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Goe-Political Conflicts and Economic Spill Over in Warri since the Post Colonial Era

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Abstract

Warri is a city that has witnessed ethnic conflicts especially since the 1950s. The ethnic conflicts in Warri among the various ethnic groups of Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw attained a high level of continuing tension that Warri has come to be an example of a society that is persistently in a state of crisis. Although it is true that ethnic conflicts are inevitable in a multi-ethnic society like Warri, and while it is also true that such conflicts do have some functional consequences, ethnic conflicts could equally be very destructive. This paper examine inter-ethnic relation and violence in Warri and discusses the various factors that were responsible for the rise of violent ethnic conflicts in Warri. It will equally discuss the implications of such violent ethnic conflicts in the city which include economic spill-over many oil multinational companies left Warri to neighbouring peaceful environment. Small and medium scale business also left the city as a result of the ethnic conflict and this left the city in economic ruin even after peace was restored. The paper recommended inter-ethnic harmony among the warring groups so as to attract investment back to the city. It also call for government investment in the economic life of the city. The paper adopt the historical method which analyze and interpret historical data.

Keyword: Violence, Intergroup relations, Conflict, peaceful coexistence, Ethnic group, Crisis.

I. Introduction

Warri is located in the present day Delta State and is the home of Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw ethnic group. Warri was part of what was formerly known as Warri Division which is now made up of Warri South West, Warri North and Warri South Local Government Area. Warri is not the capital of Delta State but it is the most prominent and fast growing Urban area in the state, just as Lagos was the former capital of Nigeria so was Warri the former Headquarters of the old Delta province which changed into Delta State, Warri since the creation of Delta State in 1992 has ceased to be the political capital of the state, but has maintained her position as the commercial center and the main industrial area of state (Imobighe, 2002).The Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw ethnic group of Warri had not lived in isolation. Available evidence suggest that there were interaction among them and this interaction was characterized by close socio-economic and political contact. The Urhobo, Iteskiri and Ijaw have interacted with each other through trade contact and marriages before the coming of the Europeans. In the post-independence era their relationship was characterized by mutual distrust and suspicion which sometimes led to open violent conflict.

II. Historical Background and Indigenous Groups

Warri like other cities is made up of different ethnic groups and with their own distinct culture and languages, this groups include Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw. They have interacted with each other for a long time before the colonial era. Warri in the North Western Niger Delta is located between latitudes 5^0 30 N and 5^0 31N and between longitudes 5^0 41E and 5^0 44E. It is located about 64 kilometers from the Bight of Benin. Its location on Warri River is the highest point of navigation for ocean going vessels (Ifediora, 2012).The type of soil is mainly low and sedimentary, sand in most part of the Niger Delta, more than clay are found in the lowest laying swam land. Warri is mainly under the influence of the South West wind and a true harmattan season is very rare, Warri experience rainfall all year round with November to March as driest month, July and September have heaviest rains. The nature of the environment encourage specialization in occupation among the indigenous people. The Urhobo in the main land took to farming in the pre-colonial and colonial period. The Ijaw and Itsekiri on the other

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hand which were at the water terrain took to fishing and salt making, the occupational specialization encourage the growth of market and market centers.

III. The Urhobo

The Urhobo in Warri were divided into two namely, the Agbarha Urhobo and OkereUrhobo. The Agbarha-Ame people came fromAgbarha-Oto and they founded their present territory in the 13th century, during that period they farm in the Warri Township. The Agbarha people are made up of seven kingdoms in the present Warri Township and they include Ogunu, Opukuti, Okurode-Urhobo, Oteghale, Igbudu, Edjeba and Agbassa. Agbarha is use as a name for both to cover the seven towns and is also use to refer to one of the units (Otite, 2011). The neighbors of Agbarha includes Uvwie, Udu, Itsekiri, Ogbe-Ijaw and Okere –Urhobo. According to the 1991 population census the Agbarha people had an estimation of 18000 and they were grouped under Warri South Local Government Area.The Agbarha-Urhobo have an annual festival popularly called Agbassa Juju, it is held around May/April every two years and it cut across all their settlement. The Agbassa Juju festival is celebrated in honor of a warrior Deity called Owhurie (Pages and Pictures, 1997).

The Okere-Urhobo on the other hand were believed to have migrated from Okpara in Olumu clan, the founders of Okere settled near the Okere River and there are still found there to this day. Okere is one of the Urhobo group found in Warri town, their neighbors include the Urhobo of Uvwie. The Urhobo of Agbarha, Itsekiri and Ijaw. The ancestors of Okere namely Idama, Ohwotemu and Sohwruvwe came from Okpara Olumu and their common ancestors were later joined by other relatives who were accommodated

The three descendants have produce other quarters or descent group called Olodi, the descendants of the Okere manage their affairs as a corporate group and have always been politically independent of their neighbors. It is believe that the Okere and Agbarha settle in Warri before the Itsekiri people. Okere develop into a political kingdom by the end of the 19th century and their government was run by elders with the eldest from paternal line as community leader (Okpako-Okere), Okere kingdom was one of the four kingly position of traditional rulers establish by the Delta State government in 1999 in that year Chief Owen Sati Olodi was crown as Ojabugbe 1. The Orosuen (king) of Okere kingdom (Otite, 2011). The Okere have an annual festival, AwanKere popularly known as Okere Juju, the festival is celebrated between June and August. It is one of the most popular festival in Warri metropolis and environs, the festival is celebrated in honor of a Diety Okioro.

IV. The Itsekiri

It is believe that the root of the Itsekiri lay's in Yoruba land because Yoruba language is the language with which the Itsekiri language is most closely related. This connection of the Itsekiri to the Yoruba origin linked them to Ugbo in Ilaje, Ese Odo Local Government Area of Ondo State, and Ode in the Ijebu country of Ogun State. The cultural similarities between the Itsekiri and the Yorubas gives additional weight to the conclusion that Itsekiri has a Yoruba origin (Ifediora, 2014). However the most acceptable origin of the Itsekiri is that of the migration of Ginuwa from Benin in the late 15th century. According to this tradition of origin, there was an Oba who ruled over the kingdom of Benin called Oba Olua. Oba Olua has an elder son called Prince Ginuwa who was causing trouble and defiling the traditional rights of the Benin kingdom. He also wanted to remove traditional practices, and he was also hostile to the chiefs and their supports. The chiefs were not happy with character and doings of the prince and even his father and they vowed that prince Ginuwa will not succeed his father as the next Oba of the Benin kingdom. Oba Olua been aware of the plans of the chiefs decided to secure the future of his son and plan that Ginuwa should have his own kingdom aside Benin, the Oba then through deception asked the seventy chiefs to send their first son's with prince Ginuiwa to offer sacrifice to one of the god's the Oba build a wooden ship that was large enough to contain the prince and the sons of the seventy chiefs to a distant land where they should settle (Osagay, 1982)

Ginuwa led the chief's sons through the river to a new settlement with himself as king, the Beninhaven learnt of their sons disappearance sent a force to bring them back with the prince. Ginuwa

also haven learnt of the chiefs forces headed to the mount of the Forcados River, Ginuwa landed in Ijala and begin a settlement there, Ginuwa died in Ijala and was buried there. Ginuwa was succeed by his first son Ijijen. Ijijen led the party from Ijala to Iwere (Warri), this settlement is known to this day as Ode-Itsekiri (Moor, 1970) The Itsekiri system of government was design on that of Benin, The Itsekiri was ruled by an Olu and the council of Oyeye. The Itsekiri economic life was determine by their physical environment, they do not have enough land for agriculture and as a result of this they depend on their rivers for fishing and manufacturing of salt which they exchange with the hinterland Urhobo for their agricultural produce.

V. The Ijaw

There is no trace of the Ijaw to any major tribe in the country. The Ijaw inhabit an environment that is predominantly covered by the mangrove swamps. They reside among the Itsekiri in Warri. Oral accounts claim that communities of migrants Ijaw dwelt on the waterfront by the side of an area called Ogbe-Ijo. The site is located at the confluence of the Agbassa creek and the Warri River. At this site the Urhobo farmers and Ijaw fishermen from the riverine country traded. Ogbe-Ijaw is bounded on the northeast by the Okere and Agbarha or Agbassa kingdom, on the southeast by Isaba kingdom, on the east by Udu kingdom, and on the south by Iduwini kingdom. According to Ifediora, Ogbe-ijoh belongs to the Ogbe Ibe (group or clan) of the western Ijaw and their origin can be traced to Ewein who came from Ekeromo, the headquarters of the Operemo Ibe. The Operemo, on their part, claim or trace their origin to Oporoma in Kabowei, Ogulagha, Gbaramatu, Kubowie and Iduwini Ibe, also resided among the Itsekiri in Warri.

The Ijaw inhabit a region that is covered by the mangrove swamps. Their homeland is completely riverine, and fishing was the predominant economic activity, which is as old as their history. Fishing is done in creeks, lakes, ponds, lagoons, rivers and the open sea. Other economic activities include palm wine tapping, hunting, salt making, wood carving, palm oil production, boat building and canoe carving. From earliest times, the Ijaw had distinguished themselves as canoe carver and boat builders, supplying most of the Western Niger Delta people with canoes. Although other groups in the Western Niger Delta were also riverine people producing canoe, the Ijaw were well known for canoe carving. The Ijaw are not self-sufficient. There were other needs for which they have to engaged, in exchanges with hinterland people such as garri, yam, plantain, livestock among others. (Ayomike, 1990) notes that Ogbe-ijoh, the Ijaw enclave in Warri has traditionally been the market/shopping area in Warri township, and Ogbe-ijoh market has been a well known landscape in Warri township.

VI. Geo-political Violence in Warri

Warri is known for ethnic violence, which had affected the city since their inception. The inter-ethnic violence involving the indigenous ethnic groups of Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw in Warri could be traced to the colonial period. The conflict grew from the struggle for group legitimacy and entitlements among the three ethnic groups (Edevie, 2004). Each of the ethnic groups claimed to be the owner of Warri. The claim over the ownership of Warri by the three ethnic groups of Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw, is a matter of a long standing historical controversy. The ethnic groups claimed to be the first to settle in Warri and tried to support their claims with historical data. They tried to interpret historical data to buttress their justification of claim over the ownership of Warri, as each group refers to the other as settlers. A good example of land dispute was Agbassa/Itsekiri land case over the establishment of Hausa settlement at Agbassa, where the Olu of Itsekiri demanded 33 percent of the rent, while the Agbassa people only allowed 5 percent (National Achive Ibadan, 1947). However, the fact remains that the three ethnic groups of Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw have long historical claims to the portion of land in Warri which they live in. Warri started as a collection of Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw settlements.

The ethnic violence in Warri was also caused by British colonial policy. At the time of the advent of British colonial rule, the Itsekiri were more united as a people and more aware of their common interests and problems than were their Urhobo and Ijaw neighbours. The Itsekiri had a

centralized political system under the Olu. This was absent among the Urhobo and Ijaw ethnic groups. As a result of this the British gave the Itsekiri preferential treatment based on the ease of dealing with people with a history of unified submission to a central authority. The Urhobo hated the Itsekiri for the preferential treatment which they received during the colonial era. Also, the British colonialists recognized the interdependence and ethnic diversity in Nigeria, but they disrupted it and agglomerated them into one political unit. According to (Usman, 2008), 'Colonialism forcibly incorporated people with different histories, cultures and socio-political organization into one country, and there was the attempt by the colonial authorities to govern each group or territory separately well into the colonial period'. Colonialism incorporated segments of the pre-colonial power elites and transformed them into components of land agents for the colonial regime both in the political and commercial sectors of the society. It was the British who subdivided the land into regions, provinces, divisions, districts and sub-districts. During the colonial period, the British created the Warri Province for administrative purposes and it included the three ethnic groups of Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo. But the province was dominated by the Itsekiri, and this resulted to reactions of the two other ethnic groups.

One of the causes of ethnic conflict in Warri emanated from an action of the government of the former Western Nigeria, when it decided to change the title of the Itsekiri King from Olu of Itsekiri to Olu of Warri in May 1952. The change was effected at the request of the Itsekiri over the objection of the Urhobo The Urhobo in particular felt that the title Olu of Warri would give the universal impression that the Olu is the paramount ruler or chief of the Warri Province, and this would legitimize the Itsekiri claim of the ownership of the area. The change of the title involved the Olu of Itsekiri ruling over all the people of Warri as if they were all Itsekiri. Warri is owned and inhabited by the Urhobo, Ijaw and Itsekiri ethnic groups. The change created animosity and mutual distrust between members of the Itsekiri and Urhobo ethnic groups.

Open violent conflict erupted in Warri among the Itsekiri, Urhobo and Ijaw in 1993, but especially with the Urhobo and Itsekiri. The violence emanated as a result of Itsekiri carnival procession to celebrate the Olus's coronation anniversary.[107]According to Evebvie, the annual procession of a carnival through major streets in Warri to mark the coronation anniversary of the Olu started with the ascension of Atuwase II to the Itsekiri throne on May 2, 1987. The Itsekiri saw the occasion as a means and opportunity to display and showcase their colourful cultural heritage. However this provoked the Urhobo. The Urhobo believed that the procession was not intended to display Itsekiri culture but to emphasize their claim over the ownership of Warri. This led to violence, which left several people dead and injured and properties destroyed.

Violent conflict also broke out in 1997 as a result of local government controversy. On October 1, 1996, 186 local government areas were created nationwide and details were made public on December 4, and an additional local government was created in Warri. On December 1996 the Delta State Military Administrator Col. D. J. Dung announced the creation of Warri Southwest Local Government Area with Ogbe-Ijoh, an Ijaw town as the headquarters (Imobighe 2002). The ijaw were very happy with the development. However, the federal government later relocated the Warri Southwest local government headquarters from Ogbe-Ijoh an Ijaw settlement to Ogidigben, an Itsekiri settlement. The Ijaw felt disappointed and marginalized. The Ijaw believed that the Itsekiri had persuaded the military government to alter earlier plans that placed the headquarters at Ogbe-Ijoh. They saw the government action as unfair. The Ijaw reacted violently and the Urhobo, due to their grievance against the Itsekiri gave tacit support to the Ijaw and this helped to broaden the scope of the conflict (Ikanone, 2007). The conflict led to unprecedented destruction of lives and properties, while the youths of the three ethnic groups saw the conflict as an opportunity to unleash their anger on the government and oil companies for long years of neglect and pollution of their land.

In February 2003, violence started from disagreement at a primary election of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) which took place at the Warri Township Stadium. The conflict erupted over the delineation of electoral wards. The Urhobo were not happy with the structure of wards for the election and they left the venue of the election. They attacked the Itsekiri areas, burning houses and vandalizing properties. This action of the Urhobo took the Itsekiri unaware.[115]At night the Itsekiri

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launched a revenge attack. The conflict recorded the destruction of lives and properties and left so many persons displaced.

VII. The Warri Violence and Economic Spillover

The Warri crises affected inter-ethnic harmony. That is, it led to unfriendly relationship among the three ethnic groups. The three ethnic groups of Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo had interacted with each other peacefully in the region for centuries. There was general distrust and increase in the resentment among members of the different ethnic groups. One factor that inhibited inter-ethnic harmony among the three ethnic groups is the struggle over the ownership of Warri and its resources especially crude oil. The Warri crisis since the 1990s affected the development of the area. Since the inception of the crisis, only few investments came into the region because businesses need a stable socio-political environment to thrive. Inter-ethnic tension and violence undermined the much needed stability. The crisis in Warri affected internal investments, as many oil and servicing companies moved their headquarters and relocated to more peaceful areas or states such as Port Harcourt, Akwa-Ibom, among others. Many of the companies only maintained skeletal services in Warri. Such companies include Tidex, Lamnalco, United Geo-Physical Surveys, Dowell-Schlumberger and Global Star. The Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) also moved more of their departments to Port Harcourt (Clifford, 2002). The relocation was not limited to big businesses alone. Small private business also relocated to other nearby towns such as Agbarho, Ughelli, Sapele among others.

In the various conflict in Warri, hundreds of lives were lost. Expensive and essential properties were lost. Markets such as Okere and Pessu were burnt. Shops, business centres and other structures were vandalized. The violence in Warri created a general state of insecurity. However since the end of the conflicts and violence, Warri is yet to recover from the economic lost. Most of the companies and businesses that left never returned. The economy of the city has been in shamble since the end of the conflict. Individuals lost their jobs and Warri became a shadow of its former self. The loss of job created a serious problem of unemployment. The major job available for the male teaming population was driving of commercial motorcycle and later tricycle. This was because most of them lost their jobs in the various oil multi-nationals. The loss of jobs also created a state of insecurity by the youth. The youth wreck havoc on the city which further compounded the economic woes. The state of insecurity discourages investment in the city despite the city's rich natural resources. No individual will want to invest in a society where there is no peace. The city is yet to recover from the violence. She is still paying the price of ethnic violence. This is because both small and big businesses is suffering the consequences of violence despite the fact that peace have returned to the city for over ten decades. Oil multi-national and small business entrepreneur are afraid to invest their capital in the city. The government should therefore encourage investment by creating a conducive business environment in the city. The government should also invest directly into the economy of the city so as to create jobs for the teaming youths who are at the fore front of violence when it erupt. The government should also try to address the issues that led to the various conflicts in Warri in order to avoid future occurrence. The people of Warri should as a matter of fact understand that development cannot take place in a state of insecurity. They should therefore embrace dialogue to any issue that affect their interest.

VIII. Conclusion

Colonialism in Nigeria created opportunities for closer interaction among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw in Warri have interacted with one another for a long time before the colonial period and the relationship manifested through trade and inter marriages. The ideal of one ethnic group dominating the other came as a result of colonial which later characterized the post- independent relationship among them. The relationship in the post-colonial era manifested in distrust which later metamorphosed into ethnic conflict. The conflicts led to the destruction of lives and properties, displacement of population and the flight of businesses to cities such and Port Harcourt and Uyo. Violence have never been a favourable option for the various groups in Warri. By way of recommendation separate local government should be created for the three ethnic groups. This will

help to prevent ethnic domination and disputes over the existing Warri South Local Government Areas. Each groups should also try to accommodate and live in unity with one another as they had done in the pre-colonial era. This is because conflict will only lead to more damages and underdevelopment. The government should also invest and encourage investment by creating a good and peaceful environment for businesses to thrive.

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