O R I G I N A L A R T I C L E

Causes of Communal Boundary Conflicts in Nigeria: A Study of Mkpani-Nko Boundary Relations of Old Upper Cross River Region

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ABSTRACT

The research primarily considers the causes of communal boundary conflicts in Nigeria using Mkpani-Nko boundary relations of the old upper Cross River Region as a focal point. Evidence indicates that for several decades, both communities of Mkpani and Nko in the old Upper Cross River Region during the colonial retro had betrothed one another in a long-drawn-out borderline skirmish that originated from wilderness disagreements. The research also examined why farmland, a fixed and free gift of nature from God was and has remained a principal factor in most of the boundary conflicts that occurred in the region. The historical methodology adopted for the research involved the use of both primary and secondary sources with the primary source largely made up of oral interviews, while the secondary source had to do with both published and unpublished works on the subject matter. Findings suggest that apart from farmland being the principal cause of the conflict, there were other remote and immediate causes responsible for the conflict with its attendant negative effects such as loss of lives, destruction of property, insecurity, and stained relationship. The paper recommends that an arbitration committee that will always be prompt to settle land disputes between and among communities in the State should be established while Peace and Reconciliation Standing Committee as well should also be established to settle non-land disputes. The paper concludes that government should always be forthright, proactive, and prompt in dealing with the communal crisis of any kind in the state to always avoid escalation.

Keywords: Communal Boundary Conflicts; Nigeria; Mkpani-Nko Boundary Relations; Cross River Region.

INTRODUCTION

Avalanche historical literature of pre-colonial and colonial intergroup relations of Africa has over the years demonstrated extensively that, prior to the advent of expatriate rule in the continent (Andrew 2014; Andrew-Essien 2018). What later became "Nigeria" first existed in the form of kingdoms, empires, nationalities, states, and communities, (both mini and mega) with well organised political systems, identities and symbols that existed independently (Boypa & Okoi 2018). The "mega" states according to M. Crowder (1962) consisted of widespread empires and kingdoms established by both Hausa and Kanuri speaking people of Northern Nigeria, the Sokoto Caliphate that ruled the Northern Savanna, the kingdoms of Ife and Benin with the most recognised and accomplished art in the world, the Yoruba Empire of Oyo with well organised systems of checks and balances; and the city-states of Niger Delta grown partly in response of European demands for slaves and later palm oil (Ozumba 2012; Odey *et al.*, 2019).

The mini-states, on the other hand, consisted of the largely politically decentralised Igbo-speaking people of the southeast that provided the famous Igbo-Ukwu bronze and Terracotta (Crowder 1962). The states both mini and mega were relatively stable with sound socio-political settings (Eteng 2012); systems of government that encouraged cordial and harmonious relationships among their people and other groups (Adagba 2006), with "fluid boundaries" as well, that were agreed upon ancient landmarks such as distinct trees, ant-hills or rivers, valleys and mountains" to mention a few (Bonchuck 2015). These fluid boundaries were however not sacrosanct as they were earlier regarded to be. Because, first, the boundaries were potentially prone to conflict, and secondly, there was the greater emphasis by the people on cooperative features of kinship groups which was a prominent major utility in promoting communal or inter-group harmony.

Elucidating on the re-emergence and causes of both inter and intra-communal boundary conflicts in the old upper Cross River Region and Nigeria were minimal, Remi Anifowoshe (1993) and J. A. Agabi (2006) carefully state those pre-colonial boundaries of what later became Nigeria were blurred, defined according to the peoples' ability and capability with greater emphasis on common language and ancestry. For instance, the Kanem wars of Idris Alooma were typically directed at regaining the lost possessions of the original homeland of the Bornu nation, likewise, the frequent expeditions of the Oyo Empire against Dahomey in the 18th century (Odoemene 2011). Other factors according to, Akin Akinteye (1999), are claims and counterclaims on contested ownership of portions of land, differences in political cultures and aspirations, desire to create, and maintain autonomous chiefdom, and the struggle for economic resources for survival.

The concept of defined or fixed boundary in the historiography of the Old upper Cross River Region and Nigerian history which began to demarcate communities and administrative units like in most other third world countries of the world is a phenomenon that came with the "opportunism, ingenuity, exigency and convenience of European colonialism" (Barkindo, 1993, p. Xiv). By these schedules, the Europeans created and imposed defined boundaries that never existed and were also alien to the traditional organization of the people, separating related ethnic groups, culturally coherent areas, and common ecological zones (Nwagbara *et al.*, 2009; Odey 2019). According to boundary experts, the colonial boundaries that were created in the colonial

upper Cross River Region and Nigeria by the colonial masters were originally meant to "create structures and institutions that encouraged antagonistic tendencies between the people" (Adagba 2006, p. 8); isolate the groups for purposes of administrative and jurisdictional convenience. Even so, neither the colonial nor post-colonial boundaries have functioned as they were expected to because these divided groups continue to interact and yearn for closer relationships across boundaries.

Old upper Cross River Region as it were in colonial historical studies comprised of eleven administrative divisions that have become local governments today. These include Absi, Bekwarra, Biase, Boki, Etung, Ikom, Obanliku, Obubra, Obudu, Ogoja, Yala, and Yakurr where Mkpani and Nko communities that form the thrust of this paper are found. Local Government Areas in the Nigerian federal system of government are the third tier of government created by the Act of Parliament for the sole responsibility of bringing the government closer to the people. There are eighteen local government areas in Cross River State. Local governments like Bekwarra, Obanliku, Obudu, Ogoja, and Yala geographically and politically constitute northern Cross River state while Abi, Boki, Etung, Ikom, Obubra, and Yakurr constitute Central. Biase with other local governments like Akamkpa, Akpabuyo, Bakassi, Calabar Municipality, Calabar South, and Odukpani constitutes Southern Senatorial Districts of the state.

There are strong pieces of evidence that "land hunger, over population and pressure on farmland" was the major causal factors responsible for communities in the old region to struggle for farmland (Goshit 2006). Land ownership among the people of the old upper Cross River region and Nigeria, in general, has remained indispensable because, to C. H. Enloe (1973) "every individual, household or community must possess an identifiable homeland for survival" (P. 85), and to R.T. Akinyele (2005) "since the issue of survival is closely tied to land ownership, the subject of where the boundary line is drawn has always become very important" (p. 20). This however re-affirms what Lord Curzon had said in 1907 about land and boundaries. That both are

Razor's edge on which hung suspended the modern issues of war and peace, of life and death to nations and communities, the protection of the home that is the most vital care of the private citizen, so is the integrity of land borders a condition for the existence of modern states (Horowitz & Anderson 2009 p.226).

Farmland ownership among colonial communities of the upper Cross River Region was "customary, with its knowledge of boundaries passed on orally to the next generations, adopting sometimes artificial monuments such as fence, hedgerow, and motes" (Omojola 2005, p. 175). Colonialism played an unqualified role in the arousal and perpetuation of communal boundary crisis and prejudices in the colonial upper Cross River region and Nigeria as colonial communities began to witness incessant outbreaks and resurgences of inter-communal boundary conflicts which have drastically altered their earlier existing cordial relationships and have pitted them with deadly consequences regardless of their earlier shared history and culture.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Generally, boundary areas according to Egbe & Okoi (2017), whether global, inter-state, or inter-community tends to be located at the sideline of the fundamental

expanses of the entity. This in other words puts boundary areas a physical difficulty in terms of distribution of capitals and other infrastructural amenities by controlling authorities. Thus, most boundary conflicts in contemporary Nigeria emanate from the use of land for agricultural purposes.

Boundary

To start with the concept of boundary, its imperative to note that according to A. I. Asiwaju (1993), the meaning of boundary exceeds the more conversant longitudinal dimension, which refers to streaks of delineation between territorially defined areas of jurisdiction or ascertainable authority to the practical or emblematic category which is epitomized by superficial boundaries of social and administrative entities such as race, ethnicity, culture, religion (Emeng 2009; Emeng 2014; Emeng 2015; Odey 2018; Odey 2019), church, mosque, industry, business, corporations including multinationals, gender, age grades or generations, families, class, occupations and professions (Asiwaju 1993).

The Longman Dictionary outlines boundary as a "dividing contour" that scripts the perimeter of an area of jurisdiction. This however suggests that boundaries generally are thin lines of departure or lines unscrambling one terrain from another. T. A. Imobighe (1993, p. 64) explains boundary as a "line of demarcation that delimits the scope of two or more administrative jurisdictions". In other words, boundaries or boundaries according to him are connection sockets between two objects or contact zones of different administrative jurisdictions that are either fantasy or actually signified on the ground in the form of pathways, fences, hedgerows, motes, and erected markers at regular intervals. R. T. Akinyele (2005), perceives boundaries as the "interface created or identify between two phenomena" (p. 21). He further states that boundaries can assume the form of cerebral catalogings such as us and them or the corporeal demarcation between two administrative units. He, however, warned that boundaries are not dead immobile lines in the grime that separates administrative areas but the pivot around which the political, social, and economic activities of people revolve.

Conflict

Generally, the term conflict as the appellation indicates has been defined contrarily by dissimilar scholars with different clarifications and connotations in different settings. One of the most quoted traditional definitions of conflict according to Onigu Otite is by L. A. Coser (1956). He defined conflict as "a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, and resources in which the opponents aim to neutralise, injure, or eliminate their rivals" (p. 8). From L. A. Coser's definition, O. Otite (1999) avers that conflict is conceptualised as a way of relaxing glitches created from contrasting benefits and the continuity of society. Harvard Program on Negotiation Glossary "Conflict" 2013 defined conflict as some exercise of confrontation, changes, or disagreement climbing within a group when the values or actions of one or more supporters of the group are either boxed by or unbearable to one or more devotees of another group (Wolf 2017). Conflict according to O. Otite (1999) arises between individuals and, or groups in

defined communal and corporeal environments from their pursuit of conflicting securities, objectives, and ambitions.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION AND COSMOLOGY OF THE PEOPLE OF MKPANI AND NKO

Generally, among Yakurr communities, Mkpani and Nko"present important social dichotomise in terms of their geographical and population size" (Oka 1999, p. 72). Mkpani is the third and Nko is the fourth "largest Yakurr communities from a spatial and socio–economic point of view" (Okoi 2018a, p. 13). Both communities occupy northwest of Yakurr Local Government Area (LGA) and share a common land boundary. They are also located within latitude 5 40 North of the equator and longitudes 8 2 and 6 10 East of the Greenwich Meridian with about one hundred and twenty-five kilometers (125kms) northwest of Calabar, the capital of Cross River State (Okoi 2012). The two communities are found in the rain forest zone with a relatively tropical climate of about 34 C temperatures during the hottest period of the year (Okoi 2018). Mkpani is the most centrally located community in Yakurr. It is bounded in the North by Nko, Northwest by Ekori, South by Agoi Ibami, southwest by Idomi, Ekori, East by Agoi Ekpo, West by Ugep (Enang 2009), while Nko is the most northerly situated Yakurr community. In the North, Nko is bounded by Adun, a community in Obubra Local Government Area, South by Mkpani, Southeast by Agoi Ekpo and Ekom Agoi, a village of Agoi Ekpo and West by Ekori.

There are basically ten (10) Yakurr communities. These communities include Ugep, the most populous community in the Old Cross River Region and the entire Cross River State. Others are Ekori, Mkpani, Idomi, Nko, Assiga, Agoi Ekpo, Agoi Ibami, Nyima and Ekpeti.The people (Yakurr) are mainly Christians with a small population of Muslims and disciples of Traditional Religion (Emeng 2007; Emeng 2012; Akpanika 2020a; Akpanika 2020b). More than three-quarters of the population are subsistent farmers that plant yam and cassava with about 80% of the cassava being processed into garri and fufu.

Yakurr as a people and local government inhabits the territory located between latitude 5 4 and 6 10 North and longitude 8 and 8 5 East (Ukpenetu 1987). It is by far the largest ethnic group situated between the Efik – Ejagam group (Calabar) at the Atlantic Ocean and the Yala – Bekwara group (Ogoja) at the Northern limits of the state (Ukpenetu 1987). In the South, Yakurr has a boundary with Biase, North by Obubra, and East by Abi Local Government Areas (Okoi 2018). Mkpani and Nko communities with other *kakor* (Yakurr people) communities speak a common language known as *Lokor* (Enor 2007). Yakurr Systems of Kingship, Family and Marriage is a Bantu linguistic classification of a group of closely related languages spoken from South – Eastern Nigeria through Central to Southern Africa (Enor 2007). The word "Bantu" to another source, is a linguistically related group of people believed to have originated from the Eastern fringes of the West African forest zone, possibly in the Benue River valley near Nigeria and Cameroon (Emmanuel Esukpa interviewed 28/04/2010). It also means "the people" (Uyouyo 2002).

ORIGIN, CAUSES, INSTRUMENTS USED, AND EFFECT OF THE CONFLICT

The Mkpani-Nko boundary conflict in the Old upper Cross River Region is traced to two major reasons which are grouped into two categories. The first was the killing of a kinsman called Ukpeh from Mkpani community by a Nko man over ownership of portions of farmland (Efoli 2006). Historically, among the Yakurr people, it's evident that killing a kinsman in and of any community brought instant war until reparations were made. The second cause of the conflict according to Sylvester Enang (2009) was a fall out of a land dispute between Nko, a community in present-day Yakurr and Adun community in Obubra local government areas. He further states that the second conflict erupted from a protracted land case in the nineteen-thirties (1930s) in which Mkpani stood in as witnesses to Adun against their kit and kins Nko community (Enang 2009). The case turned out against Nko as they (Nko) lost a large portion of their farmlands to Adun community (Efoli 2006). This incident according to Mbasekoi Efoli, did not only angered the Nko people but the generality of Yakurr people which, from that point, the Nko people secured a consensus to start a land problem with Mkpani people, that started precisely in 1949 and spanned beyond five decades of the 20th century, ended in 1992 and re-occurred in 2016.

In this first episode of the conflict, the belief in the use of invocation and incantations to fight communal conflicts was one of the prominent features of both communities in that according to Oka Martins (1999), the communities involved, "invoked the aid of their deities whose functions were connected with incantations and use of herbs and roots" (p. 76). He further stressed that "the priests of these cults produced concoctions that were swallowed by the warriors to provide them with immunity from gunshots and matchets cuts" (Okoi 2018, p. 66). The faceoff between these communities also, in addition, involved the use of "Juju, a further proof of a systematic build-up of military and pseudo-military alliances". While machetes, clubs, and guns were used during this period, both communities in 2016 in another epistle boundary conflict that ensued used "cartridge rifle, machine guns and even locally produced explosives as the primitive weapons were not completely avoided" (Okoi 2012, p. 66). Planning for the execution of the conflict was carried out by the elders who were ably assisted by young men, war societies, and social organisations, some of which provided funds for munitions and food. The conflict was further promoted by elites from the two communities as a result of suspicion and impatience, who used the outbreak of the conflict to score political goals (Bonchuk 2015).

One major devastating effect of those boundary conflicts occurrences was several lives were lost, and property destroyed. They both suffered hardship as they could not access their farms for fear of being killed (Uniga 2010). Several homes were destroyed thereby creating severe Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) (Ikpe 2005).

CONCLUSION

From the above, it's obvious and crystal clear that, re-emergence of internal boundary conflicts or disputes in the old upper Cross River region arose from several causes that affected all the sectors of both communities inadvertently. The research has

also shown that the conflict between Mkpani and Nko is traced to the 1930s, majorly triggered by land that is a shift in the boundary.

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