

An Evaluation of the Causes and Efforts Adopted in Managing the Ethnic Conflicts, Identity and Settlement Pattern among the Different Ethnic Groups in Warri, Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract: *Over the last few years, existing theory explaining the link between group identification and effective intergroup relations has been largely guided by social psychological theories of intergroup conflict such as social identity theory. This theory provides a sturdy framework for examining people identification in such societies and for an intergroup perspective. Often times, this identification leads to ethnic conflict as the different ethnic groups claim ownership of the land and control of the natural resources and struggle for power. The Warri ethnic crisis of March, 2003 is a good case in point. The study area is the oil city of Warri in Delta State, Nigeria, where the three major ethnic groups in the city, namely, Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo are always involved in ethnic conflicts. The work explored the historical background of the migration of the different ethnic groups and their mode of identification with each other in time past and the present. The work also examined the causes of the ethnic conflict among them and the efforts of managing it. Secondary sources were utilized in information gathering. Researchers, policy makers and development workers would benefit from it as they seek undistorted information on conflict management, especially in south-south Nigeria.*

Keywords: Identity, migration, ethnic group, integration, conflict

1. Introduction

Human migrations involve the physical movement of human from a particular place to another in a large group. Migration over the years has continued under the form of both voluntary migration within one's community or beyond and involuntary migration. According to international organisation for migration, there is no generally accepted definition of migration. The term 'migrant' was usually understood to cover all cases where the decision to migrate was taken freely by the individual, or group concerned, for reasons of personal convenience, and without intervention of an external compelling factor. Thus, it applied to persons, groups as well as family members moving to another area to better their material or social conditions, and improve the prospect for themselves and their family. Hill (1970:1) [1] stated that, migration is as old as man. In other words, from time immemorial, humans have moved vast distances in small family groups, or in large tribal societies, due to many factors such as, changing climate and inadequate food supply or better conditions of life and subsistence. Hill went further to name empirical observations as regard relation between migrants and native population by saying that:

Whenever two human groups from contrasting social origins are brought together, in primary social interaction, a chain reaction of social processes is initiated; one of whose inevitable outcome is conflict. Where the conflict becomes institutionalised in the structure of society, the culture gap between the two groups remains and becomes hardened. Where, on the other hand, conflict is resolved and processes of acculturation are allowed to develop freely, the culture gap between the two groups become a diminishing category in social differentiation and therefore of decreasing social significance (Hill, 1970:90) [2].

In Nigeria, settlement patterns involving indigenes and settlers can be equated to race relations where race had come to be used as a sign which often overrode other ways of classifying people. Danjibo (2009:123) [3] is of the view that settlement patterns did not only become indicative of separating the sons and daughters of the soil from other migrants, it has also impacted negatively on national identity and nation building projects. The frequent occurrence of inter communal crisis in Warri, (a major city in Delta state) in particular, and Nigeria in general, has raised the issue of ethnicity, identity, settlement patterns and ethnic conflicts management in the country's political discourse. This issue became extremely problematic since the beginning of the new democratic dispensation, which began on May 29, 1999. Imobighe (2003:13) [4] noted that, Nigeria witnessed outbreak of not less than forty violent communal or ethnic conflicts within the first three years of the country's return to democratic rule. Besides, some of the old ones gained additional potency. Some of these conflicts include among others, Zango-Kataf in Kaduna State, Itsekiri-Ijaw/Urhobo in Delta State, Ife-Modakeke in Osun State, Aguleri-Umuleri in Anambra State to mention but a few. Ethnic and inter communal violence have become so pervasive that there is hardly any part of the country that has not witnessed or experience it.

The occurrence of conflict among the Ijaws, Itsekiris and Urhobos exhibited the usual trend of mayhem and violence in Nigeria. The conflict led to the razing down of many villages and the disruptions of oil exploration in the area by angry youths. Most of the oil companies suffered human losses in the conflict. This made most of them such as Chevron, Texas, Shell, Elf (Eguavoen, 2003:243) [5] to close down most of their flow stations as well as suspended flights into the affected zones in Warri metropolis. The nations suffered huge economic losses as these oil

companies shut their facilities and Nigeria's crude oil export was greatly affected.

This paper examined the traditions of origin, migration and settlement patterns of the Ijaws, Itsekiris and Urhobos communities in Warri, Delta state, Nigeria as well as the causes of the conflicts witnessed in the city and the methods adopted in managing the conflict. The study identified Warri as a region of amazing plurality in terms of language and cultural heterogeneity, with a sense of integration and organic wholeness. Thus, the area offers a good example of unity in diversity for contemporary Nigeria. For clarity, this paper is divided into four parts. The first part introduced the study while the second part covered review of literature while part three dealt with the historical background of the conflict in the area. Part four dealt with the management of the conflict as well as conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Culture and environment activity play a prominent role in how we view ourselves as part of a larger society, and thus, this work will highlight research that emphasizes how identity is dynamic. This is in compliance with Wise (2010:2) [6] theory that all of us are a compilation of several role based identities that exist in salience with each other, with one identity rising to prominence over others as environments and activities change.

The concept 'identity' is difficult to define in exact terms. The cultural ingredients include among others, language, history, religion and cultural symbols. Jega (2002:14) [7] stated that identity represents a person's sense of belonging to a group if it influences his behaviour. He went further to state that identity serves as a rallying and organising code of social action within the civil society and in state society relations. Often than not, threats to an identity, real or envisaged, usually generate a reaction from the victims to ward off such threat which compels identity transformation. This transformation means a continuous process which suggests the changing role of identities and the heightening and increasing magnitude and effects of identity politics (Jega, 2002:6) [8] as contrary to creating an entirely new identity. Thus, scholars have argued differently that identity is neither static nor immutable after all (Giddens, 1991) [9]. In essence, identities could be manipulated, depending on the prevailing social, political, economic and cultural realities. The reason is that, the construction of a collective identity, mainly ethnicity, is assumed to guide strategic action for access to and control over resources. Osaghae (1994:138) [10] alluded to this when he stated that the centrality of ethnic identity is underscored by the reason that an ethnic group defined as primarily the political community that inspires the belief in common identity, has inclination to change and absolve new forms, depending on reactions to the various issues always generated when 'self' confronts the 'others'. It is however, this tendency of ethnic identity to serve as a political resource that gingers its inclination to engender conflict, depending on its management.

It should be noted that it is not in all situations that conflict and violence characterise the effect of inter ethnic and other forms of inter group relations. Harmony and peaceful existence as well as cooperation, in varying degrees,

characterise inter group relations too. Therefore, there is the need to acknowledge the manifold character of the role played by ethnicity in social and political life. As we are always reminded, ethnicity is amenable to static analysis. According to Nnoli (1978) [11] and Egwu (1998) [12], its Janus faced character, combining elements of imagination and reality, both determining and determined, fixed and yet, ever changing, or simultaneously providing ideology of domination and resistance, has to be recognised. The dialectical trajectories of ethnicity provide basis for accommodation and compromise on the one hand, and the basis for conflict and violence on the other hand. These are interwoven due to the fact that they are linked as political resources in the armoires of ethnic leaders. Otite (1990) [13] asserted that even more fundamental is the fact that ethnicity is a very comprehensive social category which provides a spatial framework for other identities including clan, class, religion and regional identities.

Undisputedly, there is a consensus regarding the resurgence of ethnic identity, its political mobilization as a part of the prevailing system of seeking power and authority, and as a part of the strategy of attaining material and psychological survival (Egwu, 1998 [14]; Hendricks, 1997) [15]. For Hendricks (1997:105) [16], ethnicity and other politically salient identities must be seen as different methods of consolidation statehood and the contradictions generated by the process. In essence, ethnic, regional and religious identities are part and parcel of the technology of power of the African ruling elite. On the contrary, it should not be disregarded as a form of false consciousness in which the ruling elite manipulate the masses for their own narrow political and economic ends. For Nnoli (1978) [17], the primary interests of the people and their real or imagined belief that ethnicity promotes their interests is necessary in order to be able to deal with conflict dynamics at both levels of the elite and the masses.

Violent conflict is a prevalent characteristic of social life which happens not only in times of decay and decline of society but also in times of blossoming and healthy growth. According to Nader cited in Otite and Albert (1999:8) [18], most conflicts happen at three different structural stages which consist of intra family, intra community and inter community. A multi lingua nation like Nigeria often provides a salient laboratory for the production of knowledge in the area of conflict studies due to the diverse nature of their population. This is made significance due to the struggle for access to a diversity of limited resource such as chieftaincy position, markets, power and status, water spots for animals, land, government policies and leadership of political parties and host of others (Otite and Albert, 1999:3 [19]; Osaghae *et al.*, 2001:11) [20]. Most time, the negative mobilization of such identities as ethnicity, religion, language and race in the pursuit of access to the limited resources further fuels conflicts and violence (Tenuche, 2002) [21].

Tenuche (2002) [22] insisted that as source of meaning and experience, identity possesses attributes that make bearers of certain identities impressionable to mobilization as it becomes a rallying force and organising principles for social actions (Castells, 1997:6) [23]. According to Jega (2002:36) [24], identity consciousness in itself and its varied forms,

such as ethnic, religious, communal, gender, labour and youth, are not main problems in plural societies, but become problematic when they are not properly mobilized and use as platform on which socio political action is organised in the struggle for access to the scarce resources by diverse competing groups. Thus, identity becomes a construction of social actors. I therefore concurred with Castells (1997:6) [25] opinion that identity, is to determine how, from what, by whom and for what it is constructed. In essence, identities are increasingly being mobilized in competitive situation in order to have access to those things which individuals or groups attached value.

3. Aims of the Study

This study examined the historical background and the causes of the conflicts in the city of Warri, Delta State. It also examined the different efforts adopted in managing the conflicts. The outcome of this study is of great intellectual and practical value to a generation of stakeholders, academia, scholars and even role players involved in one way or the other, in conflict management. Consultants and researchers alike will also gain current data necessary for upgrading training facilities and programs, designed to contain the advent and impacts of conflicts, in the interest of political stability and development.

3.1 Scope of the study

As indicated in the topic, this study involved the three major ethnic groups found in Warri, Delta State. The study covered the time before and after the advent of the British and colonial era in Africa in general and Warri in particular.

3.2 Methodology

The study adopted the analytic cum historical research design. Data were collected through secondary sources. The source included published books, journals and internet materials among others.

4. Discussion

4.1 Historical background and causes of the ethnic conflict in Warri

Like other ethnic groups such as the Isokos and Delta Igbos, the Itsekiris, Ijaws and the Urhobos are three neighbouring groups that inhabit part of the Delta region of Nigeria. However, in line with Ikime's (1969)²⁶ observations, the relation between these three ethnic groups has been quite uneasy. Despite this uneasiness, they are also socially interrelated, live together in the same community, intermarried, commercially interdependent and remain very much so up till date. The conflict among the Ijaws, Itsekiris and Urhobos has been on before the advent of the colonial masters. The conflict is said to be historical in origin which makes it difficult to access who among them is actually presenting the real facts. The Urhobos claim that they are the real owners and first settlers in Warri land. According to them, they only gave tenancy lease to the Itsekiri people to cultivate since they were mostly occupying swampy areas and as such, had no dry land to farm. In essence, they consider the Itsekiri as migrants whom they assisted to

overcome their occupational hardship at a given time in the history of their existence. However, when their leasing time was over, instead of returning the occupied land to the Urhobos, they used their influence with the colonial masters to engage in a tussle with the host over the ownership of Warri land. The Itsekiris on their part argued that, they are the original occupants of the land. They contend that they only gave the area in contest now to the Urhobos who were their slaves, to be farming since they (the Itsekiris) are mostly fishermen and middlemen traders. Thus, the Urhobos are regarded by the Itsekiris as intruders into their community.

This dispute over ownership of land led to yet another serious problem which helped to complicate further, the issue on ground. This issue has to do with the position of *Olu* of Warri. The non Itsekiris such as the Ijaws and the Urhobos argue that since Itsekiris are not the original owners of Warri and the fact that there are other ethnic groups inhabiting the place, no ethnic group (for instance, the Itsekiri) should lay claims to the traditional stool of the town or lord it over the other ethnic groups. Thus, they suggested that the stool be regarded as *Olu* of Itsekiri, a title that automatically describes the jurisdiction of the *Olu* and defines the limitations and extent of his powers. *Olu* of Warri entails that he is the supreme ruler of all the ethnic groups inhabiting in Warri. The title empowers him with supremacy. This is not only unacceptable to the Urhobos and the Ijaws, but also an insult on their part. For the Itsekiris also, the *Olu* of Warri as an institution has been in existence since the 15th century A.D, hence, no one can change it now. These two major issues laid the foundation for the crisis in the Warri city, Delta State and became the sources of incessant conflict amongst the said ethnic groups till date.

Nevertheless, there seems to be diversity about the crisis in Warri. This is due to the fact that some Urhobos are of the opinion that the crisis is concerned with only a particular family lineage and the Itsekiris. These families are fighting for their own selfish end and not for the interest of the whole Urhobo nation. According to this school of thought, the family/families in question sold the disputed area to the Itsekiris long time ago without knowing the effects of their action. But with the oil boom and the subsequent benefits accruing from the position of Warri being central in an area of many oil wells, development of infrastructure and the like, the quest and tussle of ownership of the area became a major crisis (Eguavoen, 2003:228)²⁷.

Eguavoen (2003:229)²⁸ stated that a new dimension was added to the violence in Warri due to development of the area, mostly with increasing activities of oil companies. This gave room to the Ijaws who also inhabit the town along with the Urhobos and the Itsekiris to start agitating against the marginalisation of their ethnic group. This made them request for their own local government council which will be a medium through which their voices could be heard and recognised. This new dimension to the conflict has helped in complicating an already difficult condition. At a certain time, the conflict was between the original parties, that is, the Itsekiris and the Urhobos; at another time, it was between the Itsekiris and the Ijaws and at another time, the Urhobos teamed up with the Ijaws to fight the Itsekiris. This

is as a result of the fact that the Ijaws and the Urhobos share a common sense of marginalisation and oppression.

Furthermore, the conflict between the Ijaws and Itsekiris started with the sighting of the Warri South Local Government Area headquarters at Ogbe-Ijoh, a region predominantly populated by the Ijaws. This did not augur well with the Itsekiris who protested it, arguing that they were the one who requested for the creation of a new local government area, thus, the headquarters should be relocated to Ogidigben, an enclave of the Itsekiris. They argued further that the gazette announcing the local government creation named Ogidigben as the headquarters and not Ogbe-Ijoh. This mix up was attributed to the then military administrator of Delta State, Col. David Dung and the attempt to correct it led to mayhem. Human beings were slaughtered, houses worth billions of naira were burnt down to ashes and Eguavoen (2003:230) [29] concluded that the affected area was left desolate. The Urhobos saw this as an opportunity on their standing grievances against the Itsekiris to give a tacit assistance to the Ijaws and helped to expound the scope of the conflict. Until date, the conflict is yet to be resolved. These structural and historical setting, thus, laid the foundation and context for the violent and ever unending conflict in Warri.

In summary, the issue of the legitimate cum claims to ownership of the town, Warri, have been the major contentious issue in this conflict, as each ethnic group claim its ownership of the town and who should control it. In essence, none of the ethnic groups is ready to accept their migrant status in Warri. It is from this cause that all other has their base. The institution and coronation of the *Olu* of Warri is another cause of the conflict. This makes the Itsekiris feel superior and even make them arrogance as if they were better than other ethnic groups in the city.

4.2 Methods adopted in managing the Warri conflict

In resonance with Imobighe (1997) [30] theories of conflict management, three levels of conflict management were adopted in resolving this conflict. These levels include conflict prevention and peace promotion, conflict control and abatement and conflict resolution. These three levels intertwined. In essence, one stage of the conflict management led to the other, until it eventually got to the point of resolution of the conflict. In the Warri conflict, only the second stage of conflict management was considered adequate by the government in its efforts in managing the conflict leaving the first and the last stages to suffer relative neglect.

Since the emergence of the conflict in Warri, different methods have been adopted to resolve it. Imobighe (2002:56) [31] affirmed this when he noted that efforts had been made in resolving the conflict but these efforts were not holistic or integrated. Obviously, due to the failure of government attempt to manage the conflict, the parties involved sought redress in the judiciary. Eguavoen (2003:247) [32] observed that over twenty court rulings have been given on the Warri land conflict. He stated further that some of the cases went as far as the Supreme Court of Nigeria, West Africa Court of Appeal and even the Privy Council in London. One of such cases was the one between

Ometan on behalf of Agbassa, Urhobo Chief and Chief Dore Numa on behalf of the Itsekiris. The position of the Itsekiris was upheld by the court in this suit. This case went as far as to the Supreme Court and the Privy Council in 1931 and 1933 respectively, but the Urhobos lost the case. However, the issue took another dimension in 1973 when Okere Urhobo got a judgment against Itsekiri which was also confirmed by the Supreme Court, stating that Okere-Urhobo was never part of the *Olu's* kingdom. It is clear from the above documentation therefore that the judicial avenue at resolving this conflict has been explored to its logical conclusion.

5. Conclusion

- This study explored different concepts such as identity, settlement pattern and related it to the conflicts in Warri City, a major town in Delta State, Nigeria.
- Boundaries have not been demarcated for the three parties so that no one would trespass the other's boundary in strictly administrative and political matters. This should not however, affect their social and economic interactions.
- It should be noted here that most of the methods adopted in resolving the conflict so far were judicial processes which were taken by individual parties involved in the issue and not a group. The government on its part set up tribunals, commissions and panels of inquiry to look into the conflict soon after its outbreak and the suppression of violence with the assistance of deployed forces.
- It is however sad to note that most of the commissions set up by the government are not implemented; instead, end up at the inaugural and sitting sessions. In essence, the judicial and other methods adopted by both government and other bodies such as commissions and panels of inquiry seem to have not yielded any result.
- Thus, the following recommendations are made for proper management of the conflict in the area.

6. Recommendations

- In resolving the conflict, both the state and federal governments should engage the warring three ethnic groups in a dialogue.
- The different ethnic groups in Warri should have their traditional ruler who have and share the same status as *Olu* of Warri with their areas of jurisdiction properly delineated.
- More local government areas should be created with corresponding wards and constituencies to accommodate the different ethnic interests in the city.

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