# A SOCIOLOGICAL POST-MORTEM OF ISSUES IN THE AROGBO IJAW-ILAJE CONFLICT: AN AGENDA FOR PEACE

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**Abstract**

Given the persistence, re-enactment and escalation of many ethnic conflicts in Africa, this study examined issues in the 1998/1999 Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict in Nigeria. This was done against the background that African leaders and mediating agencies often lack political will and commitment to resolve issues in ethnically-rooted conflicts. Using in-depth interviews and multi-stage sampling technique, 45 stakeholders from Arogbo-Ijaw and Ilaje were involved in the study. Findings revealed the Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict was centered on non-resolution of land and boundary dispute, struggle for resource control, fear of domination, marginalization, religious leadership crisis and quest for political autonomy arising from conflicts between the two groups in the past. Findings further revealed understanding ethnic conflicts goes beyond immediate factors to involve unresolved historical issues between groups concerned. The study concluded that non-resolution of issues in ethnic conflicts can undermine sustainable peace and provide 'soft-spots' for future re-enactment. The study recommended the need for peace builders, mediators, negotiators and parties to the conflict to direct peace efforts towards effective resolution of issues in the conflict as failure to do so would mean another evil day between the two ethnic groups may be ahead.

**Keywords**: Arogbo Ijaw, conflict resolution, ethnic conflict, Ilaje, peace

**Introduction**

There is no gainsaying that a major problem in the world today is conflict. But a far greater problem is lack of action plan to transform and resolve conflicts dividing hitherto stable communities and societies along ethnic, religious and ideological paths. Nigeria, like many other African countries- Sudan, South Sudan, Rwanda, Somalia and Kenya, appeared to be a major beneficiary of violent ethnic conflicts since the 1990s. Although peace efforts are made in these conflicts, such efforts, more often than not,

neglect purposeful resolutions, focusing on ceasefire and peacemaking rather than enduring resolutions of key issues in the conflict. This has practically make restoration of pre-conflict sense of peace and trust difficult to achieve among ethnic groups concerned. A major concern of this study is that African leaders and conflict managers often lack the political will to resolve main issues in many of the ethnic conflicts that has continued to divide the continent and her people along ethnic line. Using the 1998/1999 Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict as a laboratory, this study examined issues in ethnic conflicts in Nigeria so as to provide policy direction for peace and conflict transformation. It does this against the background that peace effort and resolution in ethnically-rooted conflicts, particularly in Nigeria, remain shallow and shortsighted.

The importance of examining the causes of ethnic conflict cannot be overemphasized and this was stressed by Blagojevic (2009:2). According to her, examination of the causes of ethnic conflict is necessary so that we may develop a better understanding of what causes the breakdown of peace in various multi-ethnic contexts and create more comprehensive basis for peace building and post-conflict development in ethnically divided societies. The argument here is premised on the fact that genuine reconciliation and peace building in the Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict may become improbable if there is no adequate understanding of issues that led to the conflict.

**Approaches to the study of ethnic conflict: A synopsis**

This study views ethnic conflict as social situation where there is a purposeful struggle between ethnic groups who use power to injure or defeat each other, and to gain power and other resources.  Kaufmann (1996:138 cited in Blagojevic, 2009:4) defined ethnic group as "a body of individuals who purportedly share cultural or racial characteristics, especially common ancestry or territorial origin, which distinguish them from members of other groups."

Every ethnic conflict has its own peculiarity, depending on its contexts. Despite variations in its elements, Blagojevic (2009:3) noted that all ethnic conflicts possess "common denominators" necessary for its occurrence. She maintained that although causes of ethnic conflict are located in primordialist, institutional, political and competition approaches, she was quick to warn that single approach may not be enough to explain issues in ethnic conflict.

The primordialist approach, according to Blagojevic, helps to explain the role of emotions and the conflict potential of ethnicity. The institutional, political entrepreneurs and competition over resources approaches explain how the interaction of institutional and political factors with ethnic

emotions leads to ethnification, ethnic intolerance, competition and violent conflict. She stated that, though multi-ethnic societies carry varying degrees of conflict potential, ethnic emotions, rooted in historical memories of grievances, are at the core of conflict potential.

Ethnicity, according to Horowitz (1985 cited in Blagojevic, 2009:3), embodies element of emotional intensity that is readily aroused when group's interests are undermined. For instance, Blagojevic noted that sudden change in political and institutional arrangements is capable of creating instability, uncertainty and emotional antagonisms among ethnic groups as witnessed in post-communist Bosnia and post-decolonization Sri Lanka and Rwanda. Political entrepreneurs, in their quest for power, mobilize ethnic constituencies by promoting inter-ethnic animosities using the rhetorical weapons of blame, fear and hate; a situation, Blagojevic argued, may result in inter-ethnic competition over resources and rights (2009:4).

Ganguly (1995) argued that proper understanding of the causes of ethnic mobilization and conflict requires we move beyond simplistic discussions of 'ancient hatreds' to more systematic explanations. This position was elaborated by Blagojevic in her article titled "Causes of ethnic conflict: a conceptual framework". Blagojevic stated that when subjected to convergence of set of factors and conditions, all multi-ethnic societies carry the potential of ethnic conflict and that any attempt to view historically-rooted ethnic animosities as the only cause of conflict should be seen as insufficient.

## Ethnic conflicts and its causes in Nigeria

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human social life and the emergence of inter-ethnic conflict in a plural society like Nigeria may be unavoidable, considering various value systems and limited socio-economic resources. Such atmosphere is capable of generating divergent interests among Nigerians and explains the fact that there is hardly a year without community conflict in Nigeria (Obasanjo, 1999).

In the last two decades, Nigeria has witnessed scores of ethnic-related conflicts. These conflicts have led to the emergence of various ethnic movements, seeking self-determination, autonomy, separate identity and undiluted federalism. The existence of artificial boundaries along ethnic lines across states and local government areas has resulted in boundary disputes and demand for re-unification and separation. A number of such ethnic conflicts include Ugep-Idomi, 1992, Itsekiri-Ijaw, 1995-1997, Ife-Modakeke, 1997 (Albert, 2001), Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje, 1998/1999, Hausa/Fulani-Yoruba in Sagamu, 1999 (Oyedele and Akinteye, 2001;

Akanbi, 2002), Kaduna/Kano ethno-religious riots, 2000-2001, Aguleri-Umuleri, Fulani-Berom, Tiv-Jukun, 2001 (Alubo, 2006; Okafor, 2007).

Otite (1999) and Albert (2001) noted that violent community conflicts are regular features of social life in Nigeria since 1960s. These conflicts, according to them, result from different value systems, competition for land, water and political resources among community leaders. Commenting on the Ife-Modakeke conflict, Agbe (2001) and Toriola (2001) identified the issues of land ownership, creation of local government and separate identity as major causes of the conflict.

Nwankwo (2000) stated that the social and political conditions in Nigeria are bristled with immutable realities. First, it is multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic; and second, the intensification of the struggle for control of the resources has provoked unhealthy rivalry and led to the pursuit of narrow ethnic agenda. While giving a historical account of conflicts in Bayelsa state, Bisina (2001) identified major conflicts in the State to include: the Odi invasion (1999), Olugbobiri killings and Twon Brass conflict. He noted that most of these conflicts are caused by struggle for resource control, environmental degradation, lack of development, militarization, lack of trust and deprivation.

Idowu (2001) stressed that most ethnic and communal clashes in Nigeria reflect dissatisfaction in the ownership of land and other natural resources. He maintained that these clashes result from farmland boundary disputes, siting of infrastructure and administrative headquarters and other developmental infrastructure. He added that despite the long association of these communities in terms of socio-economic, cultural and political integration, the control of resources and political power that emerge from their interaction have made complete integration impossible.

Otite and Ogionwo (2006) reported that one of the principal causes of social conflicts among groups in the present day is the growing inequality in the distribution of resources among and within societies. They stated that since societies are composed of social relationships (workers and management, teachers and pupils, parents and children), conflict becomes unavoidable. They further argued that most people enter social relations in pursuit of their own interests and these interests are always in rivalry with what others want, hence, the possibility of conflict becomes more visible. This view is further supported by a number extant literature which attributed ethnic conflict in Nigeria to the growing disenfranchisement, unequal distribution of socio-economic and political resources (Kwaja, 2011; Hutchison, 2011), land dispute, demand for local government autonomy (Okwechime, 2012), corruption (Olu-Adeyemi, 2006), fear for the future, ethnic rivalry, differing goals and aspirations, poor governance and contempt of the rule of law, accumulated deprivation, marginalization,

anger and frustrations of the past (Obashoro-John, 2012:600-602; Tepfenhart, 2013:86).

## Antecedents of arogbo ijaw-ilaje conflict

The Arogbo Ijaw and Ilaje people occupy the coastal area bounded by the Atlantic Ocean in Ondo state and constitute part of Niger Delta population in Nigeria. The Ilaje occupy Ilaje local government area while the Arogbo Ijaw constitutes one of the two ethnic groups occupying Ese-Odo local government area in Ondo state, Nigeria. According to Nigeria National Population Census (2006), Ilaje local government has a population of 290,615 while Ese-Odo local government, where the Arogbo Ijaw are part, has a population of 154,978. This suggests Ilaje ethnic group have larger population. According to Alagoa, (1972), the two ethnic groups have been neighbours since the first half of 18th century. While the Ilaje were believed to have migrated earlier from Ile-Ife, the ancestral home of the Yoruba, to occupy their present location, the Arogbo Ijaw came from the town of Gbaraun in the central Delta, now in Bayelsa state (Alagoa, 1972; Adeyemi, 2000).

Williams (1980) noted that the Ugbo (Ilaje) people left Ile-Ife in protest against injustice meted to them and were the first settlers to occupy an area that is today referred to as the Okitipupa division of the present Ondo State and their occupation is predominantly fishing and this was the major source of attraction to the migrant Arogbo Ijaw fishermen who were settled in the Ilaje eastern creeks through the permission of the Ugbo people (Curwen, 1937). Alagoa (1972) argued that the Ilaje were settled close to the Atlantic coast and west while the Arogbo Ijaw were given the eastern part for their settlement and since then commercial, cultural and even hostile relations have developed.

The history of conflicts between Arogbo Ijaw and Ilaje is well-documented. According to Alagoa (1972), the Ilaje and Arogbo Ijaw have for many decades developed commercial, cultural and even hostile relations. Before 1998 conflict, there were number of bloody hostilities between the two ethnic groups and among these were "Larogbo" and "Toto" conflict. According to Adeyemi (2000), both the "Larogbo" and "Toto" conflict broke out as a result of Arogbo Ijaw refusal to recognize and honour the tenancy agreement which they entered with the Ilaje when they arrived as well as the disagreement over ownership of disputed land area called Akpata. The Larogbo and Toto conflict were caused by the forceful demand for tribute (Isakole) by the Ilaje from Arogbo Ijaw and Arogbo Ijaw's refusal to honour such demand (Arogbo Ijaw and Ilaje oral traditions).

While commenting on the origin and causes of Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict, Magi (2003) affirmed that the last ethnic war between Ugbo-Ilaje and Arogbo Ijaw before that of 1998 occurred around 1895 and was caused by dispute over land ownership and since then a number of court cases have been instituted by both ethnic groups.

**Impact of 1998/1999 arogbo ijaw-ilaje conflict**

Conflict is often said to be inevitable and functional if well-managed. However, the catastrophic dimension of the 1998 Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict, was clearly undesirable. Africa News Service, (September 28, 1998) reported that 1998 Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict led to loss of human lives, destruction of many communities and displacement of thousands of people scattered in refugee camps in Ondo, Ogun, Lagos and Bayelsa states and, according to Magi (2003), suffered from sleeplessness, poor health, hunger and thirst. These conditions were further aggravated by the absence of health care, clothing and shelter, forcing the people to use bare floors and stones as beds and pillows (Adeyemi, 2000).

According to a Communiqué released by Okitipupa Peace Building and Reconciliation Workshop for Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje Stakeholders (2001), Adeyemi (2000) and Magi (2003), the Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict disrupted social and economic activities of the people in the affected area. In a related study, Aruna (2006) reported that the economy of both Arogbo-Ijaw and Ilaje people was put on hold for a very long period of time as a result of the blockage of the major waterways in the area. The transportation system came to a standstill as traders could not move their goods to the local markets around, especially the popular Igbokoda market, for fear of being attacked by the warlords. Aruna noted that the conflict also affected the educational system in the area as pupils and students could not go to school, there by resulting in the disruption of the children's education. According to her, the above social condition was further aggravated by the fact that many hitherto well-to-do parents became very poor due to material loss; hence the education of their wards became totally disrupted. She stated further that the conflict also led to increased wave of kidnapping and maritime piracy.

**Intervention and peace efforts**

According to Magi (2003) and Adeyemi (2000), at the wake of Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict in 1998, the Ondo State government organized peace meetings between Arogbo Ijaw and Ilaje traditional rulers and the international Red Cross Organization gave relief materials to the victims. Adeyemi added that efforts towards restoring peace to the communities affected by the conflict commenced with the presence of federal government peace keeping operation on the 19th September, 1999. On the

24th September, 1999, the federal troops occupied all the locations that served as the connecting links between the two ethnic groups which led to a ceasefire. According to Adeyemi, the ceasefire was followed by series of peace and reconciliatory meetings organized including peace workshop organized by Foundation for Democratic Development with support from USAID between 2nd and 20th April, 2001 at Okitipupa; peace meeting of nationalities of the Niger Delta and Ondo State held in London on Saturday 20th February, 1999 organized by Association of Nigerian Scholars for Dialogue (ASND) to ensure peaceful co-existence among ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta region.

Alatise (2007) noted that the Ondo state government in 2007 organized a National Youth Peace Summit in conjunction with Presidential Youth Initiative (PYTI) and Community Development Committee (CDC) at Naval Base, Igbokoda with representatives of both Arogbo Ijaw and Ilaje in order to shun violence and co-exist peacefully. Reports by Niger Delta Development Commission (2001, 2006) and Omotehinse, (2005) have shown that since the end of the conflict in 1999, rehabilitation and reconstruction are being funded by the Ondo State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission (OSOPADEC) and Niger Delta Development Commission.

**Theoretical framework**

Since the time of Marx, scholars have provided explanations on the social condition that could be sufficient for ethnic conflict. One of such explanations was provided by Ardrey (1966). In his Territorial Imperative Theory, Ardrey traced the origin of animals' property, nation and territoriality. According to him, a territory is an area of space which an animal or group of animals defend and patrol as an exclusive preserve. Ardrey argued that it is within such territory the basic needs and interests of such animals are satisfied and will spare no effort to defend such an area by keeping out those who attempt to undermine their interests and needs. These basic needs and interests, according to Ardrey, include security of space, identity, prestige, food and value system. Ardrey argued that all animals (including man) have a sense of territoriality and as such would defend their land area from external occupation in order to secure the territory which they see as their own. Ardrey submitted that nation-states, ethnic nationalities and individuals put up these kinds of animal traits through evolutionary inheritance.

In his treatment of Relative Deprivation, Gurr (1970) found support for deprivation as a systematic way through which conflict could become violent. According to Gurr, ethnic groups may become violent and agitated when they feel deprived of their rights and resources. In his later work on

ethnic groups, Gurr (1993, 2000) argued that the escalation of violent conflict is usually associated with the removal of autonomy for a particular group. The Human Needs Theory by Burton (1987, 1996) lend credence to territorial imperative and relative deprivation theories regarding the causes of ethnic conflict in African and developing societies. According to Burton, human beings have to satisfy their primordial and universal needs such as security, recognition, identity and development if they are to maintain stable societies. Burton stressed that human beings strive increasingly to gain control over their environment which is necessary for the satisfaction of these basic needs. He stated that the inability to meet human primordial needs could lead to frustration, aggression and consequently generate social conflict.

The three body of explanation has some theoretical affinity. The existence, comfort, survival and happiness of any social group is determined by the ability of its members to meet or satisfy basic and primordial needs such as the needs for food, shelter, security or safety, clothing, self-identity, recognition and development Burton (1987, 1996). These needs are satisfied within the territory or space (Ardrey, 1966) which members of such group live, using the available human and material resources. Any attempt by outsiders to rub or deny them of such resources may create a sense of deprivation, marginalization, insecurity and frustration and lead to aggressive and defensive tendencies (Gurr, 1970).

**Methodology**
This study was conducted among youth leaders, opinion leaders, traditional leaders, ex-militia commandants and government representatives from affected Arogbo-Ijaw and Ilaje communities to critically review issues in the conflict.

Using multi-stage sampling technique (convenient and snowballing samplings), 45 respondents from 25 communities, comprising 10 communities from Arogbo-Ijaw and 15 communities from Ilaje affected by the conflict, were involved in the study. The study utilized in-depth interviews (IDIs) while secondary data were sourced from communiqués and reports. A total of 45 IDIs; comprising 20 from Arogbo-Ijaw and 25 from Ilaje, were administered. The higher number of IDIs for the Ilaje was necessitated by the fact that the Ilaje have higher population and number of communities (about 69) affected compared to about 20 Arogbo-Ijaw communities affected by the conflict.

**Findings and discusssions**
**Remote causes**
      The respondents were asked to state what they considered remote causes of Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict of 1998/1999. Findings revealed that unresolved land and tenancy dispute, resource control, fear of domination and marginalization, religious leadership dispute and quest for local government autonomy were the remote causes of the ethnic. The findings are being discussed below.

**Unresolved land and tenancy dispute**
      A major factor in the Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict, as findings indicated, was the issue of land dispute. Majority of Arogbo-Ijaw attributed land ownership dispute as one of the remote causes of the conflict. One of the Arogbo-Ijaw respondents stated:

> *The Ilaje have always claimed to be owner of our land and referred to us as tenants. They continue to claim our territory and this got us angry because we are the landlord of the fresh water riverine areas of Ondo State while the Ilaje only settled in the salt water area* **(Youth leader, Arogbo-Ijaw)**

      On the contrary, the Ilaje accused the Arogbo-Ijaw of occupying Ilaje territory. According to the Ilaje, the Arogbo-Ijaw have been tenants to Ilaje and paying land rent (called "Isakole"in Ilaje dialect) to the Ilaje landlords since the past centuries. This view was captured by one of the Ilaje respondents. He commented:

> *Let me tell you the truth! The Arogbo-Ijaw people are our tenants. We used to collect rent from them but because we have been together for more than 100 years, we allow them to live freely. Now, because they stopped paying "Isakole (land rent), they are claiming our lands belong to them. This did not go well with us. So, we have to fight for our land and children (**Militia commandant, Ilaje**)*

      The foregoing suggested the inability to resolve past land dispute between the two ethnic groups contributed to the conflict. A number of Arogbo-Ijaw noted that both ethnic groups (Arogbo-Ijaw and Ilaje) have been on land dispute for decades which has caused occasional communal clashes in the past. This fact was noted by one of the Arogbo-Ijaw respondents:

> *The current administrative map of the coastal area of Ondo State ceded part of our territory to Ilaje in error*

*and this is not yet corrected* **(Traditional leader, Arogbo-Ijaw)**

This was further corroborated by some Ilaje respondents as captured by a traditional head:

*See young man! For many years, there are some communities like Akpata and Sekelewu which have been boundary problem between us and Arogbo Ijaw. These Arogbo Ijaw people are troublesome people. They want those communities as their own but we can't give them because we are the owner* **(Traditional leader, Ilaje)**

The non-resolution and competition over disputed Akpata land area between the two groups over the years, as findings revealed, seems to support Nwankwo (2000), Albert (2001), Agbe (2001), Idowu (2001) and Okwechime's (2012) arguments that ethnic conflict could arise due to competition over land and water resources.

**Resource control, fear of domination and marginalization**

Findings of this study also revealed that the need for the control of oil resources, fear of domination and marginalization as factors in the Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict. From the findings, the Arogbo-Ijaw accused the Ilaje of historical marginalization and oppression. According to the Arogbo-Ijaw, the Ilaje have always deprived them of oil revenue and local government positions. An excerpt from one of the Arogbo Ijaw opinion leaders underscored this fact:

*The Ilaje are selfish and greedy people and will always want to corner all the economic and political resources in the coastal areas of Ondo State to themselves* **(Opinion leader, Arogbo-Ijaw)**

The above finding seems to locate Arogbo Ijaw as the deprived group. The issue of resource control as factor in the conflict was also corroborated by the Ilaje as pointed out by one of the Ilaje respondents:

*As at now, Ilaje local government is the only council area that qualifies Ondo State as an oil-producing State. Oil exploitation in Ilaje land started in the 1980s and being our neighbour, Arogbo-Ijaw people felt they should be part of our oil wealth and the best way to do this was to attack us, which they eventually did* **(Opinion leader, Ilaje)**

The foregoing is an indication that the quest by both ethnic groups to control oil resources in the contributed to the conflict. Extant literature such as Obashoro-John (2012:600-602) and Kwaja (2011) have attributed deprivation and need for socio-economic resources as basis for ethnic conflict. In his deprivation theory, (Gurr, 1970) argued that ethnic conflicts often occur between groups when a group felt deprived of economic resources which serves as a survival means for the group. In the case of Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict, crude oil is an important economic resources and source of ethnic rivalry in the Niger Delta (Kwaja 2011; Obashoro-John, 2012:600-602).

In another dimension, findings of this study revealed that the Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict occurred as a result of fear of domination and marginalization of one group by the other. Some of the Ilaje respondents stated that there is a long history of suspicion and fear of domination between the two groups which, according to them, contributed to the conflict. They noted that the Ilaje are the majority while the Arogbo-Ijaw are the minority and that since Ilaje have political advantage over them in terms of population and landmass at both federal and state levels, the Arogbo-Ijaw felt they were being marginalized. This was illustrated by one respondent from the Ilaje:

> *When it comes to number of state constituencies, we have two while Arogbo-Ijaw has one. Also, we and Arogbo-Ijaw share a single federal constituency and we have the advantage whenever we present candidate because of our number. You know election is determined by number in Nigeria and people usually vote along ethnic line. The Arogbo-Ijaw people have always protested this arrangement as if it is our fault (**Traditional leader, Ilaje**)*

The issues of domination and marginalization as factors in ethnic conflicts in Africa have been documented in extant literature as captured by Tepfenhart (2013:86) and Obashoro-John, 2012: 600-602).

**Religious leadership crisis**

Religious leadership crisis within the Cherubim and Seraphim Church of Zion was identified as another remote cause of the conflict. One of the Arogbo-Ijaw traditional leaders remarked:

> *Before the death of former leader of Cherubim and Seraphim Church of Zion, Most Rev. A. A. Ogunfeyimi (an Ilaje man) in 1996, he named his deputy l.O.*

*Jemine (an Arogbo-Ijaw man) as his successor but this arrangement did not go well with some Ilaje elders and youths who wanted the late leader's son, Apostle Durojaiye Ogunfeyimi, to succeed his father. There was misunderstanding between supporters of Jemine and Durojaiye but at last, Durojaiye became leader of the Church. The Arogbo-Ijaw people watched this scenario helplessly and were not happy with the Ilaje* **(Traditional leader, Arogbo-Ijaw)**

Some of the Ilaje respondents corroborated this view as noted by one of the traditional leaders:

*Jemine (an Arogbo-Ijaw man) had already been nominated by late spiritual leader of the Church, Most Rev. A. A. Ogunfeyimi, as his successor but some Ilaje people felt that an Arogbo-Ijaw man should not be allowed to rule over them. Jemine and his people were made to leave Ugbonla, the headquarters of the Church. This action infuriated the Arogbo-Ijaw who felt if Arogbo Ijaw people have served the Ilaje for many decades, the Ilaje should find it fair enough to serve Arogbo-Ijaw too* **(Opinion leader, Ilaje)**

The issue of religious leadership crisis in the Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict introduces a new dimension to the issues of ethnic conflict in Nigeria and underscores quest for recognition and fear of domination as factors in ethnically-rooted conflicts in Africa. As findings of this study revealed, not only was Cherubim and Seraphim Church of Zion a unifying factor between Arogbo-Ijaw and Ilaje before the 1998/1999 conflict but also and more importantly a weapon of control by the Ilaje over the Arogbo-Ijaw. The Arogbo-jaw felt they have been controlled by the Ilaje through the Cherubim and Seraphim Church of Zion for many years and Ilaje refusal to allow them lead the church was an attempt to undermine the identity and freedom.

**Quest for local government autonomy**

A greater number of Arogbo-Ijaw respondents attributed the issue of local government autonomy as major remote cause of the conflict. This view has been captured by Hutchison (2011), Kwaja (2011) and Okwechime (2012) who attributed many ethnic and communal clashes in Nigeria to struggle for political autonomy and resources. In view of this, an Arogbo-Ijaw respondent noted:

*When Eso-Odo local government was carved out of old Ilaje/Ese-Odo local government in 1996, the Ilaje*

> *wanted the headquarters of the new council area sited in Ugbo, an Ilaje territory. This situation created misunderstanding between us and Ilaje. The new council headquarters was eventually sited in Igbekebo, an Apoi territory and the Ilaje people were not happy and as a result burnt some houses of our people in their territory* **(Militia commandant, Arogbo-Ijaw)**

Responding, the Ilaje respondents accused the Arogbo-Ijaw of conspiring to deny them of having two local government areas. A respondent who doubled as militia commandant and traditional leader stressed that:

> *The creation of Ese-Odo local government out of the old Ilaje/Ese-Odo local government in 1996 was controversial and unacceptable. Ilaje were initially given two local governments; Ilaje West and Ilaje East. Ilaje West was to retain the old headquarters in Igbokoda. Ilaje East was to have its headquarters in Ugbo (the ancestral home of Ugbo-Ilaje). Before the pronouncement, there was a pro-active move by the Arogbo-Ijaw which made the Ondo state government announced Ilaje and Ese-Odo local councils instead of Ilaje West and Ilaje East. This angered the Ilaje* **(Militia commandant, Ilaje)**

The positions of both ethnic groups on the remote causes of the conflict showed the existence of divergent and incompatible views between them. While the Arogbo-Ijaw felt that Ilaje have deprived, marginalized and oppressed them from time to time, the Ilaje, saw the Arogbo-Ijaw as people who laid unjustifiable claims to what actually do not belong to them; a situation capable of undermining the peace between the two groups.

**Immediate causes**

The study also sought to determine the immediate causes of 1998/1999 Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict. The issues of Akpata boundary dispute and perceived unprovoked attacks were identified as the main immediate causes of the conflict.

**Akpata boundary dispute**

Respondents identified land dispute in Akpata community as the cause of the conflict. The Arogbo Ijaw respondents accused Ilaje group of usurping their territory. They argued that the Ilaje always claim ownership of Akpata, a boundary community between Arogbo Ijaw and Ilaje. An Arogbo Ijaw traditional leader commented:

> *There is a community we call Akpatakubu. The Ilaje*
> *calls it Akpata. The community belongs to us but the*
> *Ilaje people said they are the owner. Akpatakubu is a*
> *community rich in fish and oil deposit which oil*
> *company has confirmed. The Arogbo-Ijaw were*
> *building a health centre in that community and the*
> *Ilaje told them not to build it but the Arogbo-Ijaw went*
> *ahead and built the health centre. The Ilaje later burnt*
> *down the health centre and this led to conflict in 1998*
> **(Traditional leader, Arogbo-Ijaw)**

Although the position of the Ilaje on Akpata boundary dispute as the main immediate cause of the conflict corroborated that of Ijaw, the Ilaje contrary to Arogbo-Ijaw position were unanimous that disputed land area belongs to Ilaje from the time past. An Ilaje traditional leader commented:

> *Akpata community has always belongs to us. Out of*
> *magnanimity, we gave part of Akpata community land*
> *area to the Arogbo-Ijaw to occupy but surprisingly the*
> *Arogbo-Ijaw said they are the one who owes the land*
> *because oil deposit was discovered around the area.*
> *We were not prepared for war but astonished when the*
> *Arogbo-Ijaw unleashed attack on our land*
> **(Traditional leader, Ilaje)**

From the foregoing, the boundary dispute over the ownership of an oil-rich Akpata community which both groups claim ownership was a major reason why the conflict broke out. Respondents from both groups had earlier identified Akpata boundary dispute as a historical issue in the Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict which remain unresolved. The non-resolution of issues in conflict is a central argument of this study and explains why many ethnic conflicts in Africa (including Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict) recur.

**Unprovoked attacks**

Findings revealed that both ethnic groups accused each other of unprovoked attacks and killings. While Arogbo-Ijaw accused the Ilaje of killing six Ijaw youths in cold blood, the Ilaje denied such allegation and accused the Arogbo-Ijaw of attacking them without provocation. An Arogbo-Ijaw respondent narrated:

> *Seven Arogbo-Ijaw youths were kidnapped by some*
> *Ilaje youths on their way to visit their parents and*
> *families who resided in Ilaje territory. The Ilaje youths*
> *acted under the authority of the Olugbo of Ugbo*
> *kingdom who was dissatisfied with the creation of Ese-*
> *Odo local council in 1996. The seven Arogbo-Ijaw*

> *youths were secretly threw into the Atlantic sea with their hands and legs tied but miraculously one of them survived to tell the story of what the Ilaje did to them. This is why we attacked them (**Youth leader, Arogbo-Ijaw**)*

The Ilaje respondents however denied the allegation of such killings, claiming it was baseless. They however accused the Arogbo-Ijaw of attacking their communities unprovoked. A militia commandant noted:

> *When they started the conflict, they were telling the press that we killed six of their youths. We had no reason to attack anybody before the conflict. The Arogbo-Ijaw were the first to attack us. We never prepared for war initially. Their attacked on us was unprovoked (**Militia commandant, Ilaje**)*

**Major contributions and conclusion**

Findings of this study revealed main issues in the 1998/1999 Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict to include land dispute, struggle for the control of crude oil resources, fear of domination and marginalization, quest for political autonomy and dispute over religious leadership. These factors have been documented in the works of Ardrey (1966), Burton (1996), (Gurr, 1970, 1993, 2000), Blagojevic, (2009), Hutchison (2011), Kwaja (2011), Okwechime (2012), Tepfenhart (2013:86) and Obashoro-John, 2012: 600-602) as basis for ethnic conflicts. However, central to the Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict is the issue of territoriality which provides inferential lesson for this study in three ways: First, the existence, comfort, survival and happiness of any ethnic group is influenced by the ability of its members to meet primordial needs such as the needs for food, shelter, security, clothing, self-identity, recognition and development. Second, these needs are satisfied within territory which members of such group occupy. Third, ethnic group would resist any attempts by outsiders to threaten or deprive them of their existence and happiness.

By and large, the study revealed the political economy of ethnic conflicts in Africa as ethnic groups negotiate their identity and power in plural societies. The study further deepened the understanding of ethnic conflicts as a phenomenon beyond immediate factors to involve historical experience between groups concerned. Although immediate factors can spark conflict, historical factors may take centre stage as conflict progresses since conflict often remind people of their past. This was demonstrated by the present study as findings attributed the 1998/1999 Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje to

the long history of territorial dispute, fear of domination, economic and political rivalry between the two groups.

Findings suggested that non-resolution of issues in ethnic conflicts can undermine sustainable peace and provide 'soft-spots' for re-enactment. This argument is central to the findings of this study and explains why many ethnic conflicts in Africa (including Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje conflict) recur. The study concluded that non-resolution of issues in ethnic conflicts has the capacity to re-invent conflicts and any attempts by peace builders, mediators, negotiators and parties to conflict to shy away from this fact may undermine the entire peace process.

**Recommendations**

This study recommended the following:

- Genuine effort should be directed by mediating agencies and relevant stakeholders towards peaceful and sustainable resolution of all issues in the conflict. Particularly, deliberate action should be made to resolve land and boundary dispute between both ethnic groups, especially in Akpata area.
- Fair and adequate compensations should be provided for individuals, families and communities who were victims of the conflict.
- A joint security post should be established in the disputed land areas to forestall any attack from any of the two groups.
- More peace meetings should be facilitated among community leaders and youths from both ethnic groups to ensure that there is no communication gap from time to time.
- Both ethnic groups should be given more economic and political autonomy in order to improve their sense of self-identity, recognition and facilitate grassroots development.

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