

**THE DYNAMICS OF INTERNAL BOUNDARY CONFLICT MANAGEMENT
BETWEEN CROSS RIVER STATE AND HER NEIGHBOURS 1978-2010**

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ABSTRACT: *The concern of academics the world over is to contribute to the development and peaceful co-existence of its citizens, hence they domicile their research towards achieving this objective. Using descriptive methodology, this study critically examines the crisis bedevilling Nigerian communities, arising majorly, from boundary or border lines. This crisis has raised a lot of concern with dire consequences on the people's cordial relationship. This paper therefore attempts to examine the existing relationship over time amongst the people of the study area, taking into consideration the causes of the conflict with a view to proffering possible solutions in curbing them. In achieving the above, the paper discovered that DECREE 23 of 1985 rather than carefully studying the situation with consultations, the authorities were rather in a hurry with its enactment. Also at the pivot of the conflicts is the National Boundary Commission which must be proactive if peace must be achieved.*

KEYWORDS: dynamics, internal boundary, conflict, management, Cross River State

INTRODUCTION

Man as a social being relates and interacts with his environment/nature, animals, plants and fellow man. In this interaction and relationship especially with the later since all have divergent views or perceptions towards social interactions, conflict becomes inevitable (Rummel, 2018). On a wider perspective, ego, dominance, struggle for power and resources, territorial expansion, ethnic struggle, political tussle to mention but a few has been the major causes of conflicts in our societies (Shan, 2017).

The interface between man and his social-physical environment involves a continuous process of dependence and interdependence which has the potential of breeding contradictions and conflicts. Conflict is an inherent attribute of man and society. Conflict at any level arises from divergence of interests, desires, goals, values and aspiration in the competition for recourses to meet imposing demands on social life in a defined social-physical environment. Boundary and land related conflict at the grass-root especially between communities over land and water, oil wells or other important natural recourses have continued to be on the increase in Nigeria.

However, internal boundary conflict is not a new phenomenon in Nigerian societies as there exists a plethora of cases which to a great extent have been a setback to mutual communal coexistence. The consequences are as many as the conflicts are; communities are displaced, lives and property destroyed, people displaced etc in the struggle over land boundary, forest

reserve, ancestral land, among other valuables (Ebenezer et al). Example of such is Amagu/Adadama, Obudu/Vandeikya, Izzi/Ukelle, Ikot Offiong/Oku Iboku, etc.

According to Afigbo (1981) there was peaceful coexistence amongst these communities in the per-colonial and colonial era of Nigerian history, in which economic, commercial and social factors played significant role in strengthening the existing bond. However, the post colonial era in the study area has experienced waves of communal clashes and hostilities that could be traced to boundary adjustment exercises, through the creation of states. This is not to say that the era before state creation were violent free as factors like historical standpoint and belief in earlier offshoot were responsible for those crises, but what is important here is that these clashes were low in intensity. The state creation era consequently played down the mutual relationship and coexistence that was once enjoyed among the communities and in its place left an atmosphere of distrust, violent confrontations, conflicts and chaos as a result of the ill-spelt boundary demarcation and adjustment exercise occasioned by the neglected or infamous Decree No. 23 of 1985 (FRN Official Gazette, 1985).

Against this backdrop, this study is pitched at drawing the attention of government and stakeholders involved in issues of boundary demarcation, to the devastating and debilitating communal confrontations and hostilities in the area especially between Cross River and her propinquities.

CAUSES AND TRENDS OF BOUNDARY CONFLICTS ALONG CROSS RIVER STATE BORDERS

Bonchuks(124) noted that, the causes of conflict can be from divergent factors. To this respect, the historical antecedent of the parties concerned in conflict plays a vital role in asserting the root cause of the conflict. In the same vein, Ndukwe looks at the cause of conflict from two broad perspectives – first, conflict over resources such as plantation owners versus laborers, water resources, land and boundary etc. Secondly, conflict over core values such as traditional beliefs and customs which a good example of the later is seen in societies where the caste system is invoke. However, the causes of conflict in the area of study are not farfetched from the views of scholars detailed above. The remote cause of conflict is tied to ill-defined boundary demarcation between states, leading to the persistent conflict between communities along the boundary corridor.

According to (*Anon.*), one of the cases of conflict in the area was during the Nigerian Civil War. Further, the source disclosed that during late 1966, the Nigerian soldiers dealt a blow on the Biafran soldiers in the Ikot Okpora axis, because the Biafran soldiers were barely armed with sophisticated weapons. For this reason of weapon shortage, the Biafran soldiers have to sort for weapons from communities around the region to match the firepower of the Nigerian soldiers. Consequently, villages were raided for weapons which hitherto were meant for hunting (since most men in the region are fishermen and hunters). With this development, hostilities started, as it was perceived by the non-Igbo communities as a conspiracy to disarm communities around for invasion. This culminated in destruction of farm produce, kidnap and covert conflict, rising tension amongst communities along the border line.

The conflict that erupted between Oku Iboku and Ikot Offiong can be traced to 1987 after Akwa Ibom was carved out of Cross River State. Before now, they were regarded as one hence there was no need for any form of conflict between them. However, after 1987, there have been several conflicts with claims and counter claims as to which community was responsible for the continuous crises and lack of peace in the area. This researcher in carrying out these research and from evidences, both primary and secondary, have been able to point out some causes of these protracted and unending conflicts.

The primary cause of the conflicts according to Magistrate Ikwo Bassey in an interview, between the people of Oku Iboku and Ikot Offiong has always been land. This problem has always been prevalent and has resulted in recurrent disputes and conflict. Hon. Ability Emah also opines that land was a major factor in the lingering crisis. He explains that while a section of the Ikot Offiong people insists that they are of the Itu stock, another group insists that they are of the Odukpani stock. He further states that this disagreement between the Mbiabo Esin Ufot otherwise known as Ikot Offiong people led to them fighting amongst themselves and in effect, while one group embraced Odukpani as their place of origin, the others remained with Itu. He states that in insisting on returning to their Efik speaking family in Cross River State, the Oku Iboku people asked for their lands insisting that they could leave but not with their lands as the lands were theirs.

The Oku Iboku paper factory is another factor or cause of the existing conflict according to oral information with Mr. Ofre Yaya. He posits that besides from the issue of land, the location change in the siting of the paper factory was also a factor and the cause of the continuous crisis in the area. In an interview with him, he explains to this researcher that the paper factory which was supposed to be sited at Akamkpa in Cross River State due to the nearness to raw materials was taken to Oku Iboku as a result of the influence of those in power at the time which constituted more of people from the Akwa Ibom divide. It is believed that they saw and perceived that the carving was imminent and therefore picked a site that was going to be favorable to them in the event of the carving. That paper factory however has been closed down as a result of the unavailability of resources to run the factory. The gmelina wood which is used to produce paper is in high quantity at the Akamkpa forest and all efforts to access these raw material has been resisted hence the shutting down of the factory and the Ikot Offiong people who are their neighbor are bearing the brunt of these.

The stretch of land between Oku Iboku and Ikot Offiong after the Itu Bridge is also a factor. According to Mr. Asuquo, that area is blessed with lots of hard wood which can bring lots of finance to whichever area controls the resources of the area. It is imperative to add at this point that some of these conflicts extend to other villages along the boundary corridor like Okot Akpabio, Ntan Obu, Uyi Ekanem, Asang, Ikot Offiong Ebiti etc.

Another cause of the conflict according to Chief Stephen Nya while responding to Vanguard reporters was as a result of the forest resources and the presence of oil deposits in the area. Mr. Ofre Yaya also shares these views as he explains that it is believed that there is oil deposit on the stretch of land after the Itu Bridge and the need to control and own that area has caused further skirmishes and increased the conflict between the people.

Delineation is also a factor in the Oku Iboku/Ikot Offiong crisis as the Government creates states and Local Governments without taking into cognizance local boundaries. Overtime, there is bound to be conflict.

In the case of ADADAMA-AMAGU boundary disputes, it was found out that during colonial rules, the British Colonial Government imposed imaginary boundaries alien to the traditional notion of boundaries among the people. The consequence of this was that it separated related ethnic groups in all aspects of their very existence. M. O. Bonchuk (2010) puts in thus:

...The boundaries have separated related ethnic groups... the boundaries were meant to separate these groups for purposes of administrative and jurisdictional competence. However, neither the colonial nor post-colonial boundaries have functioned as they were expected to. These divided groups continue to interact and year for closer relationship across boundaries.

In another dimension, Adejuyigbe (2005) while discussing on the issues surrounding boundary disputes in western Nigeria, highlights colonial government policy as a root cause of boundary tussle in colonial times which have regrettably lingered up till present day Nigeria, though he attributed boundaries dispute during colonial eras to disagreement over resource(s) control. For Adejuyigbe (2005), such conflict arises when colonial agents decided to pay royalty over certain natural resources situated in a frontier to one group and ignoring the other group which also shares same frontier as well.

Both Bonchuk (2010) and Adejuyigbe (2005) are of the views that one major cause of boundary disputes among the various peopling of present day Nigeria was the policies of the defunct colonial administration. Through their works, both authors illustrated how colonial administration sparked off boundary disputes which have lingered up till day. Although, it is to be noted that exactly 1917, a request was put forth to the colonial government of Lord Frederick Lugard by some people from Ilorin and Kabba Province for a boundary adjustment which will enable them to rejoin their kith and kin in the western portion of Nigeria which they were separated from during the 1914 Amalgamation. Both commissions set up by Lugard in 1917, and the one set up by Macpherson, gave a verdict of no adjustment. And the Willink set up to look into the Cross River, Ogoja and Rivers agitation only recommended adjustment based on a plebiscite (Bonchuk, 2010:).

Further, after Nigeria gained independence from British colonial rule, the country barely six years into her independence found herself grappling with so much internal issues ranging from loyalty, ethnic politics, riots, coup and mutiny, among other which eventually culminated into a Civil War lasting from 1967 to 1970. Prior to the civil war, the then military government of Gen. Yakubu Gowon was to break the formidable geo-ethnic fronts presented by the regions. Although, a source claimed that Gowon broke the regions into twelve to further destabilize the southeast under Ojukwu's control prior to the civil war to ensure that those regions which had earlier agitated for their separate states (which led to the establishment of the Willink Commission in 1957) disassociated themselves from Ojukwu's rebellious act. Hence, once states were created, ethnic groups began to glamour for their own states so as to be able to promote their individual identity and participate actively in the acquisition and appropriation of the nation's resources (Bonchuk, 2010: 125).

As for the conflict between Obudu and Vandiekia one of the factors necessitating the conflict between these communities is cultural practices. For instance, both the Obudu communities of Cross River State and Vandiekiya of Benue practice a warrior club known as Ugrinya. This practice required human heads as sacrifice when a prominent person dies, as both communities always target one another. The aggrieved communities would always want to avenge the murder of their kith and kin.

Boundary dispute over land is another factor that caused conflict between Obudu and Vandiekiya. As reported by daily Post, published on August 17, 2017, a primary school teacher, Mr. Akomaye Betiang was shot in the hand following renewed conflicts between the Bette communities in Obudu Local Government Area of northern Cross River State and the Tivs in Vandiekiya Local Government Area of southern Benue State. Daily post's investigation revealed that the incident occurred on Betiang's farm while he was working. The farm is located not far from the River Aya which the Bette people say is the boundary between both villages. In summary, from the research carried out, it is observed that most of the conflicts occurring between both communities are as a result of land dispute. These conflicts occurred between 1950, 1967, 1968, 1970, 1985, 1994, 2002, 2005-2007.

THE EFFECT OF BOUNDARY CONFLICT ON COMMUNITIES ALONG THE CROSS RIVER/ABIA BORDER AND ITS IMPLICATION ON INTERNAL GROUP RELATION.

In general term, the aftermath of any violent conflict whether big or small, short or long term is usually very devastating and frustrating. Aja-Akpuru recounted some of these effects to include untold hardship, extreme poverty, malnutrition, suffering, violence and death (42). Furthermore, it lead to poor upbringing or education of children, poor health services human right abuses and violation (mostly against women and children), easy spared of disease or epidemic etc.

To this respect, the effect of conflict in these areas will be important to this study. In one of the cases, expressing the ordeal of the conflict in this area, a motor cyclist (anon) lamented on how conflict in the area halt economic activities. Personal to him, he stated that a cyclist he earn a living by taking passenger to their destination within the area, but could not access those areas, in times of conflict. Apart from this, agricultural processes have been on a back grind due to these conflicts, affecting agricultural output.

Community development depended on the provision of basic social amenities to enhance livelihood, but with the unabated conflicts in the areas, these amenities are minimally provided and the ones provided for are being destroyed during crises times. For instance the burning down of two road construction machine belonging to Rhas. Nig Ltd, handling the construction of the road linking Ikot Okpora-Arochukwu-ututu-and Ukwa sponsored by Niger Delta Commission (NDDC). Another effect of conflicts is that strangers could be slaughtered on the assumption that the victim an enemy. In most cases tension might rise when members of the other communities are in their farms or at the market on the wrong side (Ebenzer et al 42).

Also, the unending waves of violence in these areas have caused some sort of stereotype as conflicting communities in the area label each other as cannibals. Due to this stereotype, inter-marriages especially between Igbo speaking communities and their Cross River neighbors are

not encouraged. This alone has been a backbone to the lingering waves of conflict. If inter-marriages are encouraged, it will serve as a catalyst for lasting peace in the affected areas. Population reduction in these areas is also as a result of these conflicts. Youth population (especially men) who were to drive the economic, cultural, social and political activities of the areas are involved in these conflicts and many are killed in the process. In some cases children and women are not spared either. Psychologically, the effects of these conflicts are grave as galvanized revenge which further prolongs the conflicts. It is devastating and traumatic to some people who have experienced explicit picture of happening and had since then been psychologically unstable. Like some women whose husband are killed in the process automatically turn the bread winner of the family, which of course became an added responsibility. Also upbringing of children whose parent were victims of the conflicts, becomes a problem and they might be exposed to activities that will be detrimental to there their well being, thereby causing them to become nuisance to the society.

THE WAY FORWARD

Since the Decree No. 23 of 1985, does not meet the aspiration of the border communities, federal government should as a matter of urgency delegate another commission of enquiry to look into the Cross River/Abia boundary disputes. This should be done in relationship with the NBC since it is the only agency in Nigeria charged with the responsibility of boundary definition and delimitation. The NBC on their part should not stay mute in respect to this conflict as it involves both states. Proactive measures should be taken in ensuring the proper definition of boundaries in the area, with consultation of the communities involved for proper execution and adherence to the resolution.

Apart from other recommendations, there is need for the communities along the boundary corridor to bury their hatchets and face the future regardless of the past, acceptance of peaceful negotiation that would yield substantive dividends for the overall interests of the communities within the area. Traditional rulers are vital tools for conflict resolution, as they are instruments of social organization and provide for the foundation for social change (Fatile 7). The use of traditional methods of social control such as communal solidarity, traditional oaths, rewards, vigilantes, informal settlement, checks and balance should be used for communal and border disputes resolution. To this respect, community leaders and traditional rulers should desist from inciting conflicts, either by word of mouth or actions. Community leaders should rather use their office to maintain peaceful coexistence in the region.

The National Orientation Agency (NOA), should strengthen sensitization on need for peaceful coexistence not only in the area, but across the country, and should intensify efforts to reach out to conflicting communities or those prone to conflict. Proper counseling should be given to the traumatized. Equally, emergency response and relief materials should be taken as soon as possible to conflict area to reduce casualties. Importantly, education policy formulators should incorporate peace education into the curriculum of primary and secondary schools across the country. Since they are the future generations, there is need to start inculcating in them the culture of peaceful coexistence. It is shown that among the communities along the border area there is a police outpost station only in Ukwu Eburutu. Therefore, there is need for security agencies to beef up security in the area by posting men of the agencies to the communities permanently, as this will go a long way to curb the escalation of conflict in the area.

The states boundary commissions should strengthen efforts and show commitment in the development of these border communities, with the provision of basic social amenities of life such as water supply, electricity, access road, health services among others to improve lives in the area.

Skill acquisition centers should be established in these communities by the state, local government or philanthropist, as this will give youths in the area a better livelihood and improve income generation. Also, it will go a long way in engaging them and diverting their attention from conflict involvement to other beneficial activities. Women should be involved in the peace negotiation process whenever needs arises, because they are the most affected by these conflicts. It was discovered that the members of ABOO peace committee comprising of members from the four LGA are all male. This situation is the same even at the state and the traditional ruler's level. Giving the female chance to be involved in peace negotiation will change the perception of peace.

CONCLUSION

The study has explored the management of internal boundary disputes in Nigeria, using the case of the Cross River/Abia States boundary conflicts as an example. The study explicate the fact that apart from minor differences that occurred during the colonial era, outright violence, armed confrontations and hostilities was experienced in the wake of the post-colonial era of Nigeria history. Though different factors might have triggered the immediate cause of conflict in the area, it is important to mention that ill-spelt boundary felicitation on contiguous frontier has been the remote cause of conflict in the area of study.

However, we should also note that this issue is not peculiar to the Cross River/Abia border, as many other areas across Nigeria are also confronted with similar challenges. It is the position of this research to call the attention of individuals, groups, communities, traditional rulers, security agencies, the National Boundary Commission and government at all levels to intensify their efforts towards the realization of sustainable peace in the area, as the conflict experienced has brought untold hardship, economic stagnation, mutual distrust, hostility, and violent confrontation, which is a block on the wheel of progress and development of the border communities within this area.

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