargaining power in the scheme of things in the country. However, many appear to downplay the extent of the influence of OPC and its disintegrative tendencies. Furthermore, its nature and mode of operations appear to be quite obscure to people living out the South-West geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Therefore, it has become imperative to bring to the fore a holistic history of OPC as one of the most impactful ethnic militia in Nigeria. It is also the purpose of the study to explicate certain factors that precipitated changes and continuity in the ethnic militia. OPC has gone through different periods of trials and challenges that either threatened its very existence or adjust its structure and mode of operations. One of such is the incarceration of its founder, Dr. Fredrick Fasheun in 1996. Consequently, the militia became factionalized. This study goes on to employ the eclectic method of research to analyze aspects of the history of OPC, choosing the most reliable data and interpreting them accordingly. The study finds that the OPC actually permeates most aspects of civil life in Yoruba land. The militia's activities range from mediating civil disputes to enforcing civil order. These they do without the wholesome support of the State security outfits. However, the spontaneous popularity that the OPC enjoys in the region may have ensured its sustained existence.

**Introduction**

The human race has been faced with the disturbing challenge of insecurity since its existence. The need for mutual security heightened as humans began to identify and live in communities. The people that existed in the prehistoric or preliterate periods of different parts of the world are shown to have adopted numerous measures to ensure their group safety in a very hostile, crime-ridden and unforgiving world of divergent groups. Through archaeological findings, it has been discovered that the men of the prehistoric period developed different kinds of weapons made with such crude materials as bones, sticks, stones and subsequently metals for hunting and security purposes. They also devised strategic methods of communal living in caves and subsequently different kinds of constructed shelters for the primary purpose of mutual security. This shows the innate human groups' need for security and survival.

As the world advanced, threat to group existence broadened and with the formation of heterogeneous states the responsibility of ensuring harmonious living through providing adequate security becomes a primary function of the state. In a situation where it appeared that the state was not living up to its responsibility, groups tend to adopt self-help approach to ensure the continuity of their survival and existence. Nigeria being a heterogeneous state where mutual suspicion thrives, self-preservation approaches normally comes in form of militia or vigilante outfits such as the Odua People's Congress (OPC) in the South-West geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

The implication of the foregoing is that militia groups in Nigeria are normally formed along ethnic lines. This goes further to underscore the extent of ethnic tension that has bedeviled the country since the colonial times. As time went on, the ethnic tension deepened and the growing mutual suspicion among the ethnic nationalities precipitated ensuing militarization of the society. The nature of different administrations that piloted the affairs of the country did not help matters as many of them were evidently despotic and in some cases out-rightly marginalized other ethnic nationalities. The increasing militarization of ethnicity in Nigeria may be linked to government (especially military government) responses to demands for equity in allocation of values by different ethnic groups. A case in point is the execution of Ken Saro Wiwa and other leaders of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) during General Sani Abacha's regime.<sup>xvii</sup> The implication of government's high-handedness towards ethnic demands in the country was a resort to arms thereby turning ethnic pressure groups into militia groups and consequently vigilante outfits. Buttressing the foregoing, Vickers avers, "We live in an 'era of militant ethnicity' with its grave social, economic, political and human cost".<sup>xviii</sup> The most prominent of these ethnic militias amongst many others include: Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC) and the O'odua Peoples' Congress (OPC) which is the focus of this study.

OPC is a militia movement predominant in South-western Nigeria (Yoruba area). It predates the return to civil rule in 1999, but became more visible thereafter in their quest for a repositioned Yoruba nation in the politics of Nigeria. The OPC was formed in 1994 in the wake of the crisis that followed the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential elections. At the beginning, the OPC aimed at working towards the unity, progress and autonomy of all descendants of Oduduwa (Yoruba), but in 1999, the OPC changed its major objectives following the incarceration of its founder, Dr. Fredrick Fasheun in 1996 by the Abacha military junta. This resulted in the factionalization of the organization into two: the non-violent faction headed by Dr. Fredrick Fasheun and the violent faction headed by Otunba Gani Adams.<sup>xix</sup> Consequently, the organization later changed from seeking self-determination for the Yoruba people to crime fighting activities and settlement of personal disputes.<sup>xx</sup> This change in focus enlisted the OPC among the other militia groups in the country known for violence and crime.

The preponderance of ethnic militias which have engulfed the Nigerian state for over a decade now, remains one of the fundamental challenges that have constrained or hamstrung Nigeria's security, fledgling democracy, and overall development. The activities of OPC in South-west of Nigeria are by no means an exception. The continued existence of violence expressed by these groups (ethnic militias) who feel excluded and marginalized from existing

power structures on one hand and central authority on the other, have indeed affected not only the peaceful co-existence of Nigerian peoples, but also undermined Nigeria's national development. To these must be added that the lack of improvement of the country's security apparatus as well as commitment of the government to address the core causes of insecurity, has in fact constituted a clog on the wheel of progress of Nigeria's national development and by extension the survival of democracy and achievement of desired economic growth.

It is on the above premises that this study seeks to examine the OPC from a holistic perspective. Gaps created by the studies of other authors on the subject matter OPC, spanning from the basis for its existence to their concerns, internal dynamics, mode of operation and effects of her existence would be filled.

### **Theoretical framework**

Vigilante violence is not new in entities battling with salient national questions such as equity and integration. This has led to several theoretical attempts to explain the phenomenon of vigilantism and its militia nature. Here, this study adopts the Vigilante Rituals Theory, which adequately explicates the nature and activities of the OPC. According to Muhammad Asif and Don Weenink, civilians may take laws into their hands and use violence to punish offenders when they perceive the police and legal authorities to be ineffective. The duo go further to aver that the police and legal authorities may enjoy legitimacy, but when they fail to fulfil their statutory responsibility of securing the lives and properties of the civilians, the people tend to employ their own style of self-justice, including vigilante violence.<sup>xxi</sup>

However, mere perception of the ineffectuality of the police and the legal authorities may not wholly explain the resort to vigilante violence by the people. Vigilante Ritual Theory equally attempts to develop a cultural explanation of vigilante violence. The proponents of the theory suggest that people perceive some values – moral imperatives – as essential to their group identity. Behaviour that violates such moral imperatives arouses strong emotions, such as fear, righteous anger, and a desire for punitive action. The theorists argue that these emotions are mobilized and transformed into collective violent action through vigilante rituals, in which participants restore the integrity of moral imperatives and reinforce the unity of the group by punishing the offenders.<sup>xxii</sup>

A close study of the nature of the OPC and its operations show that it evolved as a result of what was perceived as threat to the culture and values of the Yoruba ethnic group. Concomitantly, the militant body went ahead to attempt providing security in a situation where the police and the legal authorities appeared to be found wanting.

### **The Formation of OPC**

A cursory observation of the Nigerian political milieu tends to depict a case of unequal "marriage" between the North and the South of the country. The political relations between both regions appear vertical, with the North placed on the upper side of the pole. The situation may have led Wale Adebamwi to infer that the political history of Nigeria has shown under both the military and civilian administrations that it is a set of people (the northern oligarchy) that had always decided when there was to be an election, what candidates qualified for elections, when elections were to be cancelled or annulled, when there were to be military coups, and in recent times the ethnic group from which all the presidential candidates for an election should come from.<sup>xxiii</sup> While Adebamwi's averral may

need authentication to avoid spuriousity in academic expository, events in the country – a case in point being that of General Abacha and the Ogoni Nine mentioned in the previous section of this paper – have shown an unequal and unbalanced political relationship in the country. Such imbalance has its root traceable to colonialism in Nigeria. The implication of the foregoing was the emergence and proliferation of various ethnic militia groups fighting to protect their own ethnic interest against the perceived injustice, deprivation and marginalization of some ethnic nationalities. Thus, these militia groups bearing ethnic identity arose to fight and defend a ‘cause’ often related to ethnic interests. In Nigeria today, ethnic and regional groups have become part of the political landscape often threatening to inflict violence mainly for political advantage.<sup>xxiv</sup> Although most of them grew out of groups advocating for equity and self-determination in their various enclaves, with time they assumed the notorious role of exacting political revenge and retaliation.

In the South-west region of the county, Yoruba self-determination groups have been in existence for several years. Some were formed before the OPC; others had hitherto been in existence. However, the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential elections, the arrest of Chief MKO Abiola and his consequent incarceration was *de facto*, the leading motivation for the emergence of ethnic militia in the region. Their emergence was an attempt to stage opposition to the then military junta, and possibly to rescue the stolen mandate of Chief Abiola. Also, there was hope in the region that such groups will help to protect the interest of the Yoruba from suppression either by the government or by other ethnic groups. These ideologies were henceforth integrated into Yoruba politics.

Describing the emergence, sponsorship and mode of operation of these groups, Oyvind wrote;

In 1993, free and fair elections were held and the popular Yoruba businessman MKO Abiola, was proclaimed the winner, but the sitting regime annulled the election, causing the country to go into civil disorder, and forming of militant groups... (thus), the overall purpose of the militias is to draw attention to their cause when the state neglects their demand.<sup>xxv</sup>

Even with a common understanding that the annulment of the 1993 elections led to the formation of ethnic militias in Nigeria... a claim can be made that the ethnic militias have different aims, and were formed for different reasons and that of the annulment was merely a trigger. The annulment and later detention of Abiola seem to have triggered the formation of the O’odua Peoples’ Congress (OPC) as the feeling of injustice, anger and resentment grew within the Yoruba community. This again made the north feel threatened and the Arewa Peoples’ Congress (APC) was formed as a counterweight to the OPC. The other ethnic militias did not arise as a counterweight to this, rather they came about for other reasons.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The O’odua Peoples’ Congress (OPC) was founded on 29th August, 1994 and is well known for its organization and violent activities. OPC was founded by Dr. Fredrick Fasheun with Otunba Gani Adams as the national co-ordinator who later became a factional leader. Prior to 1999, other Yoruba self-determination groups who fought for Yoruba emancipation also came into existence. They include: The O’odua Youth Movement (OYM), O’odua Liberation Front (OLF) founded in 1994, O’odua Nation Peoples’ International Councils (ONPC), and O’odua Liberation Movement (OLM) founded in 1997, all of which were founded by Papa-Ade banjo.<sup>xxvii</sup> These groups emerged in the South-West opposing one form of irregularity or the other.

The O’odua Youth Movement (OYM) predates the OPC; some of its members went on to form the OPC. Prior to OPC’s internal split into two factions, some disaffected members had already broken away in 1997 to form a separate organization, the O’odua Liberation Movement (OLM). Believing that the OPC lacked political direction and had become too confrontational, the OLM attempted to articulate a clearer ideological agenda and encourage more constructive relations between its members and even with its allies, the northerners. More recently, two other groups have been formed: the O’odua Republic Front (ORF) and the Federation for Yoruba Culture and Consciousness (FYCC). The FYCC was formed in October 2001 by disillusioned members of the Gani Adams Faction, including Kunle Adesokan, Gani Adams’s former secretary and founding member of OPC.

In more recent years, the OPC and a number of other groups have come together to form a network of Yoruba self-determination organizations. The first coalition was formed in January 2000, and 2002 saw the official creation of the Coalition of O’odua Self Determination Groups (COSEG). COSEG has attempted to bring together the various organizations which are sometimes willing to work in concert with each other, but have also shown fundamental differences in approach and tactics.

A good number of these groups did not set out to assume a violent posture or nature but, circumstances led them into violence as the government consistently used the police to harass their members. Jide Alani, a respondent in Ibadan, said most of these aforementioned groups faded out even before they could stand; as such, little or nothing was known or heard about them.<sup>xxviii</sup> This, he attributed to poor structure. He further described some of them as merely “noisemakers” seeking relevance as nationalist movements and therefore do not qualify as militia groups.<sup>xxix</sup> Another respondent, Wasiu Ogunrinde, a retired police officer in his own opinion said, among all these groups, it was only the OPC that was really militant in nature and the police often engaged them.<sup>xxx</sup> From the above, it is clear that ethnic militia in South-West Nigeria revolves around the OPC which is the subject of discourse.

### **Militancy and Vigilantism in OPC**

Notably, the O’odua Peoples’ Congress (OPC) tried to adapt to the changing political and security environment in Nigeria by engaging in several kinds of activities; some of which won them a place in the hearts of the general public (including the non-Yoruba people) and some others which sent wrong signals making the organization unpopular and disliked. Some of such OPC’s activities that encouraged positive public approval rating of the organization were crime-fighting and vigilantism, mediation and settlement of disputes, collection of debts. These notwithstanding, the OPC was criticised because of their crime fighting activities which does not subject suspects to judicial process but rather visits them with instant justice.

### **Crime-Fighting Activities**

From about 1999, the OPC began to get involved in crime-fighting activities. It is not entirely clear what prompted this shift in direction, other than a desire to boost the organization’s popularity. Some observers have linked it to the surge in popularity experienced by self-appointed vigilante groups in other parts of the country, notably the Bakassi Boys, a vigilante group active in the southeast of Nigeria. Nonetheless, one may not completely rule out the failures of the State security outfits at the time to satisfactorily protect lives and properties, as

a compelling factor for the OPC to engage in crime-fighting. Despite using extremely violent and brutal methods, a human rights watch report has it that Bakassi Boys were hailed as heroes by many residents in the southeast and credited for dramatically reducing rate of violent crime in areas of operation.<sup>xxxii</sup> Their success may have partly inspired the OPC to take on a similar role in the southwest.

### **Vigilantism**

The OPC adopted vigilantism which takes the shape of overnight watch of neighbourhoods. This way, the organization contributed in curtailing security challenges prevalent among most Yoruba communities as well as enhancing its image generally. Using the foot soldiers of the organization, the OPC provided security for the masses. OPC vigilante role was so well established that, it maintained an active presence, patrolling the streets and ostensibly maintaining security in the local communities. Infact, her effectiveness in this regard elicited calls for a state police to be incorporated into the Nigerian constitution.<sup>xxxiii</sup> OPC's involvement in crime-fighting activity stems from the fact that crime is of serious concern hence, the need for intensification of her involvement. While this led to reduced incidents of armed robbery; the organisation's non-cooperation with the police in this effort generated tension between it and the police; which degenerated into clashes and consequently, whittled down OPC's visibility in the area. Their system of instant justice sent jitters down the spine of armed robbers who hitherto had a free reign in the south west of Nigeria especially, metropolitan Lagos. When the OPC vigilante caught suspected criminals, they often handed out instant justice, killing them summarily on the spot.

To the credit of the OPC, in June 2001, the then Governor of Lagos State, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, publicly announced his willingness to invite the OPC to assist the state to combat criminals who seemed to have overwhelmed the Police in Lagos.<sup>xxxiii</sup> This announcement was greeted with applause and approbation by the residents of Lagos who have had to sleep in their homes with their eyes wide open because of constant harassment by armed bandits. Evidently, underlying these vigilante groups' ability to operate freely and without accountability is the fundamental inability of the national police force to perform its law enforcement functions effectively and the consequent lack of public confidence in the police. For many years, the Nigerian police had suffered from severe lack of resources, insufficient or inadequate training, poor pay; poor conditions and widespread corruption. This resulted in the perception on the part of the general public that it is futile to report crimes to the police or expect any remedial action from them. Also, too often the police was largely judged to be corrupt and highly distrusted.<sup>xxxiv</sup> They were more likely to be involved in crime, corruption and human rights violations themselves than to have the will or ability to solve these problems. As a result, members of the OPC were individually recommended as vigilantes.

Involvement in vigilante activities became an easy way for the OPC to make money. Their leaders are very close to the local governments who employ them and they get paid for their services. The OPC provided security arrangements at official gatherings, including high profile events at which senior federal government officials were present and other social functions. Other populist social services which the OPC embraced include traffic control given the nightmare of Lagos traffic; and the ordeal of residents particularly, those who are made to confront chaotic traffic almost on a daily basis. The most striking example of their role was the ceremony for the lying-in-state of former Minister of Justice and Attorney General Bola Ige, held in January 2002 in Ibadan, which was attended by many government

officials. OPC provided security arrangements in that ceremony and was controlling the crowds and the traffic.<sup>xxxv</sup> The police were also deployed, but were apparently outnumbered by the OPC

In many localities, OPC vigilantes did not just provide security where the state had failed, they were also mobilised in conflicts with state institutions and groups believed to be favoured by the state. In particular, OPC vigilantes curbed police tolerance of and even involvement in crime by capturing and punishing police officers and other local leaders close to criminal elements. Unlike the police, the OPC rarely granted bail to suspects, and some OPC groups held prisoners for long periods of time and even subjected them to secret trials. Although these and similar OPC practices contravened Nigerian law and International human rights, the OPC still won the support of a large section of the population who felt that many criminals were protected from punishment by politicians.

More importantly, being rooted in Yoruba ancestral tradition, it is popularly believed that OPC members are widely acknowledged to master magical techniques of defence, attack or divination. It is believed that they relied on magical powers which were deeply entrenched in the Yoruba belief system. This gave them success in their vigilantism venture. This activity is still widely practised and very popular among OPC members in Lagos and the south west. Poor communities benefitted more from this as their services were relatively cheaper than those of formal security outfits. The OPC was practically seen as the poor man's police. They fought crimes from zones where the police could not dare to go. And in all cases where individuals have lost their items, OPC's intervention has often led to the recovery of such items to their owners.

### **Mediation in Disputes**

In the same vein, the OPC helped in mediation of disputes between individuals and groups as well as settlement thereof. This is made possible given the hurdles encountered by ordinary Nigerians in formal processes of dispute settlement. In many localities, the OPC reportedly settled local disputes, with issues ranging from marital disagreements, boundaries, to the collection of debts. In other words, it appears that the OPC members thus constituted themselves as enforcers of contracts. They offered a traditional alternative of dispute settlement which assumed an easy choice since ordinary Nigerians passed through hurdles in formal dispute settlement processes. They were called- in to intervene and settle scores between private individuals; for example, in disputes between landlords and tenants. Due to their meticulous arbitration especially in landlord-tenant issues, collection of debts, and so on, the OPC enjoyed some form of legitimacy as an informal regulator of the south west region. They also defended the interest of workers who had been threatened with dismissal from the work place and delivered social services especially, where formal institutions failed. Though prices were not fixed for these services, payments were made depending on the social status of the beneficiaries. The leaders of the OPC saw this as lucrative because of the percentage that accrues to them. What was realized from such dispute settlements did not go to the members or their officers entirely. The national body of the OPC was entitled to 10% of whatever fees were paid.

### **Intervention in Inter-Ethnic Conflicts**

Similarly, the relevance and contribution of the organization was seen in the areas ranging from the OPC's intervention in inter-tribal conflicts involving the Yoruba and other groups

wading into political squabbles; power tussle among Yoruba personalities as well as adding voice to issues of national proportion even when the Yoruba is not directly involved. For example, the OPC intervened in the Apapa Wharf Dockworkers crisis to protect the interests of the Yoruba dockworkers who claimed marginalization in that union and activities at the ports located in their homeland.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In 2000, similar clash with the Ijaw over fishing rights and territorial waters occurred in Lagos. Apart from intervening in communal clashes in the southwest area, OPC had several times issued warning of wading into religious disturbances that occur in the northern part of the country. For instance, the organization articulated its stance on the Sharia crisis that engulfed some areas in the north in year 2000 to 2001. They believed that the issue represents a malignant carbuncle on the face of Nigeria which revolves on the insincerity to resolve the national question.

In the same vein was the action of OPC to defend former President Olusegun Obasanjo when he was faced with the problem of impeachment threat from the National Assembly in his first term.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The OPC was all out in the matter to protect him from being humiliated at the National Assembly. They rallied to his defense and called for the impeachment proceedings to be dropped on the grounds that the move was part of the continued marginalization of the Yoruba. For the OPC, the fact that it was a Yoruba president who was under attack overshadowed the organization's vehement criticisms of the president and federal government institutions. Also, during the rift between Former Governor Gbenga Daniel and the Ogun State House of Assembly, the OPC was at the fore front of the matter.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Against these backdrops however, the legality of the OPC to perform these roles often pitched them against law enforcement agents and security operatives, resulting in casualties on both sides.

### **Promotion of Ideal Cultural Revivalism**

Another avenue that the OPC has made contributions is in their emphasis on the promotion of ideal cultural revivalism through celebrations of Yoruba cultural festivals. OPC's approach to celebrating Yoruba culture has contributed to elevating the profile of these festivals and awakening of Yoruba consciousness to their heritage. OPC activity along this area is hinged on the belief that society can only attain progress when cultural identity is intact; especially, its language. The organization also encouraged the teaching and promotion of Yoruba language through enlightenment programmes, which has yielded fruit in the sense that it is now taught in all public schools in Yorubaland.<sup>xxxix</sup>

### **Economic Empowerment**

Ostensibly meant to motivate membership, OPC has a welfare scheme to economically empower their members. These include the Barefoot College where unskilled OPC members go to acquire skills to make them useful members of the society. The OPC operates a Micro Finance Bank to advance credit and soft loan to OPC members as well as other members of the public.<sup>xl</sup> The organization also operates a CSIW insurance scheme for its members. It has also ventured into agriculture with its fish farm through which unemployed members of the organization were employed thus not only providing a means of livelihood for them but also contributing to the country's economy.<sup>xli</sup>

### **Violent Militant Activities of the OPC: A Challenge to its Existence Factionalisation**

Naturally with the passage of time, any organization must experience growth and change beyond what it used to be. Same was the case of the O'odua Peoples' Congress (OPC) which



was originally founded with noble ideas and stood for noble ideals. It was meant to redress injustices against the Yoruba nation and to champion the cause of the oppressed. For this reason, it became very popular to the generality of all and sundry; and thus, assumed an aura of invincibility. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the organisation as it progressed with the swelling in the ranks which created its own problems in terms of focus and ideological disposition. For instance, Fasheun was unable to keep the OPC fold together after his incarceration in 1996 and eventual release in 1998. His long absence from the organization during that period in time, boosted the profiles of hitherto unknown personalities who found it difficult to relinquish this new found prominence that came via the organisation. Therefore, scheming for control of the organisation was the under current that set the stage for the factionalisation, and splitting of the organization into two. This explains how Gani Adams came into the fray to become the leader of one faction of the organization and Fasheun, the leader of the other.

Thenceforth, ideological clash ensued between the duo - Gani Adams and Fredrick Fasheun, who was released shortly after the death of Sani Abacha. This clash fuelled the splitting of the organisation. Gani Adams and Fredrick Fasheun had divergent views on what should be the role of the OPC in the Abdulsalami Abubakar's transition programme.<sup>xlii</sup> The role OPC was to play in the impending transition to civil rule programme that General Abdulsalami Abubakar was to supervise became the centre of disagreements. Gani Adams and his supporters in the OPC decided to break away and establish his own faction in 1999 on the grounds that he could not cope with the liberal and persuasive approach employed by Fasheun. Adams accused Fasheun of supporting Olu Falae one of the two presidential candidates in the 1999 presidential elections against the agreement that OPC should stay away from participating in the program. He also accused Fasheun of receiving some financial largesse from Olusegun Obasanjo (who had just been elected the civilian president) in order to whittle down the activities of the organisation. Gani Adams was of the opinion that OPC should not be partisan. He saw it as cowardly since he believed in a more violent and radical approach in pursuing the OPC concerns. Gani believed that taking sides would divide the Yoruba nation. Fasheun however believed in partisan politics. Infact, he was a presidential aspirant under the defunct Social Democratic Party (SDP) in the 1993 elections even though he lost the primary. Certainly, where to throw the support of OPC led to the parting of ways by the two leaders and subsequent split of the organization into two factions.

Against these backdrops, other circumstances could be held responsible for the factionalisation of OPC. There was a contention between the two leaders over the militarisation of the organisation/movement. Fasheun's position was that the volatile vast majority of OPC members who are in their youth should be guided under the control of more matured educated leaders; but Adams, a trained carpenter with little education expressed distrust for that set of people who, to him, are from the capitalist background and could only play the role of sympathisers to the struggle. To Adams, those set of people were incapable of rendering full devotion because of their material interest in the statusquo. He believed that a good OPC member was one who possesses the will and courage to sustain the struggle i.e. one that could stand his ground, was ready, and had the courage to fight. He would rather focus his attention on the recruitment of the frustrated and deprived people on the streets. Adams cited an example with the student unionism where only the poor and deprived students came forth to protest while students from rich homes hid away in the comfort of their homes.<sup>xliii</sup> Fasheun's grouse with Gani was premised on the use of OPC members as

mercenaries to service the inordinate ambition of politicians and other nefarious activities he involved the organization during the time, especially using it to extort money from gullible and unsuspecting members and sympathisers. Adams on the other hand, accused Fasheun of collecting bribes from Obasanjo in exchange for OPC support for his candidacy in the elections. In a society that placed great emphasis on status based on education and wealth as the basis of leadership, the subaltern leadership of the OPC refused to accept the leadership of the elite and with Gani Adams in front, this led to the division of the organisation into two factions.

Though ideological and philosophical differences between Dr. Fredrick Fasheun and Chief Gani Adams may have contributed to the factionalisation of the OPC, the core cause of the division was the control of the organisation and access to material and financial leverage that go with it.<sup>xliv</sup> It must be stressed that the organization experienced phenomenal growth during the period of Fasheun's incarceration. His absence created a vacuum of leadership in the organisation and as nature abhors vacuum, the leadership naturally fell on Gani Adams until the release of Fasheun given the efforts he (Adams) was making to keep the organization intact. However, given the meteoric rise of Adams profile within the rank and file of OPC and the larger Yoruba public, he became reluctant to surrender to Fasheun when Fasheun was released by the new regime that succeeded General Abacha. This abrasive ambition of his was encouraged by certain elements of Yoruba elite including Chief Gani Fahwehimi – a prominent Lagos lawyer and chairman of Joint Action Committee (JACON); thus, culminating in the division of the organisation. The division turned violent as the factions' engaged one another in supremacy battles. These battles lingered for close to nine years amidst violent clashes.

The year 1999 was remarkable in the history of the O'odua Peoples' Congress (OPC) as the organisation experienced a turning point following its break/split into two factions in the beginning of the year. The split emerged between elements described as "moderates" loyal to Dr Fredrick Fasheun, who were prepared, to some extent, to engage with mainstream politicians; and a more radical, militant wing, led by Chief Gani Adams, who was less willing to compromise and object to the OPC playing any part in Nigeria's program of political transition. From the start, the OPC had taken a strong position on refusing to participate in the political system. "The organization resolved to be a non-political organization as such would not canvas for any political post under any political dispensation."<sup>xlv</sup> This is explicit in goals of Adams faction which include; self-determination and social emancipation for the Yoruba, regional autonomy, self-government and self-management, economic reconstruction and control, reconstructed, reconstituted and genuinely federal Nigerian union, reunion of all Yoruba in Kwara and Kogi states (in the north) with their kits and kin in the southwest, an independent army, police and judiciary and Sovereign National Conference.<sup>xlvi</sup>

While, Dr Fredrick Fasheun's OPC had as its primary objectives outlined as follows:

- To gather all the descendants of Oduduwa all over the earth especially in Africa, the Caribbean, South America and North America for a most profound, all embracing and absolutely unflinching UNITY;
- To identify with our historical and cultural origin with a view of re-living the glory of our past for the purpose of posterity;
- To educate and mobilise the descendants of Oduduwa for the purpose of the above;

- To integrate the aspirations and values of all descendants of Oduduwa, by whatever name called, anywhere on the face of the earth and struggle for the protection of these interests;
- To ensure maximum self-determination of the people of O’odua;
- To further the progress of O’odua civilisation by protecting and promoting our values, mores and the inter-generational transmission of same;
- To locate a bearing for an O’odua worldview and establish its place in the world;
- To mobilise the people of O’odua for the National Cause.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Thenceforth, there existed two OPCs. In practice, two parallel structures functioned respectively. For example, at the local government level, there were two OPC chairmen, one for each faction. OPC members from Gani Adams faction often wore T-shirts or caps proclaiming “OPC Gani Adams faction” or bearing a picture of Gani Adams.

Over time, this division within the organization turned violent as the factions engaged one another in supremacy battles. Tensions escalated and there were several violent clashes between members of the two factions resulting in killings, injuries, and attacks on properties, including an attack on Fasheun’s clinic in Mushin, Lagos, by members of the Gani Adams faction. Fasheun was branded a traitor by Gani Adams faction of OPC. Hence, the battle for supremacy to annihilate Fasheun’s faction adopted maiming, murder and genocide to the extent that the general public began to think that the strength or militancy of the organization resided in the dissident group. To entrench this misconception, OPC became more lawless with each passing day, committing atrocities here, there and yonder. Their misdeeds became a source of worry to the Yoruba community and the Nigerian government at large.

These tensions and violent clashes lingered in spite of several attempts at reconciliation by Yoruba elders, and by other respected figures in the Yoruba community. Many attempts via reconciliation meetings held between the two factions yielded little; instead the violence escalated after each of those meetings. Several meetings were called by prominent Yoruba elders including monarchs led by the Ooni of Ife to reconcile both factions but this did not yield positive results until Gbenga Daniels, the then Ogun state governor intervened in 2007 to bring some modicum of peace. He was said to have prevailed over Adams to recognize Fasheun as the founder and leader of the organisation while the position of the national co-ordinator was conceded to him (Adams).<sup>xlviii</sup> Although both faction leaders agree that unity has been achieved thereafter, the well-entrenched factional loyalty to both men and cross purpose activities are still noticeable. But, the violent factional contests for supremacy have reduced and the leadership of the organization is re-inventing the public image of the organization through activities such as seminars, business venture amongst other forums.

The existence of two factions within the OPC did not in any way militate against the organisation’s internal operation. Instead, it further solidified their existence. Whether moderately or radically, the organization out rightly sent signal to the Yoruba opponent and the military; showing that the statusquo had changed and that the Yoruba had the capacity to effect the change.<sup>xlix</sup> The organization has as its central political claim- the organization of a “Sovereign National Conference” in order to redraw radically the rules of the Federation towards greater autonomy for the regions.

The organization has a strict hierarchical structure, chain of command, and efficient systems of communication. It has structures and executive committees at national and state levels, with the Annual National Conference at its supreme decision-making body, and the National Executive Council as its governing body. At the local level, every member is required to belong to a branch and the branches are grouped into zones, which are in turn grouped into sub-regions. Zones are OPC's most important decision making level as zonal co-ordinators have important if not total liberty to decide what action is to be carried out. A zone usually had about 50 militants. When the number outgrows this, a new zone is created from it with a new coordinator godfathered by the initial coordinator of the mother zone. There are different wings, including a women's wing, and sections responsible for different activities. One section known as *Eso* ("which goes to fight"), also called "ushers" in the Gani Adams faction, is involved in vigilante activities and ensuring discipline, for example during meetings or public events.<sup>i</sup> Another group, known as the monitoring group, "clears the road ahead during rallies".<sup>ii</sup>

The OPC also has a disciplinary procedure, outlined in its constitution: members who carry out any one of a range of specified offences may face "reprimand, payment of compensation and/or performance of useful task, suspension and expulsion". The offences listed range from acts that undermine the effectiveness and reputation of the organization, to corruption, sexual abuse, fighting, and "sowing religious or any form discrimination". Over the years, there had been "many" dismissals, and people "of bad character" or who joined the organization for the wrong reasons (for example, in order to take revenge or settle personal scores) were removed.<sup>iii</sup> When individuals join the OPC, they are apparently asked to take an oath which includes a commitment not to take part in criminal activity. In July 2002, as part of an effort to give the OPC a new, cleaner image, Gani Adams reportedly stated in an OPC meeting that any member of the group who indulged in political thuggery would be suspended or dismissed, and that such moves were necessary as the 2003 elections drew nearer. These comments were made in the context of widely-expressed fears that ethnic militia groups could play a negative role in the lead-up to elections in Nigeria.<sup>liii</sup>

Crucially, the OPC was not an entirely a novelty in the Yoruba social landscape. Its success would not have been possible without the activation of already existing social networks and structures such as; road worker' unions and traditional secret societies called the '*Oro*'. *Oro* societies which used to be 'male -only civic association' closely linked to Yoruba's major nationalist party in the 1950-1960s were also in charge of crime fighting activities. There was also the Transport unions, the Market unions and the Action Group (AG) founded by Obafemi Awolowo who was the charismatic Premier of the Western Region prior to independence. All of these were already deep rooted in the society.

From inception, the OPC enjoyed a significant social capital endowment that helped in channelling the first waves of recruits. Even the market women openly gave their support and recognition. Worthy of note is one Mrs Idowu Adebawale popularly known as *Iya Ijebu* who was one of the nine founding members of OPC and leader of market women in Mushin Lagos; as well as another female OPC leader, Yemisi Akinyeye. These two women participated overwhelmingly in the Campaign for Democracy, (organized in 1991) which took a leading role in criticizing the annulled June 12, 1993 Presidential election.<sup>liv</sup>

A survey on OPC members shows that they keep growing in number and are overwhelmingly about 90% male; of which 80% are Muslims. Women are also part of the organization. They are granted specific roles in the internal division of labour. They are prohibited from performing night operations (vigilantism) but may serve as privileged informants or spies in fighting against crime. Specifically after 1999, the organization rose to include mobilization for local politicians. Several instances of the manipulation of OPC for political purposes occurred at different times.<sup>lv</sup>

### **The Violent /Militant Activities of the OPC**

After the split in ranks within the OPC (factionalisation) in 1999, the organization became more militant in its activities. Since then, Nigerians living in the south west have been held hostage by the organization through their numerous acts of violence and frequent clashes with the law enforcement agencies and other ethnic groups. As a result, OPC members became victims as well as perpetrators of human right abuses; and acts of violence which resulted in the killing of hundreds of unarmed civilians and many other injured in the process. While many of their most serious attacks were directed against Hausa, or people suspected to be northerners, their victims have also included Igbo, Ijaw and people from other ethnic groups.

By 1999, there was a pattern of killings by the OPC in the context of disputes or clashes with other ethnic groups. Often these clashes were sparked off by a minor argument between individuals from different ethnic groups, which typically then escalates when the Yoruba party brings in the OPC to fight their cause, while the other ethnic group retaliates by calling youths from their own community to their rescue. The incident would then rapidly degenerate into a violent ethnic conflict within hours or even minutes.

The most widespread killings by the OPC which took place in the context of clashes between Yoruba and other ethnic groups reached its peak in the year 2000; however, violence and human rights abuses continued in 2001 and 2002. There have also been numerous individual cases in which OPC members have killed or injured people, in the course of their vigilante work and in attempts to extort money from individuals. The OPC's activities have led them into direct confrontation with the police: there have been repeated violent clashes between the duo (OPC and the police) with casualties' on both sides. OPC members have attacked police stations on many occasions, and have killed and injured several policemen.

In 1998, the O'odua Peoples' Congress called for a boycott of the local government scheduled for December. This call generated much concern as it showed that the OPC had no faith in the transition programme of the government headed by General Abdulsalami Abubakar. His contention was that a return of democracy should be preceded by a restructuring of the federation. This stance brought OPC members into direct confrontation with law enforcement agencies especially, the police. The hostility claimed the lives of over 2000 policemen and many more members of the congress.<sup>lvi</sup>

Again, the OPC was involved in the ethnic clash that occurred in Sagamu, Ogun State on the 17<sup>th</sup> July, 1999. Scores of people were killed during this crisis. The violence began following an argument over customs observed during the Oro festival, an annual Yoruba event which had not been disrupted by any disputes either before or since 1999. Yorubas and Hausas had agreed to respect a traditional night-time curfew usually observed during the festival. However, the crisis which broke out was said to have been aggravated by the death of a

Hausa woman who was alleged to have broken the curfew and gone against the order restricting women from coming out of their homes at night during the Oro festival. The fight escalated and the OPC intervened to support the Yoruba. Both sides were armed; resulting in the death of over forty people including one of the Oro leaders. Some people were burnt inside their houses. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July (precisely five days later), there were reprisal attacks in Kano which claimed over 100 lives.<sup>lviii</sup> It took the collaborative intervention of the Governors of Ogun and Kano states before peace was restored.

In the same vein, was the clash of rival factions of dock workers at the Apapa Port. Records indicated that the OPC intervened in the support of the Yoruba faction to prevent the ‘annexation’ of the Lagos Port by the Ijaw faction, which had previously won a trade union election in Port Harcourt. About 16 people lost their lives while the violence spilled into neighbouring Ajegunle. A dust to dawn curfew was imposed on the settlement for over three weeks before a truce was established after several meetings between the community leaders and the Governor of Lagos State.<sup>lviii</sup> Just as the dust was settling, another riot broke out between the Yoruba and the Hausa in Ketu on November 26, 1999, over the control of the popular mile 12 market. The fight was thought to have been caused by jealousy on the part of Yoruba about the perceived dominance of the market by Hausa traders. There had also been disputes between particular individuals for control of key leadership positions within the market traders’ committee. As a result, some Yoruba started threatening to challenge this dominance and “claim back” the market from the Hausa. Consequently, both groups began to attack each other as they were well-armed. OPC blocked the express way which runs along the market. This express way was turned into a killing zone. Many traders lost their lives and some customers who were unfortunate to come to the market at that time. For days, a lot of dead bodies littered the road. Both Hausa and other ethnic groups were victims of this attack. The OPC would stop vehicles, offload, kill and set on fire persons identified to be of Hausa origin; Igbos were also victims. The market was closed for several weeks; people’s goods were either stolen, destroyed or rotten in the course of the crisis and many lives were lost. While an official statement put the death toll at 30, it was widely believed that the actual figure was over 100. Government reaction was to order the police to shoot on sight any person or group of persons who claim to be OPC members.

Also, in mid July 2000, a private dispute between a landlord and a tenant escalated out of control and several people were killed in the large Alaba electronics market in Lagos, as OPC members clashed with Igbo traders. The incident began when a Yoruba landlord, who had lost patience with a court case to resolve a dispute with his tenant, called in the OPC to deal with the problem instead. The OPC members attacked the tenant and accused him of being a criminal. They beat him to coma despite his pleas for help and eventually set him on fire. A protest by the Igbos over the death of their colleague resulted to the reinforcement of the OPC members who invaded parts of the market. They smashed many of the buses owned by the Igbos and barricaded the roads. As the traders tried to defend themselves, and some of them took up arms, the OPC extended the attack to other Igbo residents in the area. The fighting lasted for at least two days. Trading was suspended, although the police advised against closing the market completely to avoid a further escalation. Eventually, the paramilitary mobile police brought the situation under control.

The OPC also engaged in running battle with the Police. They attacked the police and burned several police stations, sometimes in protest at the arrests of their members, they killed and

injured policemen. OPC-police violence was particularly fierce in the period immediately preceding and following the 1999 elections. As the OPC protested against the elections, they burned down several police stations, particularly in Lagos and Ogun states. Specifically in 1999, about ten police stations were attacked by the OPC including those in Okota, Alkara, Mushin, Area B, Apapa Wharf, Sango, Ifo, Isolo, and Idiroko.<sup>lix</sup> In October 1999, clashes were reported between the police and the OPC members in Ilesa, Osun State. Other clashes took place in the same month in the Ajegunle area of Lagos state where 23 people reportedly died. OPC attacks against police stations and against policemen have continued sporadically since then, resulting in deaths and serious injuries. The OPC brought down the might of the federal government on itself when it was accused of the abduction and murder of one Mr. Afolabi Amao, the Divisional Police Office (DPO) for Bariga, a suburb of Lagos on January 9, 2000. This was one of the most notorious cases of killings of policemen by the OPC. The incident prompted the government, which hitherto had been dragging its feet in terms of taking serious measures against the organization, to impose a blanket ban on all ethnic militias in the country and declared OPC's factional leader Gani Adams wanted. Specifically, the then Inspector General of Police – Mr. Musiliu Smith placed a cash reward of one hundred thousand naira (₦100,000) on the head of Gani Adams. The Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC) raised the ransom to three hundred (₦300,000) while the Northern Senators Forum (NSF) called for the removal of David Jemibewon (a Yoruba man) as the minister in charge of Police Affairs.<sup>lx</sup>

Although by early 2003, incidents of large-scale killings by the OPC decreased, but clashes between different ethnic groups, including the Yoruba, continued taking place, and ethnic tensions not abated. The OPC remained active and visible. Its leaders did not accept responsibility for the serious human rights abuses committed by their members, despite the fact that the organization has a clear structure, chain of command and disciplinary procedures. The OPC continued to enjoy significant support among sectors of the population in south west Nigeria and among state government officials. No doubt, there could be a resurgence of violence at any time, and the OPC remains poised to intervene in the event of ethnic or political crisis, which remain a common feature of the Nigerian landscape.

The above instances of the violent activities of OPC show that the activities of these ethnic militias have been witnessed in various parts of the country, leading to the death of hundreds of people. As a result, there is hardly any Nigerian who hasn't felt the impact yet, be unconcerned about the security situation of the country, unless the person in question is among the few who benefit from and thus, have a stake in contributing to breach security and order in the country at large. Point must be made that, internal security forms the baseline of a country's defence. Hence, no country can comfortably boast of a credible defence policy until it has put its home-base in proper order. The intensity of the carnage, mutiny, unrest, sabotage, civil discontent brought by these militia groups could possibly escalate into riots and revolutionary insurgency. It is based on this fact that the then President Olusegun Obasanjo on Tuesday April 9, 2000 presented a bill to the National Assembly seeking to prohibit ethnic militia groups in the country.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined the militia and vigilante nature of O'odua Peoples' Congress (OPC) between 1999-2012 on the heels of historical evolution of ethnic militia in South-West Nigeria as an effort towards self-determination, preservation and actualization in the face of

socio-political problems necessitated by ethnic plurality in the country. The study also does not overlook the encumbrances of the militia group (OPC) in the Nigerian state especially with regard to their violent activities which has created security concerns for lives and properties in the region and in Nigeria at large; thus, suggesting that the existence of these militia groups is in no way compatible with democracy as their existence continue to pose a threat to national security.

In view of these, the study concludes that the Nigerian government's approach to the problem of ethnic militia is flawed. It has criminalized militia groups and branded them as disgruntled and misguided elements or terrorist groups; rather than looking at the underlying issues. These groups have more or less, conformed to these negative characterizations. The article opined that, there is a history to the emergence of ethnic militias in Nigeria and this is inextricably tied in to the dynamics of its political governance and the underlying ethnic connotations. The long years of debilitating military rule with the violence and arbitrariness associated with it created a society in which violence has been cultivated over a long period of time. About sixteen years of military regimes with a very minor interruption by the transition government eventually found an outlet in the post-transition government. Evidently, ethnicity and conflicts associated with it oftentimes are directly related to the centralization of power. At the end of the day, resolving the conflicts boils down to the creation of the conditions that can enable conflicting interests and forces to accept arrangements and procedures for addressing all contradictions; political, economic, social and otherwise. More importantly, the Nigerian government should respond positively to the nationwide clamour for a national dialogue by convening a Sovereign National Conference that would provide the forum for strict and expressive exchanges among the nation's diverse ethnic groups on the strategies to enhance stability and sustenance of plurality in Nigeria. This time, such conference should address the existential issues of the country. The question of restructuring and secession should be prioritized and the representatives at the dialogue should be directly elected by the people and not the government appointing their cronies who may end up agreeing to the biddings of their paymasters.

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