

Ethnic Social Movements and the Mobilisation for Militancy in Nigeria: A Case of the Ombatse Movement in Eggonland¹

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Abstract:

Ethnic social movements have long been associated with militant activities in post-independence Nigeria and identity is one of the mechanisms with which they mobilise for collective action. Using data from primary and secondary sources, this paper examines the construction and utilisation of collective identity by the Ombatse movement for the mobilisation of support in Eggonland, and the deployment of militancy in Nasarawa State of Nigeria. The Ombatse identity was built around the Ashim religious belief system of the Eggon people and portrayed as a revival of ancestral practices aimed at cleansing the Eggon people from moral vices and misfortunes. This identity attracted many Eggon people because it converged with their other identities, including as practicing Christians and Muslims. It also promised to clean out social vices, witchcraft, evil and misfortunes from Eggonland. Symbolic rituals and practices were used by the movement to build group solidarity and demarcate insiders from outsiders. The resultant widespread support attracted by the movement enabled it to mobilise its members for collective action in protecting the interests of the Eggon ethnic group. This resulted in their assumption of a sustained militant posture that brought the movement into violent conflicts with other ethnic groups and the Nasarawa State government. The paper concludes that collective identity was a powerful mechanism for the mobilisation for support by the Ombatse movement as well as for the deployment of militancy in Nasarawa State. Nonetheless, the resultant growth, popularity and militant activities of the movement also contributed towards its eventual decline.

Keywords:

Ombatse Movement; Eggonland; Social Movement; Collective Identity; Ethnic Militancy.

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Introduction

Social Movements have existed as long as agitation and conflict existed in human history and identity has been central to their existence. Globally, people have struggled against real or perceived threats of various kinds through movements. In Africa, several movements have been developed during the colonial period with the aim of bringing an end to colonial domination. The end of colonialism, however, did not mark the end of agitations in the continent. New forms of agitations soon emerged as groups compete with each other, mostly on political, economic and social basis, prompting the establishment of social movements. In Nigeria, ethnicity is a common basis on which support for militancy is mobilised and deployed through the exploitation of collective identity. Relying on data from primary and secondary sources, this paper examines how the Ombatse movement constructed and utilised collective identity to mobilise support for agitation and militancy in Nigeria. It begins with a clarification of the concepts of ethnicity, social movement and collective identity. This is followed by a background discourse on ethnic social movements, identity and militancy in post-colonial Nigeria. Finally, the work focuses on the Ombatse movement of Eggonland and how it constructed and utilised collective identity to mobilise support from the Eggon people which in turn enabled it to assume a militant posture in Nasarawa State of Nigeria.

Clarification of Concepts

In the course of this paper certain key concepts will be employed. Therefore, it is important to clarify some of these concepts in order to provide an insight into their meanings and the context in which they are used. These concepts are ethnicity, social movement and collective identity. These are discussed below:

Ethnicity: Ethnicity as a concept is broadly understood as the state of being an ethnic group. However, it has no generally accepted definition and so it is understood in different ways by different people. For instance, Tersoo and Ejue (2015) present the view that ethnicity means the state of people-hood that is held by a group, sharing a common culture and history within the society. This definition is clearly too broad to serve our purpose here effectively and so we turn to Badmus (2006) who sees ethnicity in a different way as;

“A belief in common historical evolution provides an inheritance of symbols, heroes, events, values, and hierarchies and confirms the social identities for separating both insiders and outsiders. Ethnic culture is one of the important ways people conceive of themselves and culture and identity are closely intertwined.”
(p. 192).

This perspective broadens our understanding and also introduces the concepts of culture and identity which are inherent part of ethnicity. Indeed, culture and identity are some of the important components that define an ethnic group. These provide the understanding that ethnicity is linked with how a group of people see themselves as

distinct from other groups based on the identity they share which is derived from a common ancestral origin, kinship, tradition, culture, language, territoriality and others. It is often on the basis of identity that socialization and mobilisation takes place among ethnic groups.

Social Movement: Social movements have taken various forms over time and space and so they are understood in different ways by different people. Blumer, as cited in Crossley (2002), defines a social movement as;

“Collective enterprises seeking to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in a condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new system of living. The career of a social movement depicts the emergence of a new order of life.” (p. 3).

This definition draws our attention to the idea that the need for a new order of life is the motive behind the emergence of social movements. This idea is further expanded by Godwin and Jasper, as cited in Parvanova and Pichler (2013) that the efforts to bring about the new order of life must be sustained over time to qualify as that of a social movement. This helps to separate social movements from spontaneous, one-off actions riots or mob actions. Donatella and Diani (2006) further enrich our understanding with the opinion that social movements “are a distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action: (1) are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; (2) are linked by dense informal networks; (3) share a distinct collective identity” (p. 20). This view introduces the idea that, in addition to sustained efforts, those seeking a new order of life must have clearly identified opponents, dense informal network and distinct collective identity to qualify as a social movement. Based on this perspective, therefore, many of the ethnic movements in Nigeria qualify as social movements.

Collective Identity: In social movement theory, collective identity is central to the mobilisation of people for collective action. It creates recognition, connectedness and raises a “sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a cause” (Donatella & Diani, 2006: 21). Poletta and Jasper (2001) view collective identity “as an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity” (p. 285). It forms the wall with which boundaries are constructed to define who belongs inside and who belongs outside of a movement. There is no doubt that unless collective identity is developed and maintained the social movement process cannot be complete.



Ethnic Social Movements, Identity and Militancy in Nigeria: A Background

Identity is a major factor with which ethnic groups define themselves in relation to others. Thus, there is no separating ethnicity from identity. There is no doubt, however, that the negative exploitation of identity has resulted in conflict between some of the different ethnic groups living together in Nigeria. Nonetheless, the temptation to assume that conflict was inevitable in such an ethnically diverse society is unfounded. This is because ethnic plurality is not in itself a problem but rather the negative exploitation of it is what constitutes a problem. The negative exploitation of ethnic diversity and identity to inequitably share common resources is what often leads to ethnic conflicts (Nwabueze, 2014). This tendency towards the exploitation of ethnic identity for the distribution of power and resources in Nigeria, which favours some groups, gives rise to agitation among the ethnic groups that feel disadvantaged by the process. Ethnic agitation can be manifested in several ways ranging from suspicion and mild hostility to physical violence towards groups and individuals that are perceived to be threats. In extreme cases, however, the formation of ethnic based social movements can occur and sometimes result in militancy.

Social movements of various kinds, hinged on identity, have existed for some time in Nigeria though they are sometimes referred to as ethnic militia movements (Olayode, 2011). For instance, Fayeye (2004), while acknowledging the impossibility of having a detailed list of “ethnic militias” in the country, because of the high number of ethnic groups, listed some ethnic militias to include Oodua People’s Congress (OPC), Bakassi Boys, Egbesu Boys, Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Niger-Delta Youth Movement, Plateau Youth, Benue/Tiv Youth Movement, Jukun Youth Movement, Kano-based Atjid Movement, and Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). However, it is easily seen that this list provided is problematic because some groups in the list are not necessarily ethnic based. Obviously terms such as “Plateau Youth Movement” and “Niger-Delta Youth Movement” do not refer to specific ethnic groups but to political and geographical entities that might have members from several ethnic groups. Nonetheless, these political and geographical entities provided the basis for identity construction and formation of social movements.

The emergence of ethnic and other forms of social movements in Nigeria has been attributed to several factors by commentators. One of such is the view that the decades of dictatorship, marginalisation, injustice and bad governance by military rule triggered the formation of these movements as extra-constitutional means for addressing the difficult conditions being experienced (Gilbert, 2013; Shittu, 2013). Indeed, the OPC is said to have been formed as a result of dissatisfaction over the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election in Nigeria which is believed to have been won by M. K. O. Abiola, a member of the Yoruba ethnic group. MASSOB was formed in 2000 as a result of the perceived marginalisation of the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria. Similarly, Bakassi Boys was formed in 1999 to provide vigilante and security services for the traders in Onitsha market (Oronsaye & Igbafe, 2012). While these movements were formed for different reasons, identity remains the common denominator shared by them. While

OPC was built around the Yoruba ethnic identity, MASSOB and Bakassi Boys were based on the Igbo ethnic identity.

The exploitation of identity for mobilisation by social movements have enabled them to receive the ethnic support and legitimacy needed to assume militant postures against perceived opponents such as other ethnic groups, as well as the government and its agencies. For example, the widespread support enjoyed by the OPC within the Yoruba ethnic group has contributed to its militant posture and activities in western Nigeria. The movement had been involved in several violent clashes such as the Ketu/Mile 12 market clash of 25 to 26 November, 1999 where many people were killed mostly from the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups from northern Nigeria. The movement also clashed with police in Ilorin on 14 October, 2000 where many its members were killed and arrested (Guichaoua, 2006). These kinds of violent conflicts often caused a chain reaction where other groups sometimes formed their own social movements or militia units in order to protect their own interests. For instance, the formation of the short-lived Arewa People's Congress in December 1999 by the Hausa people was specifically to checkmate the militancy of the OPC (Agbu, 2004).

The Ombatse Movement in Eggonland

Eggonland is geographically located within latitude 8.45° N and longitude 8.30° E in an area, inhabited by the Eggon ethnic group, known today as Nassarawa Eggon Local Government Area of Nasarawa State in Nigeria (Alumbugu, 2025). The Ombatse was an ethnic social movement that evolved among the Eggon ethnic group in and around this area. The movement, which became known in 2011, has been variously described as a traditional religion, a prayer group, a religious cult, and an ethnic militia. Some leaders of the group were responsible for referring to it as a traditional prayer group. Others, such as McGregor (2013) and Joseph (2013) refer to the group both as a cult and a militia. Ukoli and Uhembe (2014) go a step further to argue that the movement is a cult and not a militia as stated by some commentators. Indeed, the movement did have within it an armed militia unit, however, since its scope of membership and activities went far broader than the militia, it is better described as an ethnic social movement. This stance is based on the fact that the Ombatse was involved in relations of conflict with identifiable opponents (such as the Fulani, Alago, Migili and the Nasarawa State Government), had a dense informal network within and outside Eggonland, and had a collective identity that was clearly distinct (Diani, 2006). In addition, the movement was a sustained collective enterprise that sought to bring about a new way of life in Eggonland (Crossley, 2002).

The Ombatse movement has gained negative popularity, particularly because of its involvement in some infamous events such as the killing of over 70 security agents near Alakyo village. As a result, it attracted wide media and scholarly interest and commentaries. In spite of this, there are divergent opinions regarding the reason behind its emergence. Some available written sources offer the explanation that the Ombatse was formed as a result of a revelation received in a dream “to purify society and rid it



of social evils such as promiscuity, adultery, crime, alcohol consumption and smoking” (Philip, 2015: 31). Ayuba (2014) proposes an alternative explanation that the movement was a political organisation formed after the 2007 Governorship election in Nasarawa State by some Eggon elites in an attempt to create a unified political front for the Eggon people.

There is also the view that part of the reasons for the emergence of the Ombatse was to mobilise the Eggon people against the perceived marginalisation and injustice meted on them in Nasarawa State. This perceived injustice, according to Enna (2015), included mobilisation by those in power and other ethnic groups to frustrate Eggon political aspirations in spite of Eggon numeric advantage, granting more political appointments to other groups while neglecting the Eggon, placing an embargo on employment into the State Civil Service in order to keep out the Eggon while granting secret employments to other groups. In addition, Eggon people located in some parts of the State, such as Lafia, were being harassed by other ethnic groups on the grounds that they did not belong there. Thus, according to this view, the need arose for a movement that would agitate against this perceived marginalisation of the Eggon people. Beyond these views, however, there is no doubt that an important motive behind the emergence of the Ombatse was to mobilise the Eggon people for collective action through the construction and maintenance of an attractive collective identity.

Ombatse Movement, Collective Identity and Mobilisation in Eggonland

In the context of ethnic social movements, ethnicity often serves as the basis on which collective identity is constructed and maintained. This construction and use of collective identity for mobilisation by movements is often deliberate, systematic and involves painstaking work (Tarrow, 2011). Thus, the emergence and growth of the Ombatse movement was as a result of the creation, maintenance and exploitation of the Ombatse identity for mobilising support and legitimacy within the Eggon ethnic group. Although this identity was based on the Eggon ethnic identity, it was a separate identity in the sense that being an Eggon did not automatically make one an Ombatse member. There were steps that must be taken in order to assume the Ombatse identity. The Ombatse identity was effective as a means for mobilising support from the Eggon people because it was deliberately constructed to be an attractive collective identity.

One reason for the attractiveness of the Ombatse identity was the fact that it was constructed around the ancestral religious belief system of the Eggon people known as the *Ashim*. The movement positioned itself as a revival of the *Ashim* by attributing its emergence to a message received from the ancestors to return the Eggon people to their old ways and to sanitise Eggonland of evil and bring about a new way of life. This, according to this belief, was necessary because the misfortunes befalling the Eggon ethnic group were caused by the evil being carried out by the people, and the only way forward was to return to the good ways of their ancestors. Thus, the people must return to their ancestral shrines to pray for forgiveness and protection against the problems affecting them. While positioning itself as a revival of the Eggon traditional belief system,

the Ombatse was careful to build its identity on already existing collective identities in Eggonland. It portrayed itself as a traditional practice, not a religion, and thus encouraged its Christian and Muslim members to continue practicing their religions. This aligns with the opinion of Polletta and Jasper (2001) that movements often try to build their identities on existing independent identities as one way of ensuring solidarity. Consequently, since the Ombatse identity was believed to be synonymous to good morals, it was to both Christianity and Islam and allowed for identity convergence (Snow, 2001). This identity convergence made it possible for the movement to mobilise the support of many Eggon people across existing clan and religion divides. This strategy of appealing to traditional practices by movements, in order to mobilise the support of members of an ethnic group divided by modern religion, was not new. It proved effective when used by the OPC to mobilise Yoruba people who were equally divided by Islam and Christianity (Nolte, 2008).

Initiation rites and collective rituals are important parts of collective identity construction because they not only provide attributes of similarity or “we-ness” that unifies members, but also define the boundaries that demarcate insiders from outsiders (Eisenstadt, 1998). The practice of oath-taking for membership by the Ombatse was the initiation ritual into the movement. This oath-taking practice by the movement served three important purposes. Firstly, it was a ritual of initiation and a symbol of membership which was a necessary step that must be taken before anyone assumed the Ombatse identity. Secondly, the Ombatse oath was believed to provide protection for those who took it against evils including witchcraft and weapons. Thirdly, oath served the purpose of cleansing those who took it from evil and was also believed to prevent them from doing evil. In Eggonland there is a strong fear of witchcraft and many misfortunes are attributed to it (Danfulani, 1999). Therefore, the belief that the Ombatse oath provided protection against witchcraft made it very appealing, making many people to take this oath of membership in order to protect themselves against witchcraft. Some parents even took their children for oath-taking so as to ensure their protection from witchcraft. It was believed that the oath also prevented those who took it from doing evil. Consequently, some families went to the extent of forcing their members to take the oath so that no one would be able to do evil to others. Thus, the Ombatse identity was believed to be synonymous to purity and as a result it became an appealing identity among the Eggon people. Based on this therefore an ideal Ombatse member would be a morally upright Eggon person primarily because anyone who supposedly took the oath would die if he did any evil afterwards (U. Agyo, personal communication, August 16, 2017).

The Ombatse engaged in sustained identity work which entails “the range of activities people engage in, both individually and collectively, to signify and express who they are and what they stand for in relation or contrast to some set of others” (Snow, 2001, p. 8) They developed and practiced a number of symbolic rituals which contributed towards making the Ombatse identity attractive among the Eggon people. One of such rituals was the consumption of special herbs, either through smoking or added to food,



which was central to the membership of the movement. These herbs were believed to provide protection against evil such as witchcraft. Thus, it became usual to see both children and adults smoking the herbs publicly – a practice that was encouraged within the movement which had sole monopoly of preparing and selling these herbs. Black vests and charms were also used as a protective uniform by some members of the movement, especially members of the militia unit (Philip, 2015). The movement also organised gatherings where members would meet in large numbers to pray together, sing together and discuss their interests. It is worth noting that in addition to constructing it, these materials, rituals and practices also serve as ways of expressing collective identity (Poletta & Jasper, 2001).

The collective identity construction, maintenance and mobilisation efforts by the Ombatse proved successful because by 2012 the movement gained high acceptance and popularity among the Eggon people. The Ombatse identity was more or less a symbol of pride among its many supporters, especially among young people from rural areas who formed the bulk of its membership. It availed them a sense of belonging that was defined in opposition to, or as distinct from, others (Ebegbulem, 2011). The result of this success was the movement rapidly expanded and so it created LGA and ward units under the leadership of coordinators. These units were organised as self-help groups with executive committees to manage their affairs. The committee was responsible for enforcing discipline, settling disputes among members, administering oaths of membership and sale of herbs and charms. Members supported each other through subsidised communal labour and the proceeds were kept in their treasury. Members were supported in cash and in kind during ceremonies like child-birth and marriage and during misfortunes. Any member who did an evil act would confess during the weekly meetings of their units in order to avoid being killed by the Ombatse oath. Such erring members were cleansed ritually and asked to pay fines. Revenue was generated in units through membership dues, the taxing of members, administering oaths, sale of herbs, charms and other materials, as well as through fines (S. Egga, personal communication, September 2, 2017). Thus, this shows that the movement was bigger in scope of activities and membership than its militia unit.

The Ombatse and Militancy in Nasarawa State

Collective identity as rightly pointed out by Jasper and McGarry (2015) “stirs people to action by arousing feelings of solidarity with their fellows and by defining moral boundaries against other categories” (p. 1). The popularity of the Ombatse identity enabled the movement to mobilise a large number of supporters within the Eggon ethnic group and, consequently, stirred its members to collective action aimed primarily at protecting and defending the interests of the ethnic group. The result of this collective action was that the movement assumed a militant posture against its perceived opponents and threats. One consequence of such a posture was the heightened ethnic tension, mobilisation and militancy in the Nasarawa State, as other ethnic groups felt threatened by the growing popularity and activities of the movement. Many ethnic

groups in the State mobilised themselves to defend their own interests against real and perceived threat posed from the Ombatse movement. This contributed to the establishment of similar militant movements by most of the major ethnic groups in the State (Enna, 2015). Thus, old grievances and disagreements were revived and given new interpretations by rival ethnic groups and non-violent dispute resolution techniques were no longer effective. The result of this tension was a number of conflicts between the Ombatse and some ethnic groups in Nasarawa State. One of such was the communal clashes between the Ombatse and the Alago ethnic group at Assakio in May, 2012 and at Obi in June 2012. Several violent clashes between the Ombatse and the Fulani occurred in October 2012 (Philip, 2015). In November 2012, the Ombatse was involved in a violent clash with the Migili ethnic group in Agyaragu, near Lafia. Similarly, in January 2013, the Ombatse clashed with the Gwandara in Kwandere (Ishaya, 2014). All these conflicts resulted in the loss of lives, property as well as the displacements of people in the affected areas. Consequently, there began a rise in the stigmatisation of Eggon people by other ethnic groups both within and outside Nasarawa State. In addition, the ensuing conflicts resulted in the expulsion of many Eggon people from places like Agyaragu in Lafia LGA and parts of Obi LGA, irrespective of whether they belonged to Ombatse movement or not.

The response of the Nasarawa State government to the militant posture of the Ombatse had brought it into confrontation with the movement. One major clash between the Ombatse and the State happened at a village called Allogani in Nassarawa Eggon LGA where security agents were sent to movement's gathering to arrest its chairman in November 2012. During this incident, some gun shots were fired by the security agents and this sparked widespread protests and disorderliness in Nassarawa Eggon where the Federal road passing through the area was blocked by rampaging youths (Philip, 2015). However, this only served to embolden the movement and it continued its activities in defiance of the State government. In December 2012, the State government labelled the movement an ethnic militia and proscribed it. This was followed by efforts to enforce the ban on the Ombatse and in May 2013 security agents were sent to Alakyo village to arrest Lega Agu. The security agents were ambushed by members of Ombatse near the village and over 70 of them were killed (Ayuba 2014). This resulted in a massive crackdown on the movement which affected Eggon people in general; this included arrests, incarceration and dismissal of some Eggon security agents and civil servants accused of being members of Ombatse. Consequently, the Ombatse movement began losing its appeal as many Eggon people started dissociating themselves from it.

Decline of the Ombatse Movement

The success of collective identity construction is often accompanied by risks and negative impact both from internal and external factors (Jasper & McGarry, 2015). The case of the Ombatse was not different; the success of its mobilisation activities in Eggonland attracted some risks which contributed towards undermining the movement. As earlier



pointed out, the growth in its membership necessitated the creation of LGA and ward units throughout Eggonland, and this in turn brought with it some problems. It is believed that this growth allowed some unscrupulous elements to gain entry into the movement and even attain positions of leadership. Consequently, some unit coordinators became more focused on personal gains than on upholding the principles of the group. Some were said to be adulterating the herbs and amulets of the group and selling it to unsuspecting members. Some were said to secretly sell these to members of other ethnic groups at exorbitant prices. Fake oaths were said to be administered for profit as well as the practice of forcing people to take oath. The overall impact of these was that the efficacy of these herbs, amulets and oath-taking came under question. The sight of those who took oaths doing these evil acts without any harm coming to them brought doubts about the genuineness of the Ombatse movement (A. Abu, personal communication, September 12, 2017; Ombugadu, 2021).

The popularity of the Ombatse in Eggonland led to the emergence of powerful individuals who ended up competing with each other. The rise of individuals such as Lega Agu (also known as Baba Alakyo) to prominence was solely as a result of becoming the Chief Priest of the movement. However, over time Baba Alakyo became so powerful that his name became almost synonymous with the movement's identity. His popularity eclipsed the identity of other leaders of the group. Thus, competing individual interests and rivalries began undermining the collective interests of the movement and, what Hale (2004) refers to as, common points of reference. Shortly after the movement was proscribed in late 2012 there was a disagreement within its leadership over strategy. Some preferred adopting a low profile while others preferred to maintain a confrontational approach. Consequently, the group broke into two factions and all efforts to reunite them proved abortive (Danladi & Sule, 2019). However, this only served to increase the popularity of Baba Alakyo, so much so that his death in 2014 was interpreted by many as the end of the Ombatse movement (S. Egga, personal communication, September 2, 2017).

The popularity of Ombatse also created tension within the Eggon ethnic group because a good number of people did not identify with the movement. In Eggonland Elders are generally regarded with suspicion as being involved in witchcraft. Consequently, some young people who joined the Ombatse treated the elders with disdain because they believed they now had protection against witchcraft. This resulted in a loss of authority by elders and a significant collapse of the traditional social structures in some communities. Consequently, some of these elders had to either support the group or remain neutral in order to remain relevant in their communities (A. Abu, personal communication, September 12, 2017). Nonetheless, many Eggon people rejected the Ombatse movement in spite of the risk of being labelled as saboteurs and victimised as a result. In addition, many religious leaders of both Christianity and Islam in Eggonland opposed the rise and activities of the movement. Although the return to traditional practices by the Ombatse was able to unite Eggon people from all religions, it did not necessarily require them to abandon their religions. Yet, these

traditional practices were frowned upon by some Christian and Muslim adherents in Eggonland. In addition, the practice of forcing some Eggon people to take the Ombatse oath was viewed as a threat by these religions (Danladi & Sule, 2019). The decline of the movement was steady from 2013 until it eventually ceased to be a significant movement in Eggonland. One of the causes of the decline of movements, as noted by Polletta and Jasper (2001), was when members stop believing that the movement represents them. Indeed, by 2015 a significant proportion of the Eggon people who once believed in the Ombatse movement no longer saw it as representing their interests.

Conclusion

This paper examined the construction and utilisation of collective identity by the Ombatse movement for the mobilisation of support within the Eggon ethnic group and how the resultant support enabled the movement to assume a militant posture in Nasarawa State of Nigeria. The Ombatse identity was built around the Ashim religion and portrayed itself as a revival of ancestral practices aimed at cleansing the Eggon people from moral vices and the resultant misfortunes bedevilling them. This identity was attractive to many Eggon people because it not only converged with their other identities but also promised to rid them of social vices, witchcraft, evil and misfortunes. Rituals like the membership oath-taking, smoking herbs and wearing charms promised protection from evil while also serving to demarcate insiders from outsiders. The Ombatse identity was maintained and expressed through these collective rituals which, in addition, were aimed at both uniting its members and mobilising them for collective action to protect their interests. This was manifested in a sustained militant posture that brought the movement into violent confrontations with numerous opponents in Nasarawa State. This indicates that collective identity was not only a powerful mechanism for the mobilisation for support by the Ombatse movement but also for the deployment of militancy in Nasarawa State. However, the resultant growth, popularity and militant activities of the movement contributed towards its eventual decline.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Notes on Contributors

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Dr. Julia Ogbaji is an Associate Professor of Military History at the Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna. Specialising in the interplay of uniforms, warfare, and security in Nigeria, her research sheds light on how military attire shape conflict dynamics. With a BA (Hons) and MA from the University of Jos, and a PhD from NDA Kaduna, Dr Ogbaji has taught since 1990, advancing to Associate Professor in 2022. Her work explores how uniforms influence perceptions, tactics, and security challenges in Nigerian contexts. She published widely in books and journals.

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