
INTER-COMMUNAL CLASHES AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS OF ALADJA AND OGBE-IJOH BOUNDARY DISPUTE IN DELTA STATE

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ABSTRACT

Communal conflicts constitute serious threat to human security and development. Aside that, communal conflicts have the tendency to be interminable. Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh boundary dispute has escalated to be one of the most violent conflicts in Delta State, Nigeria. It has claimed several innocent lives and property destroyed since the conflict broke out in 1995. While multiple commissions and panels have been established to investigate and recommend solutions, the conflict continues to claim lives, disrupt communities, and perpetuate suffering. In the same vein, several peace accords have been reached and broken by both communities. It is in this light that the paper examined the Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh boundary dispute and provided peaceful ways of resolving the conflict. The paper was based on desk research and relied majorly on secondary sources of data. It adopted Realism theory for its theoretical framework. The paper found that lack of political will to implement the report of the multiple panels, vested interest from both communities against the government efforts in resolving the dispute, and selective acceptance of report by the worrying communities have been the major challenges of resolving the boundary dispute between these communities. The paper therefore recommended that Delta State Government should take immediate action to map and delineate the boundary between Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh communities to forestall further bloodshed.

Keywords: *Boundary dispute, Conflict resolution, Communal conflict, Delta State*

1. Introduction

Communal conflicts over land and boundary disputes are prevalent in Delta State and often escalate into violence. This has also resulted in sequence of reprisal attacks and killings. The escalation of communal tensions and ethnic hostilities could impact on

the dynamics of conflict with wide-ranging socioeconomic, political and security consequences. According to PIND (2023), there has been rising tensions stemming from intercommunal conflicts over land disputes in Delta State. It revealed that the state recorded over 150 fatalities as a result of escalation of communal conflict between 2021 and 2023.

Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh conflict remains one of the recurring violence over land and boundary disputes in Delta State. The over eight-decades-old boundary dispute over a 289.9 hectares land has been the source of intermittent violent confrontation between the communities. Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh are boundary communities that belong to different local government areas in Warri. While Aladja community is Urhobo in Udu Local Government Area, Ogbe-Ijoh community is Ijaw and the headquarters of Warri South-West Local Government Area of the state. Both communities are situated on the bank of the southern part of River Warri and had lived side by side peacefully and interrelated through cross-breed marriages until 1995 when major hostilities broken out. Prior to that, there were low-level skirmishes between the neighbours over the 289.90 hectares of land that divides the two communities. During this period, there also were a series of mediation efforts by traditional and community leaders to manage the boundary dispute (Keme, 2020). The conflict escalated in 1996, leading to loss of lives and destruction of property. Though, the first act of violence was recorded in 1976, the clashes have become more rampant and intensive in the 1990s with sophisticated arms and ammunition freely used (GbaramatuVoice, 2023). Ever since, it has been a circle of clashes between the neighbouring communities, resulting in scores of deaths and destruction of property. Perhaps, one of the devastating consequences of the Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh conflict is the attack and destruction of Diebiri community in 1995. Diebiri, a neighbouring Ijaw community, said to be non-partisan in the boundary dispute was drawn into the conflict, leading to extensive destruction of the community and thousands of people internally displaced, and exiled in neighbouring Batan community. Twenty-nine years later, Diebiri community is still in ruins and un-rebuilt as declared by then Military Sole Administration of the state, Group Captain Ibrahim Kefa. According to Pokun (2016), reconstruction of Diebiri and resettlement of the people must be considered alongside the final resolution of the Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh boundary dispute. Worthy of note is Aladja community is also in land dispute with Diebiri community.

Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh share a common boundary that also separates Udu Local Government Area and Warri South-West Local Government Area of Delta State. The boundary dispute has turned the former brotherly communities into ache enemies since the conflict broke out in 1995. The recurring conflict has claimed several lives,

property destroyed and many residents displaced internally. The conflict has defied several mediation mechanisms by both state and non-state actors, while several peace pacts have been signed between the communities and broken. The questions are; are there persons who don't want the blood-letting between these neighbouring communities to cease? Why and for what purpose?

Consequently, the objectives of the study in the following: examine the historical origin of the boundary dispute; determine why the boundary dispute has persisted; examine mechanisms put in place to resolve the boundary dispute; and, recommend ways how the boundary dispute can be resolved in this area.

To achieve the objectives of this study, the paper has been structured into five sections with section one as introduction. Section two is the literature review which include conceptual clarification, theoretical framework and empirical review. Section three is the methodology. Section four is the findings of the study and section five forms the concluding and policy recommendation of the paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Clarification

Communal Conflict

Communal conflict is the term used to describe conflict that occurs between competing groups within a subnational level. According to Alemika (1992), conflict is a product of antagonistic interest between two or more opposing forces or groups within a society. In the same light, Brosche and Elfveesson, (2012); Brosche, (2015) communal conflict is a conflict between non-state groups that are organized along a shared communal identity. The authors identified three categories of communal conflicts based on their nature and sources:

- i. conflicts arising from local/national elections along ethnic lines;
- ii. conflicts based on resource ownership, especially land; and,
- iii. conflicts arising from indigeneship (indigenes/settlers)

Intercommunal violence includes violent *conflicts* between residents of two villages or communities. Intercommunal conflicts in Nigeria are primarily defined by cultural, ethnic, or religious communities and identities (Pauly, 2022). It may arise over disputes concerning access to scarce resources or political power. Such conflicts may lead to violent warfare between the two or more defined communities that are involved. Okoli and Nnabuihe, (2019), contented that intercommunal conflicts thrive in primordial societies where groups are differentiated along the parochial lines of clan, religion, ethnicity, and caste. Communal conflicts are products of social relations. It involves threat or action of one party directed at a community's rights,

interests or privileges or of another party over economic issues, power or authority, cultural values and beliefs (Essien, 2020).

While communal conflict is defined as any struggle over economic lands, chieftaincy positions and political power in which the aim of the groups in conflicts are to gain the desire goal but also to eliminate, neutralized or injured their rival groups (Ritzer, 2007), Layman (2001) also viewed communal conflict as any disagreement or dispute between two or more inter-ethnic divisions. Furthermore, Coser (1956) postulated that inter-communal conflict is continues tussle over lands, traditional status, political power and limited resources in which the aims of the opposing groups are to destroy and injure their enemies. Carmet (1993) supported this idea that, such conflicts are less amenable to diplomatic intervention as the methods of crisis management and peaceful settlement.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is about how parties to a conflict can come together to find solution to the problem by addressing the root or cause of conflict in such a way that is mutually satisfactory to all parties and change their behaviours to support peace (Best, 2009). Conflict resolution implies that the deep-rooted sources of conflict are addressed, so that the behaviour of the actors in the conflict is changed and they no longer resort to violent, and the structures that support violence are also modified. The process of conflict resolution includes:

- I. awareness of a conflict;
- ii. diagnosing its nature; and,
- iii. applying appropriate strategies in order to:
 - a. Reduce and stop the negative emotional energy involved.
 - b. Enable the disputing parties or persons to understand and resolve their differences.
 - a. Resolve the differences so as to achieve solutions that are not imposed, but address the root causes of the conflict. Conflict resolution strategies include:
 - b. Negotiation
 - c. Mediation
 - d. Adjudication
 - e. Arbitration
 - f. Conciliation

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The paper is anchored on the Realism theory. The Realist theory, also known as the “Classical Realism” or “Neorealism” is rooted in the works of political theorists such

as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes Morgenthau, and Waltz. These scholars believed in the role of self-interest and power politics in shaping international relations (Antunes & Camisao, 2018).

In this context, land-based communal conflicts are often the result of communities seeking to expand their territories or protect their existence land. The Realist perspective posits that communities will pursue their interests through any means necessary, including violence or the use of force. The Realist theory helps us to understand the complex dynamics that drive the Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh boundary dispute and the potential consequences of the conflict on the immediate environment. Both communities are relentless in their pursued of justice and have employed all means at their disposal including the use of political influence and sophisticated weapons to inflict violence on their opponent. In addition, the two communities have also defied all mediation efforts for a peaceful resolution of the boundary dispute because of self-interest.

2.3 Empirical Review

According to Yecho (2006), causes of communal conflicts are dynamic, varied and contextual. Assessing the role of the UN in communal conflict management in Africa, Torbjörnsson (2016) argued that majority of communal conflicts in Africa are over land, the principal source of power and livelihood. Otite and Albert (1999) in their study of communal conflicts in Nigeria reported that claim to land constitutes about 90% of all communal conflicts in Nigeria. In probing the dynamic of conflict in Northern Nigeria, Alimba (2014) identified the major sources of communal conflict as land, boundary, and chieftaincy disputes between contiguous communities in Nigeria. Building on the above, Ikurekong, Udo and Essin (2012) argued that a major cause of communal conflict is 'aggressive resource competition' in the context of ethno-identity struggles. This implies that communal conflict is often informed by intercommunal struggles for ownership, control or access to an economic or political resource. Apart from its economic value, land is seen as an important socio-political and cultural asset. Hence, according to the author, land-based communal conflicts are not always motivated by economic or livelihood concerns, but they are oftentimes motivated by real or misplaced political or cultural concerns.

In its study of communal conflict in Cross River State, PIND (2017) revealed that communal conflicts are driven by competing claims to land by border communities arising from unclear boundary reallocation. Boundary adjustment occurs when new states or local governments are created. In their study of boundary disputes and socioeconomic effects on selected communities of Delta State, Mogborukor, Arisabor and Yusuf (2022) found that inappropriate boundary creation and

population explosion are major drivers of conflict among communities in Delta State, resulting in the loss of lives and properties, and internally displaced persons.

Investigating the role of government and violent communal conflicts, Brosche (2015) argued that conflict persists and becomes violent when there is institutional interference because government has significant influence on both actors and local elite in the conflict. He posits that resolution of communal conflicts is often undermined by biased behaviour of the government. In the same light, Otite and Albert (1999) found that state and non-state actor multi-track collaborative strategy provides the best chances in resolving communal conflict for peace. They argued that state interventions have often failed to resolve conflicts because the government lacks commitment or an understanding of the local context of the conflict. Acknowledging the role of proliferation of firearms in communal conflict, Bevan, 2008; Mkutu, 2008) posited that local conflict are often fueled by the easy availability of small arms in unstable regions, while inappropriate actions by state have often escalated local power balances and caused new grievances.

Causes of Communal Conflicts

The major causes of communal conflicts include:

- i. **Economic:** Most of the population in Nigeria is engaged in subsistence farming and herding/livestock, and there is the need for them to expand their production capacity that will meet their demand. Because of the insufficiency of land for farming and grazing of livestock, and other uses the struggle for land space for survival can easily lead to conflicts between communities. This situation is compounded by the increasing population in most rural communities and worsening climate change that comes with dwindling economic opportunities. Therefore, there is scramble for land and other natural resources for survival that sets communities against one another.
- ii. **Urbanization:** Urbanisation and industrialization most often deprive people of their land. Sometimes communities fight over a piece of land for the purpose of receiving compensation from either the government or company who wants to acquire or develop such land. It also leads to land encroachment and land grabbing, especially by persons of influence.
- iii. **Political:** Struggle for political power/representation arising from perceived exclusion and marginalization is one of the causes of conflict between

communities, especially at the local level during elections. Most times, communities seek to outwit the other, leading to political conflicts.

- iv. Social: Little issues such as religious ceremonies, miscommunication, mistrust, commercial activities and even interpersonal quarrels, etc, can escalate into intercommunal conflict if not carefully managed. This is more so if the communities differ in identity, culture and language.

Effects of Communal Conflicts

Intercommunal conflict results in variegated effects on the people.

- i. Insecurity: Conflicts between the two communities have led to many people killed including women and youths, and several injured as firearms are freely used by the rampaging youths. Some of the injured persons may be permanently incapacitated and may no longer live their full life.
- ii. Loss of property: A lot of farmers and business people have lost their properties during communal conflicts, while some of the properties such as houses, farmlands, and livestocks are either razed, looted or destroyed by rampaging youths, leaving the owners in penury and poverty.
- iii. Population displacement: Many youths, women and children have been displaced physically during communal violence. Physical displacement causes loss of socioeconomic activities in the affected communities as people flee their homes to neighbouring communities for safety. It can also lead to restriction of movement, closure of schools and markets, and causes humanitarian crisis in the affected communities.
- iv. Human rights abuse: Many people, especially women, suffer all forms of abuses with little or no protection during intercommunal conflict. People get tortured; especially women and young girls are subjected to physical and sexual violence like rape.

3. Methodology

The study adopted desk review using qualitative approach. As such the study relied heavily on secondary data from print and electronic sources. The data collected is analyzed using descriptive and content analysis to draw inferences. The choice of qualitative approach is to ensure critical analysis of the data by the researcher.

4. Brief History of Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh Boundary Dispute

Aladja/Ogbe-Ijoh boundary dispute borders on landownership. For over eight decades, the un-demarcated land boundary has been the source of dispute between the two communities. According to Aladja sources, the location where Ogbe-Ijoh settled historically belongs to Aladja community. They claimed Ogbe-Ijoh originally settled in present-day Ogbe-Ijoh market aka Sand-Sand market in Warri riverside. Between 1906 and 1908, the British colonial office in Warri acquired about 450 acres of land belonging to Ogbe-Ijoh in Warri. This led to eviction and displacement of Ogbe-Ijoh people who were subsequently resettled on a piece of land magnanimously offered to them by Aladja community (Oghenesivbe, 2023). They accused Ogbe-Ijoh community of land encroachment and land grabbing.

According to Keme (2020), Ogbe-Ijoh traditionally owned the land where Aladja is settled. He claimed that the natural boundary between Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh is the creek by Delta Steel Company (DSC) as contained in Public Notice No. 28 of 1951 titled 'Nigerian Protectorate and Cameron Order in Council 1946'. This law, according to him, "defined the boundary of the former Urhobo Division and Warri Division (now Udu Local Government Area and Warri South-West Local Government Area, respectively)". Whereas Ovwian is the boundary line between Urhobo Division and Ogbe-Ijoh and Isaba as boundary line in the Warri Division as found in a map of 1955 containing the demarcation known as "Jackson Line" (Okobiebi, 2022). Aladja, they claimed was never mentioned in that law as the community was previously known as 'Ogbe Sobo' or 'Ogbe Buyou' (Urhobo) (Ogbeneganre, 2018). Records showed that Aladja adopted its name in 1955. Why Aladja community chose to change its name is not clear.

Keme (ibid) further revealed that Ogbe-Ijoh between 1988 and 1989 granted separate leases to the then Bendel State Government contained in Gazette No.41, Vol 25 dated July 21, 1988 measuring 169.625 hectares (Industrial layout, Ogbe-Ijoh), Gazette No 13 Vol. 26 dated March 9, 1989 measuring 44 hectares (Navy shooting range, Ogbe-Ijoh) and Gazette No 140 dated 1989.

5. Mediation Mechanisms

Some efforts have been made by the state government and community leaders to mediate between the warring communities.

Orodje of Okpe Committee

The first attempt at mediation was made by some traditional rulers led by the Orodje of Okpe. The traditional rulers on 2nd April, 1995, met with representatives of the two

communities for peace talks. At the end of the mediation, both communities agreed to sheath their sword and refrain from further aggression. Oats were administered to both parties to seal the peace accord and maintain the peace.

Justice Dan Azinge Commission of Inquiry

The Justice Dan Azinge Commission of Inquiry was set up in 1996 by the then military governor, Group Captain Ibrahim Kefas. The panel report was not implemented before the advent of civil rule in 1999.

Chief Tunde Smooth Peace and Reconciliation Committee

The 2008 peace and reconciliation committee took far-reaching decisions to demarcate the boundary between the communities, but his efforts were frustrated. Chief Tunde Smooth is a Warri-based Ijaw businessman.

Justice Franklyn Nwulu Panel of Inquiry

In 2009, Governor Emmanuel Uduaghan, set up the Justice Nwulu panel of inquiry. There was no white paper by the government and the report of the panel of inquiry did not see the light of day.

Prof. Abednego Ekoko Panel of Inquiry

The panel was set up by Governor Ifeanyi Okowa in July 2016. The panel submitted its report to the state government, yet this report remains in limbo.

6. Challenges of Resolving Aladja/Ogbe-Ijoh Boundary Dispute

Lack of political will: The reasons the Aladja/Ogbe-Ijoh boundary dispute has persisted are not far-fetched. From all indication, the Delta State Government has demonstrated ample lack of capacity and political will to implement the reports of the multiple panels set up to look into the conflict over the years. From 1996 to 2016, successive governments have set up three panels of inquiry to resolve the conflict but failed to implement the recommendations of any of them. This lackadaisical attitude of the state government raises salient concerns. Why would a government that set up a panel to address a problem fail to implement the report of its own panel even though it had sufficient time and resources to do so? And whose interest is government serving by avoiding to do what it set out to do? It is on that basis that the two communities have accused the Delta State Government of lack of political will to resolve the conflict by pandering to the other party. The fundamental role of government is to manage and resolve conflict to safeguard the lives and property of the people. In this instance, the Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh boundary dispute has lingered for too long and the government must demonstrate capacity to permanent resolved the conflict.

Vested interests: Both communities have directly and indirectly worked against past efforts by the state government for peaceful demarcation and resolution of the protracted boundary dispute. Due to mutual distrust, the two communities have deployed political capital at their disposal to interfere and frustrate past mediation mechanisms to secure upper hand against their opponent. Certain politicians and persons of influence in both communities have been accused of using their position to influence and frustrate implementation of the recommendations of the panels. These people have been accused of stoking the embers of the recurring conflict for reason(s) best known to them and intimidating the state government from implementing the reports of the panels. Furthermore, the two communities at different points have also accused some members of the panels and those in government of partisanship and biases against their interest. Such toxic behavior not only creates unnecessary suspicion and tension between the communities but also put the government in tight corners. Funnily enough, the military has also not been spared of these accusations. The communities have accused the military and police of intimidation and bias against them in the conflict.

Selective acceptance of reports: Apparently, the conflicting communities have elected to cherry pick the reports of the various panels as each prefers and refers to particular report it deems favourable for implementation. For instance, Aladja community may want the government to implement the report of say panel 2 or 4, while Ogbe-Ijoh community may choose to have the report of say panel 1 or 3 implemented, depending on what each side perceives to be in its favour. Does this make it difficult for government to bite the bullet and forestall these communities from further bloodbath?

The scenario playing out in the lingering Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh boundary dispute is not different from experiences in other parts of Nigeria. Granted, boundary disputes are not easy to settle, yet government's preference to manage land disputes rather than resolve them often gives grounds for recurrence of such conflicts. The Aladja/Ogbe-Ijoh boundary dispute has not only become protracted, it has also led to the loss of several lives and property worth hundreds of millions of naira that could have been avoided had the government done the needful timeously. The lukewarm attitude of government speaks volume and not in tandem with the oath of office the governors swore to uphold. The government of the day must take responsibility for the seemingly irresolvable Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh boundary dispute.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conflict is inevitable and conventional in social relations. However, when conflict is allowed to fester and affect the environment, it may become harder to resolve, and

escalate into violent crisis and war. The timely resolution of conflict is, therefore, required to ensure peace, security and development. The Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh boundary dispute has transformed into a worrisome recurring conflict. Many lives have been lost and properties worth millions of naira destroyed, with several persons displaced over the years. While both communities are to blame for the continued boundary conflict, the Delta State Government has a constitutional mandate to protect the lives and property of the people and the communities involved by finding lasting solution to the conflict. The fact that successive state governments have failed to implement reports of the many panels since 1999 speaks volume, and it's undesirable. That is not how conflicts are resolved.

It becomes imperative; therefore, that Delta State Government must have the political will and act expeditiously to implement the recommendations of the various committees and panels to prevent further bloodshed between the brotherly communities. In doing so, it must be pragmatic and rise above primordial sentiments, and ensure neutrality. Most significantly, the government must prevent further escalation of this conflict from morphing into ethnic conflagration. In that case, the stakes would be too high and too costly not only for the warring communities, but also for the entire state. Consequently, mapping and delineating the boundary between Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh is the only solution to end the conflict for peaceful coexistence. This would require commitment by the state government and collective efforts of all stakeholders.

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