

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The state, identity mobilization and conflict: A study of intra ethnic conflict in Ebira land, north central -Nigeria

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This study focused mainly on changes in the traditional institutions of governance occasioned by colonial rule and the impact of such changes on the organization of social life of erstwhile republican communities in Nigeria. These changes appeared to be the most fundamental and underlying cause of incessant violent conflicts and the seeming powerlessness on the part of State authorities to exert control and provide security to the communities. Relying essentially on content analysis of media reports, materials from the archives including reports by colonial officials on the Ebira community complimented largely with in-depth interviews carried out with leading actors in the conflicts, the study also examined the overall impact of the crises of the Nigerian State on politics and society among the Ebira and how that related to the dynamics of intra-ethnic violence. Among others, the study recommends that there is an urgent need to emphasize informal and traditional approaches to conflict management and peace building so as to ensure the empowerment of local communities and institutions in the management of conflict.

**Key words:** Clan, conflict, Ebira-Tao, ethnic group, identity mobilization, traditional institution.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent studies in ethnic relations in Nigeria have revealed that intra-ethnic differences and sub-ethnic identities are as mobilized as ethnic and inter-ethnic differences with implications for violent outcomes. This form of conflict has increasingly become the focus of several academic studies (Nnoli, 1998; Otite and Albert 1999; Ibeanu and Onu, 2001; Omotola, 2008; 2007). Despite the advances in this field of identity politics in Nigeria, little or nothing is known about the problem among the Ebira. This study seeks to make a modest contribution in that regard. As an ethnic group, the Ebira Tao people of Kogi State can be said to be a homogenous group, marked out by a fairly distinct language, a similar culture and a myth of common origin (Brown, 1955; Boston, 1968). However, incessant violent conflicts within the Ebira group have assumed such a frightening dimension. Some consequences of the intermittent violent outbreak include loss of lives and property, social tension, disruption of family and communal life, general atmosphere of mistrust and as well as violent conflicts that involved use of dangerous and sophisticated weapons together with access to drugs and assorted light weapons, the use of poisonous sub-stances cocaine inclusive, and gun running. Most disturbing is the fact that delinquent youth gangs disposed towards aggressive behavior have emerged all over the land.

Sub-ethnic identity among the Ebira Tao group dates back to the origin of the settlement now known as Ebira-land. The people define their sub-ethnic groups by such primordial categories as clan. The construction of clan identity in Ebiraland is increasingly been fostered as the basis for the allocation of political offices and ascension to traditional offices. This form of identity is therefore becoming increasingly mobilized in the struggle for power and social positions among the Ebira. Over the years, clan-based differences have provided the basis for conflict and violence. Among others, the Adavi Eba communal clashes of 1997, the violence between Ozumi and Idoji street in 2001, the Ihima/Adavi Eba crisis in 2002, the Ohiowan and Emani clannish conflicts that paralysed Ihima town between 2006 and 2007 and the political/clannish conflicts between Oziogu and Oziomoye clans that has paralyzed Okene town since 2007 and are still unresolved are important examples. In addition, it is also on record that none of the celebrations of the annual Ekuechi festival has been devoid of violence since 1979.

Historical and global studies suggest that violent conflict is a common feature of social life, which occur not only in periods of decay and decline of society, but also in periods of blossoming and healthy growth (Dahl, 1991).

As Nader (1968;) cited in (Otitte and Albert,1999) suggests, the three major structural levels at which most conflicts occur include intra family, intra community and inter community. A plural society as typified by Nigeria often provides important laboratory for the production of knowledge in the area of conflict studies given the diverse nature of their population. This acquires more significance because of the struggle for access to a variety of limited resources which could include chieftaincy position, power and status, grassland, markets, water spots for animals, rival claims to land, government policies and leadership of political parties among others (Otitte and Albert, 1999; Osaghae, 2001). More often than not, the negative mobilization of such identities as ethnicity, religion, language and race in the pursuit of access to the limited resources further fuels conflict and violence.

What this suggests is that identities are increasingly being mobilized in competitive situations to secure access to those things to which individuals and or groups attach value. As source of meaning and experience, identity possesses attributes that make bearers of certain identities susceptible to mobilization, as it becomes a rallying force and organizing principles for social actions (Castells, 1997). However, as Jega (2002), contends, identity consciousness in itself and its varied forms - ethnic, religious, communal, gender, labor and youth are not major problems in plural societies, but become problematic when they are negatively mobilized and used as platform on which socio-political action is organized in the struggle for access to scarce resources by various competing groups. For this reason, identity becomes a construction of social actors. The real issue, as Castells (1997), therefore submitted, is to determine how, from what, by whom and for what the identity is constructed.

The State has also been involved in identity construction. The Nigerian State as is the case with all Post-Colonial States has become crisis ridden as it has largely failed to meet and satisfy the yearnings of its people. Jega (2002) said capitalist rent seeking; patrimonialism and prebendalism have been identified as the major characteristics of the Post-Colonial Nigeria State. Some people refer to the Nigeria State as a "Rogue State". The State controls the economic resources in the society and the fierce contest for State control result in the mobilization of ethnic/religious identities. While the State resorts to politics of its legitimation, those excluded from access to State resources, resort to identity politics to contest this exclusion. Jega (2002) contends that the State thus became projected as the critical variable in identity transformation, and the resurgence of identity politics. Given this situation, elite contestation for political power to capture the State is characterized by cutthroat competition in which sentiment is mobilized; ethno-religious and communal identities are negatively massaged and manipulated so as to achieve selfish objectives.

The role of the post-colonial Nigeria State in the mobilization of identity consciousness has its root in the Colo-

onial State. In furthering the objective of the colonial regime to subject the indigenous Nigerian communities to imperial control and incorporation into the world capitalist system, the Colonial States where convenient, constructed identities and structures which were consciously mobilized to create divisions, which fragmented colonial societies. This was to prevent a strong opposition to the Colonial State. In another work Jega (1994), stated that some colonial policies were in furtherance of this objective. Specifically, the Colonial State created 'settler' and 'indigenous communities'; the North, South and Eastern divide among Nigerians to weaken opposition from otherwise independent communities.

The changes in the structure of traditional authority during the colonial regime played a key role in fostering identity politics. According to Vaughan (1991), in the pursuit of their imperial interest, the British colonial administrators manipulated traditional authority and even invented new ones in most so called 'pagan' communities where a hierarchical command of administration was not in existence. Continuing Vaughan (1991) submitted that chiefs in colonial Nigeria collaborated with the colonial administrators to become the main repository of indigenous political and legal authority within the native authority and native court structures. The traditional rulers thus emerged as key instruments in the advancement of colonial objectives in Nigeria. The major fallout of this development is the complete destruction of the existing political structures of authority. This was more pronounced where centralized traditional structures were forced on erstwhile republican communities. More often than not, the traditional instruments for exercising social control such as the masquerade institutions and clan headed structures of control were weakened. The modern State structures were instituted and functioned by force using colonial institutions of control such as the native police and the native courts. Vaughan (1991) said, in the attempt to mobilize mass support, the emerging ethno-regional political classes' co-opted the traditional rulers who were closest to the grass roots in furthering their interests in the post-independent period. The traditional rulers became key instruments in the mobilization of primordial sentiments thus fanning identity politics. This series was demonstrated in Ibeanu and Onu's (2001) assessment of the mobilization of the Igbo identity after independence.

Further to this, Vaughan (1991) noted that the effect of the harsh reality of State formation in post-colonial Africa is that the apparatus of governance has began to crumble before it has been fully consolidated. The economic crisis now prevalent in African States has further compounded the crisis of political authority. These developments may have accentuated the reliance of the political elite and local dwellers on traditional institutions and practices. The apparent limitation of modern State structures to exercise effective participation and control at the grassroots have inevitably enhanced the status of

paramount chiefs who are still relied upon by the State to ensure mass support and control. Despite this recognition of the need to co-opt the traditional institution in governance, the institution is denied the political authority to assert her position in governance processes.

The various studies of ethnic/religious conflicts focus on inter ethnic and intra and inter religious conflict. Studies on ethnic conflict specifically focus on conflicts between ethnic groups. The Academic Association Peace Works, in its study of community conflicts (Oтите and Albert, 1999) conducted eight ethnographic studies of community conflicts in Nigeria, only one of the studies examined an intra-ethnic conflict. Intra ethnic conflicts, where they occur, could be as primordial and as violent with devastating consequences as other forms of conflict. According to Ibeanu and Onu (2001), violent conflicts among sub-ethnic identities are often overlooked mainly on the assumption that inter ethnic conflicts result from externalized action built on internal unity of ethnic groups or rather a cohesion or sense of unity among ethnic groups which are galvanized into action against other groups thus burying the difference which really exists within given ethnic groups. Continuing they argued that the divergent and opposing class interests within a given ethnic group is subsumed when an ethnic group acts politically as a social force as emphasis are placed on those factors which unifies its members namely that they belong to the same ethnic group.

Difference constructed for the purpose of political mobilization within ethnic groups is replete in studies on ethnic conflict. As already indicated, conflict among the Somali clans led to the dismemberment of the Somali nation and destroyed the Somali State (Nnoli, 1998) Nnoli also documented the violent conflict within the Yoruba Ethnic group as it occurred among the Egba, Ijebu, Ekiti, Ondo and Ibadan. Ibeanu and Onu (2001) reported that although the Igbo ethnic group predominantly inhabits the South East of Nigeria, intra-ethnic conflicts as more frequent than conflict between the Igbo's and other ethnic groups in the South East. A growing attachment to sub-ethnic identities as clans has resulted in violent conflicts and strained relationships within the Igbo as witnessed by increasing differentiation between the Wawa and other Igbo ethnic groups and the Ado or Edo and the Onitsha Vs other Igbo identity. There was also the violent conflict between the Aguleri and the Umuleri sub-Igbo groups.

Akinteye (1999) also did a classic study of intra-ethnic conflict among the Yoruba using the Igbo Ora conflict as a case study. Studying sub-ethnic conflict and its devastating consequence has become imperative to generate relevant knowledge and to proffer actionable programmes to contain it. As Osaghae (2001) and Oтите (1993) clearly submitted, the existence of ethnic difference is a necessary but not sufficient condition for conflict, and that despite the prevalence of conflict in inter-group relations, there are generally some political, economic and social ties that unite members of different ethnic groups in a plural society. Where these linkages come into competition with those of local or

statewide sentiment, the solidarity nature of intimate group loyalties is likely to take precedence over other claims.

For the purpose of this study, account of conflict in Ebiraland will focus on the colonial and the postcolonial periods. The change in the institutions of governance within these two periods and their impact on the organization of the social life and conflict is extensively discussed. The study also examines the overall impact of the crisis of the Nigerian State on politics and society among the Epira, and how it relates to the dynamics of intra-ethnic violence. However, conflict in Epiraland has always been changing in form and character; while some have political undertone, others take the form of intra-religious conflicts. Yet, others manifest in the form of street fighting among youth gangs and violence between different clans.

The study discusses the implications of these various forms of conflict, not only on the organization of social and political life, but also the formal and non-formal intervention strategies that have been deployed to contain the spate of conflict in Epiraland.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The efforts to engage in a systematic study of violence in Epiraland run into difficulty given the dearth of research on contemporary Epira history and politics. The study, therefore, relied essentially on content analysis of media reports in newspapers and magazines, complimented largely with in-depth interviews carried out with leading actors in the chains of conflict and violence, opinion leaders, religious leaders and the leadership of women, youth and trade union organizations. This was the method used by the few studies on intra ethnic studies already mentioned in the literature. Colonial reports on the administration of the Northern Region in Nigeria generally and those that specifically addressed the Epira community were consulted.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS Sub-ethnic**

### **identity and violence in Epiraland**

Mamdani (2001) contends that the institutional legacy of colonialism is at the root of conflicts in post-colonial societies in Africa. In particular, the Native Authority system patterned to suit the diverse ethnic groups was authoritarian and divorced from the African traditional system of governance. The colonial administrative system had the least respect for the different levels of authority in the traditional authority system, which in Epira land, was devolved around the male family heads, clan chiefs and the chief priests (Ibrahim, 2000; Temple, 1965).

The colonial authority structure therefore did not respect the age-long patriarchal nature of the people, in addition to the independent and revered positions of the clan chiefs. (Kogi State of Nigeria, Committee Report 1997). The imposition of the centralized system of governance on an erstwhile republican community, therefore,

had the implication of precipitating incessant violence in the community. Violent conflicts occurred in Ebira land in 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926, and 1952. (Sanni, 1997 Enesi, 1996 Northern Region Annual Reports) In addition, the appointment of a warrant chief in the person of Ibrahim Atta with wide powers under the Native Authority system undermined the traditional process for the selection of a leader in the community.

The implication of this development was the apparent divorce of the people from, not only the new authority structure, but also the modality for filling vacant positions within the new structure became problematic. Vaughan's (1991) point that the modern state structure is incapable of ensuring control at the grassroots is quite apt considering the impact of colonization on political life in Ebiraland.

Furthermore, the failure of the state to meet its socio-economic obligations to the people has encouraged the fostering of primordial identities by contending elite groups in the desperate struggle for power and Resources.

However, the struggle over chieftaincy and local power structures has been one important basis for intra-ethnic conflict in Ebiraland. More than any other factor, this has precipitated the chains of conflict and violence. For two years after Attah's resignation as chief of Ebira land, the elected Native Authority ruled the land as there was no laid down rules for the appointment of a paramount ruler. According to Abdul (1997), 368 representatives made up of elected councilors, ward heads and two representatives (which included the clan heads), from the eight districts in Ebira land were constituted into a committee to select a new paramount ruler for Ebira land. Sani Omolori, a leading member of the opposition group won with a vote of 342 and was appointed Ohinoyi on 1 June 1952. The rules and processes for the appointment of a traditional ruler for Ebira land is still contentious as a high Court in Nigeria only in February 2009 set aside the appointment of Ado Ibrahim who took over the rulership of the community on the death of Sanni Omolori in 1994. The Courts ruled that procedure for his appointment was not valid.

### **Democratization process and violence in Ebiraland**

It is well known that the Nigerian state plays a leading role in the development process on the account of the vast resources it controls. The implication is that the state becomes a coveted prize to be won at all cost by the various class fractions that create divisions in the society. In Ebiraland, the appeal to sub-ethnic differences by politicians and elites canvassing for votes and seeking public office became pronounced in the Second Republic. The process associated with democratization such as the party system and elections provide a congenial atmosphere for the negative manipulation of these sub-ethnic identities.

There was a general consensus among persons interviewed that violence which characterizes electoral politics in Ebira land today has its origin in the 1950s. Then, the struggle for control of the NA between the ITU and the NPC/IPU resulted into violence in which both parties engaged the youths to perpetrate violence. The ITU had the 'Boma' boys while the NPC youth groups were known as the 'Cowboys'. While the use of guns by organized youth was not common practice, masquerades and traditional singers became divided along party lines leading to during the celebration of cultural festivities. The old divide between the ITU and the NPC was again manifested in the politics of the second Republic (1979-1983). A significant number of those who were strong opponents of the Attah and the NPC joined the Great Nigeria People's Party (GNPP), while the NPC supporter aligned forces with the National Party of Nigeria (NPN).

Indeed, it was in the second Republic that another dimension was introduced into party politics in Ebira land with the increased political mobilization of sub-ethnic identities. For instance, in the fierce contest for power between Adamu Attah (a son of Ibrahim Atta) and Obatemi Usman for a seat into the Constituent Assembly in 1977, Obatemi Usman lost to Adamu Atta and resorted to appeal to the sentiments of his Oziogu clan, and accusing the Aniku sub-clan of Adavi to which Attah belonged, of occupying most of the public offices in Ebira land.

Beginning from the second Republic politics in 1979, the zoning of the public office along clan line increasingly became entrenched in the body politics of Ebiraland.

In 1990, the Aniku sub clan of Adavi produced the Chairman for Adavi local Government area. The next elected Chairman was from the Uhami sub clan of Adavi, while in 1999 the chairmanship position was zoned to Ezuka. In the 2003 political dispensation, the position of Chairman was zoned to the Adieka sub clan. In Okene Local Government area, public office is often rotated between Okene and Okengwe district. Contest for public office is usually between the Agada and Okovi and their subclans. Ihima district on its part rotated positions in public office between the subclans of Eika and Ihima district. Elective positions into the state and federal offices are zoned and rotated among the different district. Regular meetings of clan are now intensified thus fostering sub-ethnic consciousness among the people. Disputes that may arise between contestants for public office within a sub clan is minimal as the views of clan heads are usually respected. The clan heads play a decisive role in who is put forward to contest for an office zoned to the group.

The politicization of the position of clan heads has a negative effect on the entire community as the struggle for such position is fiercely fought, resulting in violent conflicts as has occurred between the Upopuvete and Aniku sub-clans of Adavi local government. The panel set up by the Kogi state government in 1997 to determine the

causes of the conflicts revealed that politicians from the three major sub-clans that contested for the vacant stool of the clan chief (Asema of Upopuvete) engaged in deft maneuvers and manipulations in the area with each wanting his own choice as occupant of the stool.

The tendency for political alignments to occur along clan line has therefore made it convenient for politicians to manipulate clan sentiments in furtherance of their narrow ambitions. The consequence is that, inter-clan conflict which was hitherto unknown among the Ebirra has become a recurring problem as exemplified in the recurring violent conflict between Okengwe and Ihima districts, and Adavi Eba and Okengwe districts.

The problem of politicization of clan identities is not limited to competition for local power. Masquerades and singers who hitherto entertained during cultural festivals are aligned with the different political parties thus turning such festivals into an arena of conflict and violence. This became more rampant in the second Republic when contest for power between political parties resulted into violence in which unemployed youths were recruited as political thugs. This pattern of violence fueled by the political mobilization of clan identities has become entrenched in the current democratic dispensation. The disturbing trend of turning cultural festivals into conflict arena is discussed in fuller detail in the next section.

The prominent role played by the youths in the circles of violence in Ebiraland is attributable to a number of factors. The paramount rulers of Ebiraland, for example, have attributed youth involvement in violence to manipulation by some powerful community leaders (Out, 1995; Ibrahim, 2002), although the manipulation theory can hardly account for all the cases. Many of those interviewed blame the anger among youths occasioned by high level of unemployment as the basis of conflict and violence. It was established in the course of our investigation that most of the youths including those that had been arrested in connection with thuggery either dropped out of schools or/and are unemployed. According to Usman (Interview, 2002), youth perpetrators of violence are unemployed and hungry, and out of desperation, constitute themselves into groups referred to as 'Aduvusu' (I'm ready to die) or 'Ozomateyisu' (one cannot hide from death). They tend to be more violent under the cover of masquerades.

The strong link between unemployment and youth violence is supported by the views of many of the respondents who argue that violent conflict in Ebira land was at its lowest ebb between 1980 - 1985 when the Ajaokuta steel project was at its peak and provided employment to a large number of youths from Ebiraland. Violent crime therefore becomes the means, not only for expressing the crisis of youth identity, but also for acquiring additional sources of power in the forms of charms and amulets. The phenomenon of unemployment has been worsened by the negative impact of the structural adjustment programme and other key elements of the

economic reform policies. However, not to be ignored is the increasing polarization between the elders and the youth in Ebiraland, with the latter blaming the woes of the land on the former, and insisting on having a greater say in the leadership arrangement of the society. In the view of one of the persons interviewed, there is a growing discontent among the youths on the role of Elders in the society who the youths blame for the lack of basic infrastructural facilities and employment opportunities in the area. The youth insist on taking over power from the politicians by getting their candidates fielded to contest elections into public office by creating youth organizations such as the People's Initiative Foundation and the Ebira Youth Congress (EYC).

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

One major finding of this study is that in the struggle to gain access to local power structures including the position of the paramount rulership, the Ohinoyi, provides an arena of elite manipulation in which the community is divided along clan lines, and masquerades and youths, unleash violence on unsuspecting persons. The large pool of unemployed, able-bodied and hungry young men is thus exploited for political gains. The study, therefore, brings into bold relief, the limited capability of state institutions to think through, and implement appropriate policies that can address the social malaise. The chains of violent conflicts have impacted negatively on the socio-economic organization of Ebiraland. The victims of violence are mainly the women and the children; several women turned widows with added responsibilities of children upbringing in addition to industrious women having their wares destroyed when properties and markets are torched by irate youth's groups. Furthermore, intermittent violent conflicts in Ebiraland have the implication of socializing youths into a culture of violence and other forms of delinquent behaviors.

The negative impact of incessant violence in a community calls for concerted efforts at the levels of the state and community to reverse the present ugly trends. At the level of the state, the completion of the Ajaokuta Steel Complex and the question of good governance should be made priorities. As the study clearly show, escalation of violence in Ebira land associated with masquerades and youth has coincided with the down turn of the Nigerian economy and the crisis that hit the Ajaokuta Steel Complex which hitherto was a source of employment for a large number of people. Government therefore needs to address the numerous challenges of the steel company by taking a leading role in revamping it and putting it to productive use. Similarly, both state and local governments can go along way in addressing the problem of unemployment and rural decay by instituting transparent, open and accountable system of rule. Also to be addressed is the intractable issue of citizenship in which membership of the local ethnic community is the basis of

access to citizenship rights provided in the Nigerian Constitution. It is a key issue in youth violence in Ebiraland, as thousands of Ebiraland farmers who have been forced by the difficult terrain of Ebiraland to settle in neighbouring states of Ondo, Ekiti and Edo states send their children back home to receive their education. Such children who are denied parental care and mentoring often used as cannon fodders in the course of violent conflict. Government has additional role to play in stemming the tide of youth violence. In this sense, there is an urgent need to put emphasis on technical and vocational education instead of the present emphasis on secondary education which does not address issues of self-employment and wealth generation outside of public sector employment.

Despite the tendency for clan identity to be mobilized as basis of conflict, it is possible to use the sense of solidarity fostered by clan identities as the framework for mobilizing resources and promoting development as was the case in pre-colonial Ebiraland when clans offered annual sacrifices to ancestors to address communal problems and seek blessings from the ancestors. There is also the need to emphasize informal and traditional approaches to conflict management and peace-building such as to ensure the empowerment of local communities and institutions in the management of conflict.

It is hoped that a combination of these suggested policies and the deepening of the on-going processes of democratization would create the window of opportunity to reverse the present trend in Ebiraland. It is only then that it possible to overcome the long term effect of colonization which re-organized Ebiraland in such a way that it could fit into the quest for law and order supportive of the larger imperial interest of Britain in Nigeria, while at the same time dealing with opportunistic mobilization of clan difference by the post-colonial ruling elites and the political class.

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