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Beyond Scarcity: Instigators, Sponsors and the Drivers of Communal Violence between the Bassa Komu and Egbura Mozum in Bassa Local Government Area of Kogi State, Nigeria (2017 To 2022).

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Abstract

Scholarship on communal violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt offers a mature account of the causes of conflict, land scarcity, contested indigeneity, colonial administrative legacies and institutional bias, but a much thinner account of who and what converts a latent resource grievance into recurrent violence. This study addresses that gap through a qualitative examination of the conflict between the Bassa Komu and Egbura Mozum communities in Bassa Local Government Area of Kogi State between 2017 and 2022. Adopting Resource Competition Theory and drawing on key informant interviews complemented by documentary sources and analysed through content analysis, the study distinguishes the causes of resource competition from its drivers, and identifies two driver mechanisms. The first is trigger-based escalation, in which symbolically charged events (a court ruling on a disputed fishing pond, the desecration of the Genge masquerade, festival processions and political appointments) reactivate a dormant contest over land, ponds and market access in short and intense cycles. The second is elite instigation and external sponsorship, whereby middle-aged community members, political stakeholders and financially capable elites mobilise and fund youth violence, with respondents reporting arms stockpiling and financing that reaches beyond the local government area. The study argues that the conflict has generated its own constituency of beneficiaries, a localised conflict economy whose participants hold a material interest in its continuation, and concludes that resolution requires not only equitable resource governance but the deliberate demobilisation of those who profit from irresolution.

Keywords: Resource competition, communal conflict, conflict drivers, elite instigation

Introduction

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has repeatedly experienced communal crises with severe consequences for social, economic and political life, and nowhere more so than in the Middle Belt, where competition over land, water, fishing resources and political influence frequently produces violent confrontation (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2019; Okoli & Nnabuihe, 2019). The scholarly study of these conflicts has generated a large and consistent body of causal explanation, locating violence in a recognisable cluster of structural conditions: competition over farmland and water under demographic pressure

(Homer-Dixon, 1999), colonial administrative arrangements that subordinated one group to another, the constitutional distinction between indigene and settler, and adjudicative institutions widely read as partial (Elfversson, 2015). These explanations are correct as far as they go. Their difficulty is that they explain a condition rather than an event.

Structural conditions are, by definition, continuous. Land scarcity in Bassa Local Government Area was as acute in 2019 as in 2017, and colonial administrative arrangements have been constant for generations. Yet the violence they are invoked to explain is not continuous at all: it is episodic, concentrated and separated by long intervals in which the two communities trade, intermarry in some wards and share market space. A framework that accounts only for the standing conditions cannot, on its own, explain why the conflict erupts in one year and lies dormant in the next, nor why particular individuals rather than the aggrieved population at large take up arms. Something converts the condition into the event, and that converting mechanism is what this study calls a driver. The distinction is not merely terminological, for it carries direct consequences for policy: if the conflict is a product of scarcity alone, redistribution is the remedy; if it is also sustained by actors who profit from its continuation, redistribution alone cannot stop it.

The Bassa Komu and the Egbura Mozum have coexisted within the Mozum district of Bassa Local Government Area for generations, with periods of ordinary neighbourliness, but within a relationship structured from the outset by an administrative hierarchy neither group chose. The British colonial practice of merging distinct ethnic groups under single native authorities placed the Bassa Komu within the Igala Division (Clifford, 1944), and the Bassa were subordinated first under the Igala Native Authority and later grouped with the Egbura Mozum. The creation of Bassa Local Government Area institutionalised the arrangement, placing the two communities in permanent competition for a single set of offices, land allocations and titles. Two flashpoints then structure the period under study. In 2015 a court ruling awarded a disputed fishing pond to the Egbura Mozum, and far from settling the matter, the judgment was received by the losing side as proof that adjudication had been captured (P06, P07). In 2017 the Genge masquerade, a ritual identified with Bassa Komu presence and performed on the death of a significant elder, was obstructed and desecrated at Kpanche, and the resulting violence spread across Kpanche, Biroko, Ozugbe and neighbouring settlements (P03, P08; TheCable, 2018; Weekly Trust, 2018). Reprisal killings, arson, the burning of a traditional ruler's palace, the poisoning of fishing ponds and the closure of Sherya market followed, and intermittent violence continued through 2022 (Jimoh, 2018; Tribune Online, 2022). State responses, including judicial commissions of inquiry (ThisDay, 2018), security deployments, the arrest of traditional rulers (The Analyst NG, 2022), and peace accords (Weekly Trust, 2018), have been recurrent and, by the near-unanimous assessment of respondents, ineffective.

Gap

Communal conflict denotes violent confrontation between groups in geographical proximity divided by ethnic, cultural or political difference (Okoli & Nnabuihe, 2019), and studies in Kogi State and neighbouring Taraba State link it to disputes over land, traditional leadership and economic resources (Ibrahim & Ahmed, 2021; Luka, 2017). The Nigerian literature is, however, weighted towards causes and consequences (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2019; Ibrahim & Ahmed, 2021). Resource-based explanations describe a structure without actors (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2019), while the smaller strand on elite manipulation describes actors without a structure (Egwu, 2016; Luka, 2017). Neither, on its own, explains the observed rhythm of Middle Belt violence: long dormancy punctuated by brief, organised and expensive episodes. Akov (2017) makes a related argument for farmer–herder clashes in North Central Nigeria, contending that the resource debate alone offers a narrow reading of such conflict. It is this gap between structure and actors that the present study addresses.

Aim of the Study

This study aims to explain how a long-standing contest over land, fishing ponds, market space and political office between the Bassa Komu and the Egbura Mozum is converted, at particular moments, into organised and recurrent violence. It moves from asking why the two communities compete to asking who and what drives that competition from latent grievance into violence. To do so, the study distinguishes the structural causes of resource competition from its drivers, which are the events, actors and institutional conditions that determine when, between whom and how violently the competition is expressed. The study pursues this aim in Bassa Local Government Area of Kogi State between 2017 and 2022, using Resource Competition Theory as its analytical lens.

Research Questions

The study is guided by one central question: who and what drives resource competition between the Bassa Komu and the Egbura Mozum from latent grievance into recurrent violence? Four sub-questions break the central question into its empirical components:

i. Which resources are contested between the two communities, and how do the communities' claims to them compare?

ii. Which trigger events reactivate the contest, and what function does each serve within the struggle over resources?

iii. Who instigates, mobilises and finances violence, and what material or political interest do these actors have in the conflict continuing?

iv. How do institutional responses, including adjudication, security deployment and peace accords, affect the occurrence and persistence of violence?

Significance of the Bassa Komu–Egbura Mozum Conflict

The conflict merits examination for scholarly, practical and policy reasons. First, the conflict is recurrent but foreseeable, which makes it preventable in principle. Key informants described the conflict as intermittent rather than continuous, reactivated by specific events and then subsiding into an uneasy silence (P02, P07). They also identified the recurring triggers, namely judicial rulings, ritual processions, political appointments and rumour, as largely foreseeable, and one respondent described a period in which everyone knew violence was coming and no one acted (P09). A conflict whose flashpoints can be anticipated is one where early warning and anticipatory response can make a difference, and the case therefore has direct value for peacebuilding practice.

Second, the conflict is one in which both communities lose and neither has a neutral forum for its claims. Respondents from both communities advanced mirrored claims over fishing ponds (P02, P11) and farmland (P04, P10), each side experiencing itself as the rightful and dispossessed party. Both communities also identify the closure of Sherya market as a shared loss. A contest of this kind, in which every party carries costs yet no accepted mechanism can adjudicate between inherited claims, is a demanding test of how Resource Competition Theory explains violence that persists against the interests of most of those involved.

Third, the interviews provide evidence on instigation and sponsorship that the existing literature on communal conflict in Kogi and neighbouring states rarely documents. Two informants, one from each community, independently described a structure in which older, better-resourced actors mobilise and fund younger participants (P11, P12). One of them further reported arms stockpiling, mercenary recruitment and financing from business people in Port Harcourt (P12). If this account is correct, a conflict financed from outside the local government area cannot be settled by an agreement among parties present in Bassa alone, which changes what peacebuilding in this case must address. The study treats these accounts as testimony from participants embedded in a partisan conflict, and it separates the element supported from both sides, that older and wealthier actors mobilise and fund younger ones, from the element that the data do not establish, attribution to one community rather than both.

Fourth, respondents described the institutional response as a central part of the problem. They characterised official action as reactive and performative, arriving only after violence (P01), and reported that a peace accord signed at Oguma collapsed within a month because no committee monitored it (P03). By the near-unanimous assessment of respondents, state responses have been ineffective. This matters beyond Bassa, because

the same pattern of unenforced agreements and weak arbitration is a feature of other communal conflicts in the Middle Belt, so the findings speak to the design of mediation and enforcement arrangements more widely.

Press reports corroborate that the violence has been severe and recurrent, including nine deaths in June 2022 and a palace burnt (Tribune Online, 2022), and 17 people feared dead in October 2018 (Jimoh, 2018).

Contribution of the Study

Theoretical contribution. Scarcity-based accounts of communal conflict have been criticised for offering a narrow reading of violence (Akov, 2017). This study responds by showing that Resource Competition Theory, read as an account of interests rather than of scarcity alone, can explain the drivers of violence without importing a separate framework. A protracted contest over finite assets generates its own constituency of beneficiaries, and that constituency has a material interest in the contest continuing. The study extends the theory in two ways. It shows that symbolic trigger events such as rulings, rituals, processions and appointments are claims advanced within the material contest rather than acts standing apart from it. It also shows that resource competition operates as cause, driver and consequence at once, because violence deepens the scarcity from which the competition arose.

Empirical contribution. The study identifies and documents two driver mechanisms in a single case: trigger-based escalation, and elite instigation with external sponsorship. Drawing on key informant interviews and documentary sources, it specifies the trigger events, the roles of middle-aged mobilisers, community leaders, political patrons and external financiers, and the institutional non-arbitration that makes instigation cheap. It also shows how the accounts of respondents from the two communities converge and diverge on who sponsors violence, and it distinguishes what the data establish from what they do not.

Practical contribution. The study shows that peace in Bassa requires more than equitable resource governance. It also requires identifying and disengaging those who profit from irresolution, together with enforcement capacity that makes instigation costly. The recommendations that follow from this argument cover early warning, mediation, monitored peace accords and rehabilitation of displaced households.

Theoretical Framework

Operational Fit of the Theory in the Bassa Komu–Egbura Mozum Case

Four propositions derived from Resource Competition Theory guide the analysis. First, the contested assets are concrete and identifiable, so that competition can be traced to

specific ponds, farmland, markets and offices. Second, a group that perceives its access to these assets to be encroached upon responds with retaliatory, group-based violence. Third, where a contest becomes protracted, actors positioned to profit from it develop an interest in sustaining it, which locates the drivers of violence among instigators and sponsors. Fourth, where institutions that should arbitrate access are weak or distrusted, disputes over claims become physical rather than legal. Each proposition is linked below to the research question and is tested against the evidence presented in the Findings.

Resources Contested or Controlled

Contested assets are fishing ponds at Biroko and Ozugbe (P02, P11), farmland at Okatakpa and Ozugbe (P04, P10), and Sherya market with the offices that allocate land, contracts and appointments. Each community advances mirrored, unadjudicated claims to these finite assets, making this competition, not aggregate scarcity (Akov, 2017).

Actors Who Seek to Control, Access or Benefit from the Resources

Three groups have a stake: ordinary community members, such as farmers, fisherfolk and displaced persons, seeking livelihood access; leaders and political patrons seeking control over allocation (P11, P12); and mobilisers, financiers and arms suppliers who benefit from the contest itself (P11, P12). Interests widen as contests become protracted.

How Resource Competition Contributes to the Emergence and Escalation of Violence

Violence emerges where access is perceived as unequal and institutions are distrusted, as with the 2015 pond ruling (P06, P07). Triggers, such as rulings, rituals, appointments and rumour (P03, P07, P08), alter claims over assets and provoke retaliation. Violence then closes markets and displaces farmers, deepening scarcity and entrenching claims.

Explaining Instigators and Sponsors through the Theory

Organised violence requires investment, which the theory explains through interest: once a contest is protracted, those positioned to profit sustain it. Mobilisers, financiers, patrons and external backers (Table 3) invest in arms and recruits expecting returns a settlement would end (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Egwu, 2016).

Whether Resource Competition Alone Explains the Conflict

Resource competition is necessary but not sufficient. It interacts with colonial administrative history (Clifford, 1944), political control of offices (P12), identity claims such as the Genge masquerade (P03, P08), and weak, distrusted institutions (P01, P03; Elfversson, 2015), which shape when, between whom and how violently competition is expressed.

Methodology

This study adopts a purely qualitative research design. The study is bounded as a single case within Bassa Local Government Area, covering the most affected communities of Mozum, Oguma, Sherya, Kpanche, Biroko, Ozugbe and Odugbo, over the period 2017 to 2022.

A qualitative design is appropriate because the research question asks who and what converts latent grievance into violence. That question concerns the identity, motives and mobilising practices of actors, the meanings participants attach to trigger events, and the networks through which violence is organised and financed. These are matters of process and interpretation rather than frequency, and they cannot be recovered from standing structural indicators or from official records, which seldom document instigation and sponsorship. Key informant interviews allow participants with direct knowledge to explain how and why events unfolded, while documentary sources allow their accounts to be set against the public record. A single-case design provides the depth needed to trace mechanisms across the period 2017 to 2022 within one local government area, and content analysis offers a systematic way of identifying recurring themes across interviews and documents. The aim is analytic rather than statistical generalisation: the case is used to examine how the mechanisms posited by the theory operate, not to estimate how common they are.

Data were obtained from primary and documentary sources. The primary data were generated through key informant interviews with individuals possessing direct knowledge of the conflict, including traditional and community leaders, two former local government chairmen, youth and women leaders, farmers, fisherfolk and displaced persons drawn from both communities. These were complemented by government reports, judicial panel records, media publications and existing scholarly literature.

Purposive sampling was employed, appropriate where the objective is to identify information-rich cases rather than statistical representativeness, and twelve key informants (aged thirty to seventy) were selected with deliberate attention to ethnic balance.

Content analysis was used to identify recurring themes relating to trigger events, instigation and sponsorship, and institutional response, interpreted through Resource Competition Theory.

Participants are identified by anonymised codes to protect their identity. Given the sensitivity of allegations concerning instigation and financing, no individual named by respondents is identified, and testimonial claims are reported as the accounts of participants embedded in a partisan conflict rather than as independently verified fact.

Findings

The Contested Resource Base

The driver mechanisms operate on concrete assets rather than on scarcity in the abstract. Three categories recur, and in each the two communities advance mirrored claims, so that each side experiences itself as the rightful and dispossessed party with no neutral mechanism to adjudicate between inherited claims, see Table 1.

Table 1. The contested resource base

Asset category	Basis of each community's claim	Illustrative source
Fishing ponds (Biroko, Ozugbe)	Both claim ancestral ownership; each reports seizure by the other	P02, P11
Farmland (Okatakpa, Ozugbe)	One claims title by occupation and development; the other by displacement, not abandonment	P04, P10
Sherya market and offices	Shared infrastructure controlling allocation of land, contracts and appointments	Both communities

Trigger-Based Drivers

Respondents described the conflict as intermittent rather than continuous, reactivated by specific events and then subsiding into an uneasy silence (P02, P07). Read through Resource Competition Theory, the recurring triggers share a common property: each alters, or purports to alter, the standing of a claim over a contested asset. With the exception of rumour, they are also foreseeable, which makes the interval in which respondents locate the failure of intervention, when everyone knew violence was coming and no one acted (P09), an addressable one.

Table 2. Trigger-based drivers and their function within the resource contest

Trigger type	Example in the case	Function within the contest
Judicial ruling	2015 pond judgment for the Egbura Mozum	Formal reallocation of a productive asset; rejected as biased, converting a legal contest into a physical one (P06, P07)
Ritual procession	Genge masquerade desecrated at Kpanche, 2017	Assertion, and denial, of a community's presence in contested space (P03, P08)

Trigger type	Example in the case	Function within the contest
Political appointment	Breakdown of the chairmanship rotation	Reallocation of the offices that distribute land and contracts
Rumour	Recurrent across the period	Ignites violence in an environment of mutual suspicion (P07)

Instigation and Sponsorship

The trigger mechanism explains timing but not organisation. Arson at scale, coordinated reprisals, the poisoning of ponds and sustained displacement require planning, mobilisation and money, and respondents were unambiguous that these are supplied by identifiable actors. Two informants addressed instigation directly and independently, one from each community, and both described a structure in which older, better-resourced actors mobilise and fund younger participants.

Table 3. The instigation and sponsorship structure

Actor or capability	Function	Source
Middle-aged mobilisers	Direct and incite youth cohorts	P11
Community leaders and elite financiers	Fund violence without participating	P11, P12
Political patrons ("people in government")	Keep communal boundaries salient for positional gain	P12
External and diaspora backers (Port Harcourt)	Finance the conflict from beyond the local government area	P12
Arms stockpiling (Biroko) and mercenary recruitment	Supply the means of coordinated violence	P12

The single most significant detail is that the financing reaches business people in Port Harcourt (P12), hundreds of kilometres away: a conflict financed from that distance

cannot be resolved by an agreement concluded in Oguma among parties present in Oguma.

The Attribution Problem

The two accounts differ in a way that correlates with the ethnic position of the respondent. The Egbura Mozum informant (P11) identifies instigators by generation and role without assigning ethnicity; the Bassa Komu informant (P12) attributes financing, arms and mercenary recruitment specifically to the Egbura. The second account is more detailed and more actionable, but also more partisan. The convergent element, that older and wealthier actors mobilise and fund younger participants, is supported from both sides and does not depend on either respondent's partisanship; the divergent element, attribution to one community rather than both, is not established by the data and is not asserted here. Given the symmetry evident elsewhere, the prior expectation is that mobilisation structures exist on both sides. The policy implication is unaffected: whether the conflict economy is one-sided or mutual, disengaging instigators does not require prior determination of which community is more culpable.

The Constituency of Beneficiaries

Read as an account of interests, these findings identify a mechanism the causal literature misses. Arms are purchased, combatants contracted, political positions consolidated around communal mobilisation, and distant commercial networks sustained, each an investment implying a return that a settlement would extinguish. This is the dynamic Collier and Hoeffler (2004) identify at national scale and Egwu (2016) at the scale of rural banditry; the Bassa case shows it operating at communal scale, within a single local government area. The conflict has thus outgrown its origins: it began as a contest over ponds, farmland and office, and now also sustains a small constituency for whom the contest is itself the asset, which explains its persistence despite the suffering of the great majority on both sides.

Institutional Non-Arbitration

Respondents described the institutional environment as uniformly permissive: responses were reactive and performative, present only after violence (P01), and a peace accord signed at Oguma collapsed within a month because no committee monitored it (P03). Non-arbitration makes trigger events dangerous, since a ruling or a procession produces violence where no institution is trusted to give agreement effect; non-enforcement makes instigation cheap, since where no investigation follows an episode, arms stockpiling,

mercenary recruitment and financing carry no legal risk. This pattern is consistent with evidence that governments seldom act as neutral arbiters in communal conflicts and that their interventions reflect strategic interests as well as the need to provide security (Elfversson, 2015). The absence of consequence is therefore not a failure running alongside the conflict economy but the condition that makes it viable.

Discussion

Causes and Drivers

The findings support the analytical separation with which the study began. The structural conditions are continuous across the period, whereas the violence is not; what varies is the occurrence of trigger events and the activity of instigators, and it is variation in these drivers that tracks variation in violence. A study designed to identify causes recovers causes, because they are true and because they are what participants offer when asked why the conflict exists; the driver layer surfaces only when the question is posed in terms of who mobilises, who pays and who benefits.

Fit of Resource Competition Theory with the Findings

These findings support Resource Competition theory while extending it. Read as an account of interests rather than of scarcity alone, the theory reaches the driver layer without supplementation: once a contest becomes protracted, the contest itself is evaluated as an asset by those positioned to profit from it, and a constituency of beneficiaries forms whose members are structurally opposed to settlement.

Resource Competition as Cause, Driver and Consequence

The recursive structure the findings disclose reinforces the point. Historical exclusion created the resource imbalance; triggers and instigation converted it into recurrent violence; and the violence produced closed markets, abandoned farmland and displacement, deepening the scarcity from which the competition arose. Resource competition thus functions simultaneously as cause, active driver and consequence, each cycle leaving the contested base smaller and the claims upon it more entrenched.

Conclusion

The study set out to answer not why resource competition exists between the Bassa Komu and Egbura Mozum, but who and what converts it into recurrent violence. Two driver mechanisms were identified: trigger-based escalation, which reactivates a dormant contest through events that function as claims upon contested assets, and elite instigation and external sponsorship, which supply the organisation, financing and armament that

convert grievance into coordinated violence. The theoretical contribution is to show that the resource competition theory, read as an account of interests, accommodates both without supplementation, because a protracted contest over finite assets generates its own constituency of beneficiaries. The practical consequence is that peace in Bassa cannot be built on resource governance alone, necessary though that is; it requires the deliberate identification and disengagement of those who profit from irresolution, and enforcement capacity sufficient to make instigation costly. Until the conflict ceases to be profitable for those who organise it, agreements will continue to be signed and broken within the month.

Recommendations

1. Government should establish an independent boundary and resource management commission, with defined membership from both communities and published terms, to resolve the disputes over fishing ponds, farmland and market access, treating the reopening and protection of Sherya market as a priority given its identification by both communities as a shared loss.

2. A local early warning and anticipatory response arrangement should be created, oriented to the foreseeable triggers of judicial rulings, ritual processions and political appointments, and empowered to convene both communities before rather than after such events.

3. The instigation and financing structure should be mapped and addressed directly, with arms holdings treated as a security matter and the external dimension of financing acknowledged as beyond the reach of any purely local agreement.

4. Every future peace accord should specify a monitoring committee, a reporting schedule, a named responsible office and a review point, and its terms should be published within the communities, so that agreements are enforced rather than merely signed.

5. Neutral mediation capacity should be built through the sustained involvement of independent and non-governmental bodies, so that the communities are not left dependent on a state whose impartiality both sides doubt.

6. Economic rehabilitation and resettlement support should be provided to displaced persons and affected households, both as relief and as a means of reducing the material desperation on which youth mobilisation draws.

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