INTRA-ETHNIC CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE IN EBIRA LAND

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CHAPTER TEN

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Introduction

Recent studies in ethnic relations in Nigeria have revealed that intra-ethnic differences and sub-ethnic identities are as mobilized as ethnic and inter-ethnic differences with implications for violent outcomes. This form of conflict has increasingly become the focus of several academic studies (Nnoli 1998; Otite and Albert 1999; Ibeanu and Onu, 2001. As an ethnic group, the Ebira Tao people of Kogi State can be said to be a homogenous group, marked out by a fairly distinct language, a similar culture an a myth of common origin. However, incessant violent conflict within the Ebira group has assumed such a frightening dimension. Some consequences of the intermittent violent outbreak include loss of lives and property, social tension, disruption of family and communal life, general atmosphere of mistrust and as well as violent conflicts have involved use of dangerous and sophisticated weapons together with access to drugs and assorted light weapons, the use of poisonous substances cocaine inclusive, and gun running. Most disturbing of the delinquent youth gangs disposed towards aggressive behavior have emerged all over the land.

Sub-ethnic identity among the Ebira Tao group dates back to the origin of the settlement now known as Ebiraland. The people define their sub-ethnic groups by such primordial categories as clan. The construction of clan identity in Ebiraland is increasingly been fostered as the basis for the allocation of political offices and ascension to traditional offices. This form of identity is therefore, is becoming increasingly mobilized in the struggle for power and social positions among the Ebira. Over the years, clan-based differences have provided the basis for conflict and violence. Among others, the Adavi Eba communal clashes of 1997, the violence between Ozumi and Idoji street in 2001, and the Ihima/Adavi Eba crisis in 2002, are important examples. In addition, it is
also on record that none of the celebrations of the annual Ekuechi festival has been devoid of violence since 1979.

However, efforts to engage in a systematic study of violence in Ebiraland run into difficulty given the dearth of research on contemporary Ebira history and politics. The study, therefore, relied essentially on content analysis of media reports in newspapers and magazines, complimented largely with in-depth interviews carried out with leading actors in the chains of conflict and violence, opinion leaders, religious leaders and the leadership of women, youth and trade union organizations.

For the purpose of this chapter, account of conflict in Ebiraland will focus on the colonial and the postcolonial periods. The change in the institutions of governance within these two periods and their impact on the organization of the social life and conflict is extensively discussed. The chapter also examines the overall impact of the crisis of the Nigerian state on politics and society among the Ebira, and how it relates to the dynamics of intra-ethnic violence. However, conflict in Ebiraland has always been changing in form and character; while some have political undertone, others take the form of intra-religious conflicts. Yet, others manifest in the form of street fighting among youth gangs and violence between different clans during cultural festivals.

The chapter discusses the implications of these various forms of conflict, not only on the organization of social and political life, but also the formal and non-formal intervention strategies that have been deployed to contain the spate of conflict in Ebiraland.

**On Identity Politics, State and Ethnic Conflict**

Historical and global studies suggest that violent conflict is a common feature of social life, which occur not only in periods of decay and decline of society but also in periods of blossoming and healthy growth. (Dahl, 1991:64). As Nader suggests, the three major structural levels at which most conflicts occur include intra family, intra community and inter community (Cited in Otite and Albert, 1996:8). A plural society as typified by Nigeria often provides important laboratory for the production of knowledge
in the area of conflict studies given the diverse nature of their population. This acquires more significance because of the struggle for access to a variety of limited resources which could include chieftaincy position, power and status, grassland, markets, water spots for animals, rival claims to land, government policies and leadership of political parties among others (Otite and Albert, 1999:3; Osaghae et al. 2001:11). More often than not, the negative mobilization of such identities as ethnicity, religion, language and race in the pursuit of access to the limited resources further fuels conflict and violence.

What this suggests is that identities are increasingly being mobilized in competitive situation to secure access to those things to which individuals and or groups attach value. As source of meaning and experience, identity possesses attributes that make bearers of certain identities susceptible to mobilization, as it becomes a rallying force and organizing principles for social actions (Castells, 1997:6). However, as Jega (2002:36), contends, identity consciousness in itself and its varied forms - ethnic, religious, communal, gender, labor and youth - not major problems in plural societies, but become problematic when they are negatively mobilized and use as platform on which socio-political action is organized in the struggle for access to scarce resources by various competing groups. For this reason, identity becomes a construction of social actors. The real issue, as Castells (1997:7), therefore contends, is to determine how, from what, by whom and for what the identity is constructed.

The state has also been involved in identity construction. The Nigerian state as is the case with all pos-colonial states has become crisis ridden as it has largely failed to meet and satisfy the yearnings of its people. According to Jega (2002:36) capitalist rent seeking, patrimonialism and prebedalism have been identified as the major characteristics of the post-colonial Nigeria state. Some people refer to the Nigeria state as a “rogue state”. The state controls the economic resources in the society and the fierce contest for state control result in the mobilization of ethnic/religious identities. While the state resorts to politics of its legitimation, those excluded from access to state resources, resorts to identity politics to contest this exclusion. Jega (2002:36) contends that the state thus became projected as the critical variable in identity transformation, and the resurgence of identity politics. Given this situation,
elite contestation for political power to capture the state is characterized by cutthroat competition in which sentiment is mobilized; ethno-religious and communal identities are negatively massaged and manipulated so as to achieve selfish objectives.

The role of the post-colonial Nigeria state in the mobilization of identity consciousness has its root in the colonial state. In furthering the objective of the colonial regime to subject the indigenous Nigerian communities to imperial control and incorporation into the world capitalist system, the colonial states where convenient, constructed identities which were consciously mobilized to create divisions, which fragmented colonial societies. This was to prevent a strong opposition to the colonial state. According to Jega (1994), some colonial policies were in furtherance of this objective. Specifically, the colonial state created ‘settler’ and ‘indigenous communities’; the North, South and Eastern divide among Nigerians to weaken opposition from otherwise independent communities.

The changes in the structure of traditional authority during the colonial regime played a key role in fostering identity politics. According to Vaughan (1991:309), in the pursuit of their imperial interest, the British colonial administrators manipulated traditional authority and even invented new ones in most so-called ‘pagan’ communities where a hierarchical command of administrations was not in existence. Vaughan (1999:310) contends that chiefs in colonial Nigeria collaborated with the colonial administrators to become the main repository of indigenous political and legal authority within the native authority and native court structures. The traditional rulers thus emerged as key instruments in the advancement of colonial objectives in Nigeria. The major fallout of this development is the complete destruction of the existing political structures of authority. This was more pronounced where centralized traditional structures were forced on erstwhile republican communities. More often than not, the traditional instruments for exercising social control such as the masquerade institutions were weakened. The modern state structures were instituted and functioned by force using colonial institutions of control such as the native police and the native courts. Vaughan (1999:310) said, in the attempt to mobilize the mass support, the emerging ethno-regional political classes coopted the traditional rulers who are closest to the grass roots in furthering their interests in the post-independent
period. The traditional rulers became key instruments in the mobilization of primordial sentiments thus fanning identity politics. This series was demonstrated in Ibeanu and Onu’s (2001) assessment of the mobilization of the Igbo identity after independence.

Further to this, Vaughn (1999:311) contends that the effect of the harsh reality of state formation in post-colonial Africa is that the apparatus of governance has began to crumble before it has been fully consolidated. The economic crisis now prevalent in African state has further compounded the crisis of political authority. These development may have accentuated the reliance of the political elite and local dwellers on traditional institutions and practices. The apparent limitation of modern state structures to exercise effective participation and control at the grassroots have inevitably enhanced the status of paramount chiefs who are still relied upon by the state to ensure mass support and control.

The various studies of ethnic/religious conflicts focus on inter ethnic and intra and inter religious conflict. Studies on ethnic conflict specifically focus on conflicts between ethnic groups. The Academic Association Peace Works, in its study of community conflicts (Otite and Albert (ed) 1999) conducted eight ethnographic studies of community conflicts in Nigeria one of the studies examined an intra-ethnic conflict. Intra ethnic conflicts, where they occur, could be as primordial and as violent with devastating consequences as other forms of conflict. According to Ibeanu & Onu (2001:36), violent conflict among sub-ethnic identities are often over looked mainly on the assumption that inter ethnic conflicts result from externalized action built on internal unity of ethnic groups or rather a cohesion or sense of unity among ethnic groups which are galvanized into action against other groups thus burying the difference which really exists within given ethnic groups. For example, the divergent and opposing class interests within a given ethnic group is subsumed when an ethnic group acts politically as a social force as emphasis are placed on those factors which unifies its members namely that they belong to the same ethnic group.

Difference constructed for the purpose of political mobilization within ethnic groups is replete in studies on ethnic conflict. As already indicated, conflict among the Somali clans led to the dismemberment of the Somali nation and destroyed the Somali
state (Nnoli 1998:1) Nnoli also documented the violent conflict within the Yoruba Ethnic group as it occurred among the Egba, Ijebu, Ekiti, Ondo and Ibadan. Ibeanu and Onu (2001:36) contend that although the Igbo ethnic group predominantly inhabits the South East of Nigeria, intra-ethnic conflicts are more frequent than conflict between the Igbo’s and other ethnic groups in the south East. A growing attachment to sub-ethnic identities as clans has resulted in violent conflicts and strained relationships within the Igbo as witnessed by increasing differentiation between the Wawa and other Igbo ethnic groups and the Ado or Edo and the Onitsha Vs other Igbo identity. There was also the violent conflict between the Aguleri and the Umuleri sub-Igbo groups. Akinteye (1999) also examined a classic study of intra-ethnic conflict among the Yoruba using the Igbo Ora conflict as a case study. Studying sub-ethnic conflict and its devastating consequence has become imperative to generate relevant knowledge and to proffer actionable programmes to contain it. As Osaghae et al (2001) and Otite (1993), clearly underscore the existence of ethnic difference is a necessary but not sufficient condition for conflict, and that despite the prevalence of conflict in inter-group relations, there are generally some political, economic and social ties that unite members of different ethnic groups in a plural society. Where these linkages come into competition with those of local or statewide sentiment, the solidarity nature of intimate group loyalties is likely to take precedence over other claims.

**History and Identity Transformation Among the Ebira**

Local legend traces the origin of the Ebira to Yemen in the Middle East from where they settled in the Kwararafa kingdom. They later migrated from the Kwararafa Kingdom with other groups such as the Jukun, Idoma, Tiv, Angas, Igala and Igarra ethnic groups (Salami 2002, Sani 1997, Enesi 1996), referred to in colonial records as ‘pagan’ tribes. The Ebira group moved from Kwararafa Kingdom and finally settled at Opete before spreading around the surrounding hills of Opete; but after sojourning in Wukari, Apoto and Idah. The leader of Ebira group was believed to have settled at Opete while his five sons settled in groups around Opete. These areas of settlement include Eika, Okchi, Adavi, Okengwe and Ihima. The grandchildren of Ataji Ebira define the clan in Ebiraland while his great-grandchildren constitute the sub clans, which are well
documented (Enesi 1996:6; Kokori, 1997:65). The groups of families that settled in the different locations constituted the clans. One reason advanced for the several migration of Ebira group was their refusal to be subjected to any form of overbearing authority and tyrannical rule. As an ethnic group, the Ebira Tao people speak a common language, have a common culture and myth of common descent. They also occupy a common territory which they regard as a homeland thus fitting into the definition of an ethnic group (Osaghae, 2002).

However, in the cause of migration, the Ebira group settled at different places thus becoming dispersed across ethnic boundaries. There thus exist the Ebira Tao or Ebira Ehi located in Kogi State; the Ebira Igu or Ebira Koto also in Kogi, the Ebira Agatu in Benue State; the Ebira Umasha and the Ebira Oje or Ebira Toto in Benue State (Sani, 1997; Jibo et al, 2001). The highest concentration of the Ebira is in Kogi State where, according to the 1991 census they have a population of 721,932. The group is found in four local government areas: Okene, Okehi, Adavi, and Ajaokuta.

Prior to the advent of British colonization, the Ebira had evolved a system of traditional administration. Each clan in Ebira Tao land was led by a clan chief who was usually the eldest male in the clan. The clan chief had different titles that differentiate them from one another. Each clan chief was completely independent and none was subordinate to the other (Committee Report, 1997:3; Ibrahim, 2000). Above the clan chiefs, the spiritual leaders and the warlords, the Ebira people share a strong belief in a superior being, the ancestor of the Ebira people whose spirit is represented on earth by the “Eku” masquerade. At Eika, there exists the Ebira ancestral temple (Iregba) from where spiritual contact was maintained with the Ebira Tao ancestor.

This temple according to Ibrahim (2000:16), was the highest place of authority where laws and vital decisions concerning the entire land were taken. The temple was also the medium for the masquerades to rise. Lineage temples which cover the affairs of a group of clans with one immediate ancestor also exist to disseminate laws emanating from the ancestral temple and settle matters that may arise within such groups. The masquerades were therefore a major instrument of social control in Ebira land as they meted out punishment to offenders (Temple: 1965:156; Ado Ibrahim 2002).
The Ebira Tao group came under colonial rule between 1902 and 1903, though not without some resistance, which was forcefully brought under control with the superior weapons of the invading colonial forces. In 1902 when the colonial forces entered Ebiraland, they met a loose form of administration under the leadership of the clan chiefs. In all the five units of settlement, the clan chief was advised by a council of elders, which co-opted members to fill vacancies as they occurred. Given this organized form of republican setting, the British could not immediately foster a single rulership system on the people which was necessary to facilitate tax collection and general administration of the area.

Despite the favourable disposition of the colonial administration to have in place a central chief for the Ebira, the ‘natives’ could not reach agreement on a central chief from among the clan heads as none was ready to concede superiority to the other. However, the series of wars with foreign forces such as Nupe and the Fulani had produced several war lords in Ebira land who, although were subordinate to the clan chiefs, had powers which towered over those of clan chiefs. The warlords were economically empowered as they controlled trade in human merchandise with intense rivalry among them. They include Owudah Adidi, Omadivi, Abanika and Agidi of Ukako. Uwudah Adidi who was resident in Kabba when the British forces occupied the town was appointed the first white man’s chief from Ebira land (Ibrahim 2002:35). The other warlords who sought to establish contact with the British did so through the new chief. Agidi who had been a major rival of Omadivi opposed British rule and was subdued by British forces when it marched into Okene in March 1904 (Ibrahim 2000:35), while Omadivi accepted the colonial invaders and even accommodated them (Salami, 2002). Consequently, he was recognized as Chief of Okene, while the other units of Ebira land remained under the headship of the clan chiefs. Thereafter, Omadivi sought to ascend to the headship of his clan, Ozomi of Agada of the Ogu sub clan. When he was denied the title he took the title of his maternal family who were of Igala stock – Atta – while becoming the head of Eda sub-clan. Having risen to such a position, Omadivi used his grandson, Ibraham, to liaise with the colonial administrators which enabled him to served in various capacities as a cook, messenger and a tax scribe in the colonial administration. In these capacities,
Ibrahima, whose mother who was the daughter of Omadivi, an enterprising woman who traded in British goods, traveled extensively with colonial officials.

On the death of Omadivi in January 1917, the British were more favourably disposed to the idea of creating a chief for the entire Ebira land as opposed to chiefs who presided over the different units. The colonial administration favoured the candidature of Ibrahima as the district head of the Ebira land. Consequently, Adano who was appointed in place Omadivi was removed in November of the same year on allegations of bribery, paving the way for Ibrahima to emerge as district head of Ebira land. His appointment was met with a strong opposition by the different clans, as the tradition of the elders taking over headship position had been breached. They were further irked by the fact that the Ebira leader emerged from a matricidal background. To sustain his control and grip over the turbulent subjects, the colonial administration gave Attah Ibrahima who chose to use his grand father’s title of Atta tremendous powers to subdue any uprising. Under the native authority system operated by the colonial administration, the chief was known as the chief in council. As the sole native authority his decision overrides council decisions. The chief also controlled the native courts and the native treasury. Ibrahima thus wielded tremendous powers to suppress the resentment of the Ebira people on his ascension to the throne. Two clan chiefs were arrested and the third fled the town to escape arrest. People who had no connection with the clan chiefs were appointed to take over their positions (Sani 1997:33). Given these circumstances, there were occasions when the people openly resisted Attah Ibrahima’s rule between 1917-1953.

The Ebira people revolted against the tax collection method adopted by the Attah in 1922. They also resisted the deployment of the Ebira people to work on the Eastern Nigerian Railway line in Idomaland (Enesi, 1996:11). In 1923, the Attah was accused of being behind the disappearance of the clan chief of Ihima. In 1924, there was massive revolt against the Attah and subsequent events led to his suspension from office. He was later reinstated in December of that year. In 1925, people from Obangede and Ihima revolted against tax payments and the Attah had to disguise himself to save his life. In 1926 there was conflict between Attah and the custodians of masquerades for violating the masquerade law. Yet, the colonial administration promoted Attah to the post of 2nd Class status amidst strong opposition from his opponents. The change in the colonial
native administrative system in 1952 gave the opposition the opportunity to openly challenge the authority of the Attah. The chief in council system in operation which gave the chief tremendous powers was replaced by the chief and council system. The chief therefore no longer enjoyed veto powers over native authority members who were now elected.

Interestingly, the democratization process produced two dominant political parties in Ebira land. They included the Igbirra Tribal Union (ITU) which consisted of those opposed to Attah’s regime and the Northern People’s Congress which consisted of the kinsmen, friends and loyalist of the Attah. The traders and the ex-service men with the support of the Catholic Church mounted pressure on the Native Authority by challenging the authority of the Attah. The ITU won overwhelming majority of the first election into the Native Authority in 1952 and the federal election in 1954. The Governor of the then Northern Region, Bryan Sharwood Smith, forced the Attah to resign giving the strong opposition to his rule. On 30th June the Attah announced his decision to retire and left the Division for a house at Dekina.

The strained relationship between the ITU and NPC were exacerbated as each party was determined to get a man of its own choosing appointed chief of Ebiraland, leading to the introduction of thuggery, arson and other forms of violence into the body politics of the land. The masquerade institution became instrument of violence as masquerades were divided along party lines. The struggle for position of authority within the colonial administrative structure was highly coveted and fiercely sought after by contending groups of Ebira land, especially the war lords and the clan chiefs. The sideling of the clan as the source of authority encouraged its use as a factor for identity mobilization. But it was the appointment of Attah Ibrahima as a warrant chief on an erstwhile republican community and its implication for existing system of power relations and undermined the unity of the Ebira as a people.

**Sub-Ethnic Identity and Violence in Ebiraland.**

Mamdani (2001:2) contends that the institutional legacy of colonialism is at the root of conflicts in post-colonial societies in Africa. In particular, the Native Authority system patterned to suit the diverse ethnic groups was authoritarian and divorced from
the African traditional system of governance. The colonial administrative system had the least respect for the different levels of authority in the traditional authority system, which in Ebira land, was devolved around the male family heads, clan chiefs and the chief priests. The colonial authority structure therefore did not respect the age-long patriarchal nature of the people, in addition to the independent and revered positions of the clan chiefs. The imposition of the centralized system of governance on an erstwhile republican community, therefore, had the implication of precipitating incessant violence in the community. In addition, the appointment of a warrant chief with wide powers under the Native Authority system undermined the traditional process for the selection of a leader in the community.

The implication of this development was the apparent divorce of the people from, not only the new authority structure, but also the modality for filling vacant positions within the new structure became problematic. Vaughan’s (1991:311) point that the modern state structure is incapable of ensuring control at the grassroots is quite apt considering the impact of colonization on political life in Ebiraland. Furthermore, the failure of the state to meet its socio-economic obligations to the people has encouraged the fostering of primordial identities by contending elite groups in the desperate struggle for power and resources.

However, the struggle over chieftaincy and local power structures has been one important basis for intra-ethnic conflict in Ebiraland. More than any other factor, this has precipitated the chains of conflict and violence. For two years after Attah’s resignation as chief of Ebira land, the elected Native Authority ruled the land as there was no laid down rules for the appointment of a paramount ruler. According to Abdul (1997-67), 368 representatives made up of elected councilors, ward heads and two representatives (which included the clan heads), from the eight districts in Ebira land were constituted into a committee to select a new paramount ruler for Ebira land. Sani Omolori, a leading member of the opposition group won with a vote of 342 and was appointed Ohinoyi on 1 June 1952.

This change in the traditional system of administration, in the context of division in the society, which was the fallout of the tussle for paramount stool, had implications for the maintenance of law and order in the community for several reasons. One, the
democratization process and the reforms of the NA in 1954 altered the power base of the new rulership. During the reign of Attah Ibrahim, for instance, as sole Native Authority, he appointed ward heads for different districts who were directly responsible to him. But under the chief and council NA system, the appointment of ward heads was politicized and they became government appointees who were no longer directly responsible to the paramount ruler. Two, the traditional belief among the people in the powers of the chief priest and masquerades as representatives of the ancestors on earth was demystified after the revolution against the Attah. The chief priests and other respected clan chiefs constituted the power base to the traditional ruler. The changes in traditional authority, and, in the culture and belief system weakened the traditional authority system. The Ohinoyi could no longer exercise decisive control over the community due to the reduction in the powers of chiefs and the sharp division in the community, which culminated in constant criticism by the supporters of the Attah. Furthermore, the children of Attah occupied powerful position in the public and private sectors, and they maintained a strong and sustained opposition to the rule of Ohinoyi.

At the time of the death of Sani Omolori in 1996, the Ebira community was yet to evolve an acceptable model for ascension to the throne of the paramount ruler. It therefore provided room for clan identities were mobilized in the struggle for ascension to the throne. Before the creation of Kogi State in 1991, a committee on chieftaincy affairs set up by the Kwara State Government to evolve an acceptable method for the ascension to the throne of paramount ruler of Ebiraland, had recommended the principle of rotation among the different clans in Ebira land. It recommended that Ihima District produce the next Ohinoyi. Again, following the creation of Kogi State, the government on the death of Sani Omolori, set up a committee to work out the modality for ascension to the throne of Ohinoyi. The committee was made up of three representatives from each of the five traditional districts. The submissions form the different districts gave an insight into deep rooted desire of the different clans to ascend the throne to which each laid equal claims.

Submissions from the Attah family, however, insisted that there are two ruling houses in Ebira land: the Omadivi Ruling House that produced the first Attah Omadivi and the Iyebe Ruling house, the house of Atta Ibrahima Onoruoiza (Committee Report
The submission claimed that since Attah Ibrahima was the last paramount ruler from the Attah family, it was the turn of Omadivi ruling house to produce the next Attah. However, the committee’s submissions to government rejected the claim that there exist a ruling House in Ebira land. Rather, the committee upheld the reports of colonial administration which submitted that the Attah title was only an exotic title adopted by Omadivi, and that there was no ruling house prior to the advent of colonial rule. The committee therefore, recommended that the principle of rotation among the five traditional districts be adopted. It also recommended that the rotation should follow this order: Ihima, Eika, Eganyi, Adavi and Okengwe.

Despite government’s rejection of the recommendation of the Committee Report, it objected to the appointment of a new ruler first from Ihima. Its position was premised on its “strong desire to afford all eligible sons of Ebiraland equal opportunity to ascend the throne of Ohinoyi of Ebira land. Government, however, accepted the principle of rotation of the stool of Ohinoyi among the five traditional Districts in Ebira land, while accepting at the same time the adoption of the title of Ohinoyi for the paramount ruler. It was Ado Ibrahim, son of Attah Ibrahima who emerged as Ohinoyi under the new government guidelines. His appointment, however, became a matter of litigation as clans who claimed they had not been fairly treated sought justice in law courts. Although the government approved the title of the paramount ruler as Ohinoyi of Ebiraland, Ado Ibrahim chose to adopt the title of Ohinoyi of Ebira land and Attah the III.

Not unexpectedly, the emergence of Ado Ibrahim as Ohinoyi created a deep division between the Ohinoyi’s supporters on the one hand, and clan members and some powerful individuals in the community on the other who were against the appointment. The overall consequence is the weakening of the traditional authority of the Ohinoyi, precisely because he does not enjoy the overwhelming support of his subjects. Furthermore, there is the tendency of clan chiefs to owe their allegiance to the state government, rather than the Ohinoyi. It is plausible to argue that incidences of violence during cultural festivities and political party activities in Ebiraland have their roots in the rivalry among the opposing groups on the issue of the paramount ruler.
Democratization Process and Violence in Ebiraland

It is well known that the Nigerian state plays a leading role in the development process on the account of the vast resources it controls. The implication is that the state becomes a coveted prize to be won at all cost by the various class fractions that create divisions in the society. In Ebiraland, the appeal to sub-ethnic differences by politicians and elites canvassing for votes and seeking public office became pronounced in the Second Republic. The process associated with democratization such as the party system and elections provide a congenial atmosphere for the negative manipulation of these sub-ethnic identities.

There was a general consensus among persons interviewed that violence which characterizes electoral politics in Ebiraland today has its origin in the 1950s. Then, the struggle for control of the NA between the ITU and the NPC/IPU resulted into violence in which both parties engaged the youths to perpetrate violence. The ITU had the ‘Boma’ boys while the NPC youth groups were known as the ‘Cowboys’. While the use of guns by organized youth was not common practice, masquerades and traditional singers became divided along party lines leading to during the celebration of cultural festivities. The old divide between the ITU and the NPC was again manifested in the politics of the second Republic (1979-1983). A significant number of those who were strong opponents of the Attah and the NPC joined the Great Nigeria People’s Party (GNPP), while the NPC supporter aligned forces with the National Party of Nigeria (NPN).

Indeed, it was in the second Republic that another dimension was introduced into party politics in Ebira land with the increased political mobilization of sub-ethnic identities. For instance, in the fierce contest for power between Adamu Attah (a son of Ibrahima Atta) and Obatemi Usman for a seat into the Constituent Assembly in 1977, Obatemi Usman lost to Adamu Atta and resorted to appeal to the sentiments of his Oziogu clan, and accusing the Aniku sub-clan of Adavi to which Attah belonged, of occupying most of the public offices in Ebira land. Beginning from the second Republic politics in 1979, the zoning of the public office along clan line increasingly became entrenched in the body politics of Ebiraland.

In 1990, the Aniku sub clan of Adavi produced the Chairman for Adavi local Government area. The next elected Chairman was from the Uhami sub clan of Adavi,
while in 1999 the chairmanship position was zoned to Ezuka. In the 2003 political dispensation, the position of Chairman was zoned to the Adieka sub clan. In Okene Local Government area, public office is often rotated between Okene and Okengwe district. Contest for public office is usually between the Agada and Okovi and their subclans. Ihima district on its part rotated positions in public office between the subclans of Eika and Ihima district. Elective positions into the state and federal offices are zoned and rotated among the different district. Regular meetings of clan are now intensified thus fostering sub-ethnic consciousness among the people. Disputes that may arise between contestants for public office within a sub clan is minimal as the views of clan heads are usually respected. The clan heads play a decisive role in who is put forward to contest for an office zoned to the group.

The politicization of the position of clan heads has a negative effect on the entire community as the struggle for such position is fiercely fought, resulting in violent conflicts as has occurred between the Upopuvete and Aniku sub-clans of Adavi local government. The panel set up by the Kogi state government in 1997 to determine the causes of the conflicts revealed that politicians from the three major sub-clans that contested for the vacant stool of the clan chief (Asema of Upopuvete) engaged in deft manoeuvres and manipulations. in the area wanted his own choice as occupant of the stool. The tendency for political alignments to occur along clan line has therefore made it convenient for politicians to manipulate clan sentiments in furtherance of their narrow ambitions. The consequence is that, inter-clan conflict which was hitherto unknown among the Ebirra has become a recurring problem as exemplified in the recurring violent conflict between Okengwe and Ihima districts, and Adavi Eba and Okengwe districts.

The problem of politicization of clan identities is not limited to competition for local power. Masquerades and singers who hitherto entertained during cultural festivals are aligned with the different political parties thus turning such festivals into an arena of conflict and violence. This became more rampant in the second Republic when contest for power between political parties resulted into violence in which unemployed youths were recruited as political thugs. This pattern of violence fueled by the political mobilization of clan identities has become entrenched in the current democratic
Cultural Festivals as Instrument for Violence in Ebira Land

A notable feature of the social life of the Ebira people is the celebration of cultural festivals characterized by displays of masquerades. It is at festivals that masquerades and the ‘Ikede’ singers play their roles as agents of social change and control in the community. They sing in praise of achievers and condemn those whose activities are considered inimical to the peace, progress and development of the community. Prior to 1979, masquerade institution was controlled largely by farmers and the rural folks, and festivals were arranged to coincide with periods when farming activities were at low ebb. Because masquerades were considered as the representatives of the ancestors’ spirits on earth, a masquerade could only evolve following the death of a powerful clan elder or clan chief. Although it was predominantly controlled by the men, spiritually and economically empowered women also founded masquerades. However, the masquerade institution was clearly identified with specific households or individuals who were held responsible for any violence during festivals.

During the colonial dispensation, masquerades and singers were requested to apply for permit before any outing, with a guarantor who was held responsible for breach of peace. To a large extent, masquerades continued to play the same traditional social functions that were ingrained by Ebira culture and tradition. This however, changed over time as a result of a combination of factors such as the politicization of clan identities, and the process of democratization associated with the struggle for independence and first Republic which followed. One implication is the denigration of cultural festivities in Ebira land as masquerade became divided along party lines (ITU/NPC) in the 1950s. The increasing sense of attachment to clan beginning from 1979 therefore had the effect of dividing prominent masquerades along clan lines. A case in point is the Achewuru masquerades which the support of the Omoye clan and Okeverse which had the support of Oziogus clan.

Thus, rather the situation in which support for masquerades transcended the cleavage of the clan, the experience of the second Republic showed that the rivalry between
politicians from Oziogu clans and those of other clans was reflected in the pattern of support for the two prominent masquerades. Cultural festivals also became avenues for castigating rival clans and political opponents. The rivalry between the two masquerades became intensified with the demise of previous masquerade leaders as Avokuta from Omoye clan took over from Achewuru while Arijenu from Oziogu clan took the place of Okevere. Not surprisingly, the partisan divide in Ebiraland in the second Republic between the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) also provided the basis of division among the masquerades as each political party financed the activities of rival masquerades and providing political protection for those that perpetrated violence.

In order to protect their interest, supporters and fans of the different masquerades formed clubs to advance their interest. To ensure the protection of the leading masquerades against arrests for violent crimes, the followers created masquerades that were not backed by guarantors who could be liable for offences of masquerades. For example, the Avokuta members founded ‘Idu’ while the Arijenu group founded ‘Agugu’. Many of the community elders interviewed lament the present situation in which masquerades are used to unleash terror on perceived opponents during cultural festivals, and consider strange the prevailing situation in which a masquerade emerges from “abara” (household) whose head could be held responsible the violent conduct of masquerades. The increasing trend for the masquerade institution to be controlled by young gangs as instrument of unleashing terror and fomenting troubles forced successive governments in both Kwara and Kogi states to enact laws banning the celebration of Echame festival, for instance.

Government efforts have however failed to stem the tide of violence associated with the activities of masquerades, because the youths have persistently defied the ban orders. For example, seven days after the Edict No. 8 came into effect in 1995, the police in Okehi local government could not stop some youths in Ihima who featured in masquerade-related violence. A week after the Ihima episode, Okene commenced celebration of Echeahana festivals which ended in violent conflicts between Idoji and Idozumi quarters. Violent conflicts also marked the celebration of (the new yam) Echeori
festivals in 2002 when Echeori celebrants from Ihima extended the celebration into Adavi-Eba, which historically is not in the boundary within which ‘Echeon’ is celebrated.

The prominent role played by the youths in the circles of violence in Ebiraland is attributable to a number of factors. The paramount rulers of Ebiraland, for example, have attributed youth involvement in violence to manipulation by some powerful community leaders (Otu 1995:11; Ado Ibrahim 2002), although the manipulation theory can hardly account for all the cases. Many of those interviewed blame the anger among youths occasioned by high level of unemployment as the basis of conflict and violence. It was established in the course of our investigation that most of the youths including those that had been arrested in connection with thuggery either dropped out of schools or/and are unemployed. According to Usman (Interview, 2002), youth perpetrators of violence are unemployed and hungry, and out of desperation, constitute themselves into groups referred to as ‘Aduvusu’ (I’m ready to die) or ‘Ozomateyisu’ (one cannot hide from death). They tend to be more violent under the cover of masquerades.

The strong link between unemployment and youth violence is supported by the views of many of the respondents who argue that violent conflict in Ebiraland was at its lowest ebb between 1980-1985 when the Ajaokuta steel project was at its peak and provided employment to a large number of youths from Ebiraland. Violent crime therefore becomes the means, not only for expressing the crisis of youth identity, but also for acquiring additional sources of power in the forms of charms and amulets. The phenomenon of unemployment has been worsened by the negative impact of the structural adjustment programme and other key elements of the economic reform policies. However, not to be ignored is the increasing polarization between the elders and the youth in Ebiraland, with the latter blaming the woes of the land on the former, and insisting on having a greater say in the leadership arrangement of the society. In the view of one of the persons interviewed, there is a growing discontent among the youths on the role of Elders in the society who the youths blame for the lack of basic infrastructural facilities and employment opportunities in the area. The youth insist on taking over power form the politicians by getting their candidates fielded to contest elections into public office by creating youth organizations such as the People’s Initiative Foundation and the Ebira Youth Congress (EYC).
Recommendations and Conclusion

One major finding of this study is that in the struggle to gain access to local power structures including the position of the paramount rulership, the Ohinoyi, provides an arena of elite manipulation in which the community is divided along clan lines, and masquerades and youths, unleash violence on unsuspecting persons. The large pool of unemployed, able-bodied and hungry young men is thus exploited for political gains. The study, therefore, brings into bold relief, the limited capability of state institutions to think through, and implement appropriate policies that can address the social malaise. The chains of violent conflicts have impacted negatively on the socio-economic organization of Ebiraland. The victims of violence are mainly the women and the children; several women turned widows with added responsibilities of children upbringing in addition to industrious women having their wares destroyed when properties and markets are torched by irate youths groups. Furthermore, intermittent violent conflicts in Ebiraland have the implication of socializing youths into a culture of violence and other forms of delinquent behaviours.

The negative impact of incessant violence in a community calls for concerted efforts at the levels of the state and community to reverse the present ugly trends. At the level of the state, the completion of the Ajaokuta Steel Complex and the question of good governance should be made priorities. As the study clearly show, escalation of violence in Ebira land associated with masquerades and youth has coincided with the down turn of the Nigerian economy and the crisis that hit the Ajaokuta Steel Complex which hitherto was a source of employment for a large number of people. Government therefore needs to address the numerous challenges of the steel company by taking a leading role in revamping it and putting it to productive use. Similarly, both state and local governments can go along way in addressing the problem of unemployment and rural decay by instituting transparent, open and accountable system of rule. Also to be addressed is the intractable issue of citizenship in which membership of the local ethnic community is the basis of access to citizenship rights provided in the Nigerian Constitution. It is a key issue in youth violence in Ebiraland, as thousands of Ebira farmers who have been forced by
the difficult terrain of Ebiraland to settle in neighbouring states of Ondo, Ekiti and Edo states send their children back home to receive their education. Such children who are denied parental care and mentoring often used as cannon fodders in the course of violent conflict. Government has additional role to play in stemming the tide of youth violence. In this sense, there is an urgent need to put emphasis on technical and vocational education instead of the present emphasis on secondary education which does not address issues of self-employment and wealth generation outside of public sector employment.

Despite the tendency for clan identity to be mobilized as basis of conflict, it is possible to use the sense of solidarity fostered by clan identities as the framework for mobilizing resources and promoting development as was the case in pre-colonial Ebiraland when clans offered annual sacrifices to ancestors to address communal problems and seek blessings from the ancestors. There is also the need to emphasize informal and traditional approaches to conflict management and peace-building such as to ensure the empowerment of local communities and institutions in the management of conflict.

It is hoped that a combination of these suggested policies and the deepening of the on-going processes of democratization would create the window of opportunity to reverse the present trend in Ebiraland. It is only then that it possible to overcome the long term effect of colonization which re-organized Ebiraland in such a way that it could fit into the quest for law and order supportive of the larger imperial interest of Britain in Nigeria, while at the same time dealing with opportunistic mobilization of clan difference by the post-colonial ruling elites and the political class.
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