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Sins of the Father: The Danger and Futility of Trans-Generational Conflicts in Nigeria

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Abstract

Many of Nigeria's conflicts are recurrent and trans-generational. The youth often inherit conflicts without truly understanding the root causes or any other perspectives. They are often overly sensitive when dealing with people from certain ethnic groups because of perceived or real wrongs that their ancestors committed and passed down prejudices. As a result, conflicts often continue without any of the active participants really remembering what they are fighting for, and minor misunderstandings that would ordinarily have been resolved amicably sometimes escalate into major violent conflicts because of perceived sensitivities. Some examples include the Ife/Modakeke; Aguleri/Umuleri; and the Tiv/Jukun conflicts. This paper examines some of the most serious communal conflicts that have occurred in Nigeria's recent history as well as the Nigerian civil war. It attempts to identify the root causes of the conflicts. It then attempts to deduce the attitude of young people from the opposing communities as well as opposing sides in the civil war to the conflicts and to each other. The paper highlights the root causes of these conflicts in a bid to assess their relevance in the 21st century Nigeria. An examination of current sentiments reveals whether or not the particular conflicts are accorded due or undue attention. The effect of the attitude of the youth to these conflicts is also examined. Finally, new dynamics to these "old" conflicts are assessed as well as implications for conflict resolution efforts.

Keywords: Nigeria, trans-generational, communal, recurrent, root causes, ethnic, resolution



Introduction

Nigeria has been described as an "...amalgamation of ethnic groups pitched against each other in a jostle for power and resources..." (Agbigboa, 2013, p. 10). This description is in a bid to explain the reason for many protracted communal conflicts in the country. Postulations such as the ones that point to colonial manipulations assert that the frequency of conflict in Nigeria may be attributable to the fact that the country was an *artificial creation*. Similar *artificially created* states like Cameroon and Mali also suffer from protracted conflicts along the pre-colonial ethnic lines. The Tuaregs have fought for years since the colonial division of their people across five countries. They continue to fight, most notably in Mali, for recognition (Lecocq & Klute, 2013). In Cameroon, the Anglophones continue to protest their perceived suppression in the current state with Ambazonia (Anglophone Cameroon) even declaring independence in October 2017 (Okereke, 2018). These studies often highlight aspects of perceived maltreatment of the aggrieved without necessarily assessing transgenerational dynamics.

Horizontal inequalities, the unequitable distribution of economic and political resources at the state and local level based on cultural orientation has been identified as the main reason for protracted conflicts such the Aguleri/Umuleri and the Ife/Modakeke conflicts. However, some of the proponents of this theory admit that there are contextual variables as well such as memories of previous violent conflicts and perceptions as to personality that each party has about the other (Onwuzuruigbo, 2011). The horizontal inequalities argument does not also explain why there are cases where such inequalities exist but where there is relative peace.

Many of Nigeria's conflicts are recurrent and trans-generational in nature. Studies of the causes of conflict in Nigeria list factors such as resource scarcity/control; revenue allocation; indigene/settler issues; farmer/herder conflicts; ethnicity; religion and land tussles as major sources of conflict in the country. Few, if any, address these causes from the perspective of how the dynamics have changed over the years or how much of a role the sentiments from possibly earliest manifestations play in more recent manifestations. Thus, the transgenerational nature and transmission of perceptions is often downplayed.

The youth often continue in conflict because they are taught never to trust people because of history however perceived even by the *teacher*. Many of these conflicts, some of which have precolonial influences, are rooted in the pursuit of physiological and security level needs by people that live in circumstances that should be different from those existing in Nigeria today. However, because of transferred sentiments, the youth are trying to hold on to perceptions that they never personally formed. As a result, they are vulnerable to manipulations and propaganda. Unless this trend is arrested, there is little hope for sustained peace especially in communities with fractured histories. This piece attempts an examination of circumstances that existed at the earliest manifestations of old conflicts, the root causes as well as how they were resolved in some cases. It then attempts a discussion of the effects of these conflicts on perceptions of young people today. It concludes that there is a need for concerted efforts towards reforming perceptions for there to be sustainable peace.

The Nigerian Civil War

Perhaps the military coup of January 1966 could be identified as a convenient "root cause" of the Nigerian civil war even though the coup itself had its own root causes. The main aim of the coup was "...



to establish a strong, united, and prosperous nation, free from corruption and strife..." (Nzeogwu, 2003, p. 126; Obasanjo, 1987, p. 97) and Nigeria's enemies were identified to include "political profiteers, ...[men]that seek bribes, ...those that seek to keep the country divided permanently, ...the tribalists, the nepotists..." (Nzeogwu, 2003, p. 127; Obasanjo, 1987, p. 99).

While the coup was considered to have failed substantially, the overthrow of the erstwhile government had been applauded by most Nigerians at first. By July of the same year however, the coup had been dubbed the *Ibo Coup* and continues to be referred to as such and the plotters were reduced to mere criminals. The perception of northern Nigerians was that the aim of the coup plotters had been to eliminate the northern elite. Interestingly, it has been suggested that the first insinuations of tribal motives for the coup were made by the British press and that they had their own motives for doing this (Nzeogwu, 2003; Ezeigbo, 1991). In any case, in May of the same year, riots preceded other ugly incidents including the counter-coup of July and the subsequent massacre of eastern Nigerians in the north and other parts of the country.

The federal government was unable to curtail the massacre of easterners in the north (Gould, 2012). This fact, and their placing an economic embargo on the east aroused feelings of oppression in eastern Nigeria and gave rise to agitations for secession led by the government of eastern Nigeria. On January 4-5, 1967, the military leaders of the regions met at Aburi, Ghana to agree on a way forward. It appeared that they had reached an agreement, but they failed to follow through due to disparities in interpretation by the parties (Gould, 2012). The federal government reneged on several aspects of the Aburi Agreement. As a result, on May 30, 1967, the eastern region (Biafra) seceded from Nigeria. On July 6, 1967, the federal government declared war on Biafra and thus began the Civil War.

Biafra alienated itself from the rest of Nigeria and even invaded the mid-west in August 1967. Propaganda promulgated by the two sides served to deepen the tribal infused wedge between the two factions (Ezeigbo, 1991). By the time the war ended in 1970, seemingly irreversible damage had been done to the relationship between the eastern region (Biafra) and the rest of Nigeria even as the region was re-integrated into Nigeria.

The Umuleri and Aguleri Conflict

This conflict between two neighboring communities of the same tribe in Anambra state of Nigeria could be traced back to the 1920s. The subject of the conflict is Otuocha, land that lies on the left bank of the Anambra River. It is connected to the north-east by the Emu Stream, Aguleri and in the south-west by the Akor River, Umuleri (Nwabisi & Umuleri v. Idigo; Another on behalf of Aguleri, 1959). Both communities acknowledged the other's lineage from Eri. The issue, as regards cultural history, was that each claimed direct, and therefore, stronger heritage over the other (Obiakor, 2016).

Otuocha's geographical advantage made it a preferred choice for trade and settlement of colonial missionaries and businesses. The land had allegedly been bought by the Royal Niger Company from Umuleri in 1898 and transferred to the Crown in 1916. At the same time, Aguleri claimed to have sold a part of the land to the Catholic Mission in 1894 (Nwabisi & Ors v. Idigo; Ors, 1959).

The British sought to control land ownership in the community, and this caused a shift from communal towards individual land ownership. This resulted in a tussle for Otuocha land between the British and other settlers as well as the Aguleri and Umuleri communities (Onwuzurigbo, 2011).



Of the two communities, Aguleri accepted Christianity first and so its citizens began to profit from access to education and other amenities. This formed the basis for what some have described as horizontal inequalities which served to heighten conflict. The Aguleri people were able to take employment within the colonial native administration and in 1910, Idigo, an Aguleri man, was appointed Warrant Chief. His area of jurisdiction included Aguleri, Umuleri and Otuocha. By the 1920s, when colonial authorities started to revert back to quasi-communal ownership of land (quasi, because control vested in Warrant Chiefs and other colonial-administration created leaders rather than the communities), Idigo became very powerful and was able to use his influence to accord advantage to his kinsmen in Otuocha land transactions. The Umuleri people took legal action against him in 1933 over Otuocha land transactions but were not successful. The same year also recorded one of the first serious incidents of violent conflict between the two communities (Onwuzuruigbo, 2011).

In 1950, the Crown abandoned all rights and title to Otuocha and this triggered conflict between the two communities as to which community the title would revert to. The Umuleri people instituted an action originally in the Native Court and later in the Supreme Court (the Privy Council), over ownership of the land. The action failed, even on appeal. In 1964, Chinwuba, an Aguleri man who represented both communities at the eastern region house of assembly, officially changed the name from "Otuocha" to "Otuocha Aguleri" (Onwuzurigbo, 2011). Violent conflict ensued and the people of Umuleri instituted legal action against the act. The government withdrew the gazette that made the announcement (Obiakor, 2016). It is important to note that there were several court actions involving the two parties, mostly instituted by the Umuleri people and while the courts mostly found that the land did not belong to them, they did not assert that it belonged to the Aguleri people either (Nwabisi & Ors v. Idigo; Ors, 1959).

For a long time, Aguleri people enjoyed dominance in the region and were able to effectively exclude Umuleri from political processes. Their moves sometimes led to violent protests by the Umuleri people. Thus, the two communities were in conflict from the 1920s with isolated incidents giving rise to major conflicts because of historical sentiments. In 1995, in the wake of already existing conflicts regarding an attempt by Aguleri to carry out development projects on land that was subject to dispute between the two communities, an Umuleri man sought to develop land that he had bought from a fellow Umuleri man, but who had, in turn, bought it from an Aguleri man. Aguleri youths attacked the builders and Umuleri. This resulted in major violent conflict. Security agencies had to wade in to control the situation. The state government mandated a judicial commission of enquiry to investigate the conflict. Their report indicted, Edozie, an Aguleri man with family ties to Umuleri and then chairman of the Anambra local government Caretaker Commission. He was blamed for the mismanagement of the fallout. When he died in 1999, Umuleri youth saw a chance to revenge and they did so by attacking during a vigil that was held in his honor (Onwuzurigbo, 2011; Obiakor, 2016). The ensuing conflict raised the scale of the conflict to a full-blown war.

The 1999 conflict was so serious that even the then President Olusegun Obasanjo visited the region and urged the communities to settle peacefully. Toward the end of 1999, the Aguleri Representative Council and Umuleri General Assembly reached an agreement to end the violent conflict (Aguleri-Umuleri Peace Accord). They agreed, inter alia, to divide Otuocha between the two communities (Oseremen & Majekodunmi, 2017). In 2004, a Peace Committee was inaugurated that consisted of members from both communities and they proceeded to divide the land. Even though, Umuleri pulled out of the Committee in 2010, relative peace returned to the region (Okafor, 2016).



The Ife and Modakeke Conflict

This is one of the oldest communal conflicts in Nigeria. Ile-Ife and Modakeke are neighboring communities in Osun state of Nigeria. There had been mass migration to Ile Ife from all over the Yoruba kingdom, especially Ibadan, Oyo state, after the Yoruba inter-tribal wars and the fall of the Oyo kingdom in the 19th century (Olayiwola, 2010; Asiyanbola, 2010). The then Ooni of Ife, Odunlabiojo created Modakeke to accommodate these displaced persons. At first, the relationship between the two communities was good and more people moved to the area and even entered into a different settlement arrangement with another Ooni (traditional ruler of Ife), Abeweila. The people of Ife started to feel their political power might be threatened by these new settlers. It is alleged that this led them to attack the Modakekes between 1835 and 1849 after the death of Abeweila (Olayinwola & Okorie, 2010; Asiyanbola, 2010).

In 1835, an Ife man, Chief Okunade who had become very influential in Ibadan was expelled from Ibadan and later killed because the locals were beginning to see him as a threat. The Oyo people took over Ibadan and excluded the Ifes. This annoyed them and in retaliation, they attacked the Modakekes. In the Ibadan/Ekitiparapos conflict, the Ifes and Modakekes fought with opposing sides. The Ifes were defeated in both conflicts (Olayinwola & Okorie, 2010; Asiyanbola, 2010). This did not help already fragile relations with their Modakeke neighbors.

In 1980, the Modakekes held a ceremony to raise money for the community. The then Ooni posited that as Modakeke was part of Ife, they had no right to raise funds separately. The Modakakes started at this point to ask for a separate local government council. The Ifes felt that as immigrants, the Modakekes should not get their own council. New local government councils were created in 1981 and again in 1996 but each time, the Modakekes were placed under Ife. This led to violent conflicts between the two communities. The most recent serious escalation of this conflict occurred in 2000.

The Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo (South-South Region of Nigeria) Conflict

The Ijaws are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. However, today, because they are spread across six states, they are minorities in all the states. In colonial times, Ijaws from the west were notorious pirates and this made them unpopular with their Itsekiri neighbors (Ikime, 1967; Ukiwo, 2007). The Itsekiri also had geographical and economic advantage over the western Ijaw and this made their region more susceptible to colonial presence (Ikime, 1967; Ukiwo, 2007). In 1927, both the Ijaw and the Urhobo rioted against the Itsekiri dominance of colonial native administration. It did not help that the then paramount ruler of Warri, Chief Numa referred to himself as the paramount ruler of the Isekiri, Urhobo and Ijaw as did his successor Chief Ginuwa II. In 1932, western Ijaw became fully absorbed into the colony (Ikime, 1967; Ukiwo, 2007).

From the 1920s, the Ijaws made several pleas for separation from the Itsekiris. The colonial administration did not think it would be practicable for various reasons: economical, geographical, and historical. They admitted that the Ijaws were marginalized and underdeveloped (Ikime, p. 75) but refused to grant their request for separation. In 1951, when the then governor of the western region, Awolowo, allowed the Itsekiri to change the title of "Olu of Itsekiri" to "Olu of Warri", the Ijaws felt insulted and worried about possible implications for their status in the community. Even the Urhobos were offended and attacked Itsekiris as well as refused to trade with them, and rejected their legal processes (Ikime,



1967). The arrival of the international oil companies in the 1960s made the tussle over Warri even more intense. The Itsekiris dominated the political space in Warri at all levels amidst protests from the Ijaw up till independence in 1960 and after. They dominated in the local government chairmanship of Warri local government after its creation in 1976 (Ukiwo, 2007).

The Ijaws continued to ask to be separated from the Itsekiris but administration after administration refused. At some point, they were transferred to other local government areas but seeing this as abandonment of the fight over Warri and fearing that they would again be marginalized and cut off from social development, they asked to be returned to Warri local government area and they were (Ukiwo, 2007).

In 1991, new local government areas were created but the government again refused to give Ijaws a separate local government area. In 1995, the then Delta state governor created a new Warri south local government area with headquarters in Ogbe-Ijoh, an Ijaw community but months after, in 1996, the federal government issued a decree stating that the new local government area was Warri southwest and that the headquarters would be in Ogidigben, an Itsekiri community. The Ijaws saw this as a further manifestation of their marginalization, and conflict erupted between them and the Itsekiri. This caused general unrest amongst Warri's three ethnic groups: Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo and insecurity in the region. The unrest and insecurity resulted in the disruption of petroleum activities which in turn had negative effect on the country's economy. The military were deployed to the region (Ukiwo, 2007; Edevbie, 200).

The Tiv and Jukun Conflict

Before Nigeria was created, the Tiv, Jukun, Idoma, Bassa, Gbagyi and other ethnic groups of north central Nigeria already had relations and as a result had somewhat, each, been influenced by the other in terms of culture and even language (Maiyaki, 2014). They lived together in relative peace. Some of these ethnic groups had a centralized structure such as the Jukun while others had a de-centralized structure such as the Tiv (Awe, 1999). Both ethnic groups are predominantly farmers (Aluaigba, 2009).

The conflict between the Tiv and the Jukun is one of the oldest and most violent ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. The series of violent clashes have allegedly been caused by: land disputes, politics, and indigene/settler issues with land being a major factor. The Tiv moved constantly in search of fertile land and there was mass migration of Tivs into the Wukari area of Taraba State. This was a problem for the native Jukun especially as yam, a major crop for the Tiv had negative effects on soil where it is grown and renders it useless for many years. The Tiv, therefore, moved to new land, often to the annoyance of their "accommodating" neighbors (Aluaigba, 2009).

The earliest sign of political trouble was in 1956 when a Tiv man, Tangur Gaza, defeated a Jukun man, Mallam Ibrahim Sangari in the house of representatives' elections for Wukari. The Jukun became apprehensive of the fact that Tiv, whom they considered foreigners, might constitute a political threat. The first manifestation of the conflict was in 1959 in Wukari before the national elections. Beneath the political motive of this conflict appeared to lie, pent-up frustrations of the Tiv against the colonial authority structure - its oppression of the Tiv during colonial rule and the complicity of the Jukun. Also, in the first republic, the Tiv and Jukun supported opposing parties (Aluaigba, 2009).

In 1990, violent conflict erupted between these ethnic groups and while some were of the opinion





that land disputes were the cause, others also feel that the Jukun used the opportunity to attempt to address Wukari local government area politics. In 2001, violence erupted again between the two groups. The immediate cause of the conflict was a fight between a Tiv farmer and Fulani cattle herdsmen. The military were deployed to Taraba and Benue States to restore peace.

The Danger and Futility of Trans-Generational Conflicts in Nigeria

The communal conflicts discussed above all have roots in pre-colonial times. They are all rooted in tussles over land, political relevance, and indigene/settler status. While some of these issues remain relevant today in the relevant communities, their level of relevance and, more importantly, youth consciousness of the issues are largely affected by the narratives they have heard about the root cause and historic manifestations. As is evident from the discussion above, there are often conflicting "facts" to each conflict and people could be influenced based on what version they believe which is often the version that is more sympathetic to their particular tribe.

In a 2009 study, Asiyanbola (2009) attempted an answer to the question: *How is past violent crisis recollected and passed on to the next generation?* He concentrated on the Ife-Modakeke crisis and found that while most of those questioned (90.3%) had witnessed at least one episode of the crisis personally, more than 79% had heard about the conflict before they became adults. Asiyanbola's study also revealed that while the communities are at relative peace, as they were at the time of the study, significant sections of the population still harbored resentment or distrust towards the other community. This was based on their reaction to questions about inter-marriage. Going by reactions to online news items, similar results would be obtained if the study was conducted on any of the other communities from the communal conflicts discussed above. This is unfortunate, Chief E. K. Clark, a prominent Ijaw leader, declares saying that: "...a majority of the Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri, who are suffering today, do not understand why we are fighting and what we are fighting for... Enough is enough (Ofogbor, 2004).

Nigerian youth often take advantage of ethnic and communal conflicts as an opportunity to "revenge" on a society that excludes them from effective political participation; does not provide them with social amenities; and "refuses" to address their employment and source of livelihood concerns. In the same vein, politicians often take advantage of inter-communal sentiments to incite youth to participate in violent conflict for their political gains. The informal passing on of "history" of communal conflicts makes this easier.

As regards the Civil War, the situation is further complicated by the intensity of the propaganda on both sides before, during and after the war. The fact that specifics of the civil war do not form part of the history curriculum in either primary or secondary schools is dangerous. Most people have heard snippets of accounts of the events leading up to the civil war and the war itself. These snippets are often what makes youth more susceptible to narratives such as those of secessionist movements such as MASSOB and IPOB on the one hand, and other anti-Igbo groups on the other. While this is not an attempt to discuss the merit or otherwise of the position of either group, it is dangerous that the youth are not armed with factual and non-partisan narratives that would enable them to make more informed decisions. This makes them extremely vulnerable to manipulations by those who may distort or "alter" facts to suit their purposes.

Conclusion



Most of the communities discussed above are not currently in active conflict. However, there are flare-ups occasionally. The role of trans-generational narratives in how quickly simple "conflict" situations escalate should not be ignored. While the government should continue to strive to provide amenities and employment for the youth, it is also necessary that narratives are "corrected" or, at least, "formalized" so that when the inevitable conflicts occur, they can be managed better. The government should also look into recommendations of committees and other bodies that have been mandated with resolving particular conflicts in the past, assess their practicability and implement them where possible or commission new enquiries. It is imperative that conflict management processes are transparent. It is also important that the youth know their history so that they do not rely on information that may be manipulated. It is important that history is taught to young ones to give them stronger foundation of Nigerian and communal history and make them less vulnerable to propaganda.

There is need to address all Nigeria's protracted conflicts in detail and conduct studies as to transmission of history to future generations and the formative influence of these transmissions on them. An attempt should be made to extract honest accounts of all conflicts. Apologies might need to be made and wounds and memories need to be healed for Nigeria to move on.

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