



Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Pre-Colonial Igbo Society of Nigeria

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Abstract. This paper examines conflict and conflict resolution among the Igbo of Nigeria in pre-colonial period. Conflicts have always been part of human societies. So long as there is interaction amongst individuals or societies, there are bound to be conflicts as a result of fact that interests among individuals and societies interest vary. In pre-colonial Igbo society, various types of conflicts manifested. These included inter-personal, intra-community and inter-community conflicts, some of which led to wars. However, there were various means by which these conflicts were resolved to the satisfaction of the warring parties.

Conflict resolution mechanism was an integral part of pre-colonial Igbo village democracy. The absence of a centralized system of government among the people in pre-colonial period did not mean that the people were in a state of anarchy. As in most pre-colonial African societies, there were bound to be conflicts amongst individuals and communities but there also existed traditional methods by which they were resolved to ensure that peace and order were achieved and maintained in the society. It is however hopes that the lessons to be learn from the findings of this paper, if properly applied, would be of great benefit to those who are charged with the responsibilities of finding amicable resolutions to the various intra and inter ethnic as well as sectarian crises presently ravaging various parts of the Nigeria and African continent in general.

Keywords: *Pre-colonial, Igbo Society, Conflict Resolution, Inheritance, Oracles.*

Introduction

Conflicts are generally accepted to be inevitable phenomenon in the lives of men. It cannot be completely separated from the inter-relationships that exist among individuals and communities. Conflict is therefore a natural occurrence among human beings. Whenever people gather together in the family or other social and political groups there are bound to be conflicts which according to Alagoa, could lead to “struggle of various level of intensity, extending to violent combat which could lead to the destruction of the group” (Alagoa, 2001). It is often argued that because human beings are by nature competitive and aggressive, there will always be conflicts amongst them.

It has been considered by Oguntomisin (2004) that the various communities in pre-colonial Nigeria had varied conventions aimed at mitigating inter-human and intra and inter communal conflicts. These conventions were not without being backed by taboo which must be observed for peaceful regulation of human activities such as co-habitation, relationship between husband and wife, father and children, one community and the other among others.

However, pre-colonial African societies are reputed to hold secrets of peacemaking and conflict resolution embedded in their customs and traditions before the disruptive activities brought about by colonization (Zartman, 2000:9). This can be seen in the principle of *Ubuntu* (Ohiochoya, 2008:1), a concept that demonstrates the fact that Africans had, over the years, developed and tested varied methods of conflict resolution. This is an all embracing African interpretation of both negative and positive peace (Francis, 2006:26). The concept of *Ubuntu* was also widely applied in the resolution of conflicts among the peoples of East-Central and Southern Africa. It is also found in varied form in different communities in other parts of Africa. The term is known to be a humanistic and holistic in the conception of peace which states that human beings are one in their relationships with one another. The pre-colonial Igbo societies had well defined social political institutions that helped to facilitate conflict resolution. The basic political organization that existed throughout pre-colonial Igbo societies was what

Elizabeth Isichei (1996) describes as village democracy - a system of government that gave everyone – old and young – certain roles to play in the society. The mechanisms for conflict resolution in pre-colonial Igbo society were embedded in the traditional and culture of the people. Consequently, conflicts and disputes were resolved mainly by mediation. The management of conflicts amongst pre-colonial Igbo as in other African societies according to Alagoa (2001) involved the following six principles:

.... First, the principle of impartiality of the manager of conflict. Rulers in all Nigerian communities were expected to behave impartially in their office.... Second, the principle of fairness. That is, the poor and weak should receive a fair deal as well as the rich and powerful.... Third, the ... principle of accommodation, compromise and a disposition for reconciliation, as opposed to the principle of “winner takes all” or the “zero sum game”.... Fourth, the principle of reciprocity. The spirit of accommodation must be mutual and reciprocal to be effective.... Fifth, the principle of moderation and of measured action and response. It was this principle that informed the deliberate limitation of the level of violence in conflicts within Nigerian communities in the past... Sixth, the principle of incompatibility or separation. That is where the parties to a conflict cannot be reconciled, the best policy would be to separate them....(pp. 1-8).

Igbo society in the pre-colonial period was not at all times peaceful. There were moments, as we witness today, when tensions and open physical conflicts ensued (Ugochukwu, 2006:69-70). Examination of human affairs has in many cases showed that interactions among human beings are sometimes characterized by intolerance which in turn engenders tensions and conflicts. In other words, as long as human beings exist and interact, conflicts are bound to ensue amongst them.

In pre-colonial period, some of the issues that sparked off conflicts among individuals, communities and states have remained basically the same as at today.

These include issues arising from marriages, inheritance, religion, land, boundaries among others. It is important to understand the fact that conflicts, though may cause division and enmity, would always occur so long as human beings live and interact with one another in a given society.

The introduction of fire arms into Igbo land by the Europeans in the nineteenth century engendered series of communal conflicts and crises (Isichei, 1981:109). Not much is known about these conflicts, beyond the fact that they usually resulted from issues arising from such factors as murder, land disputes, kidnapping, and so on. Wars between several Owerri village groups in the 1880s were caused by land dispute while the attack of southern Igbo town of Obegu by Aro was associated with debt recovery (*Ibid.*, 78). Typically, wars between village groups were however, regulated by a number of conventions (*Ibid.*, 80). Nevertheless, the resolution of one conflict did not have to include a definite victory for one of the parties involved. Judgment among the Igbo usually involved compromise and accommodation. The Igbo insist that a good judgment “cuts into the flesh as well as the bone” of the matter in dispute. This implies a “hostile” compromise in which there is neither victor nor vanquished; a reconciliation to the benefit of - or a loss to – both parties (Uchendu, 1965:14). Various institutions in Igbo land played vital roles in conflicts resolution. These included the council of elders, the *Umuada* institution, the oracle Priest or *Eze Ala* amongst others. Those whose actions caused unrest in the society were severely punished to ensure lasting peace. However, conflict resolution mechanism among the Igbo as in other pre-colonial African societies were not meant only to assuage or pacify the victim(s) but to act as deterrent to all those who may want to commit such crime(s); not only to appease the living but the ancestors and gods of the land (Brukum, 1998:39-47).

Research on conflicts resolution in the pre-colonial Igbo society has not received much attention from scholars. In this regard, this work is an attempt to bridge the existing gap in our knowledge of conflict resolution in pre-colonial Igbo society.

Conflict and Conflict Resolution

Group structure cannot be said to be static in any given society as there is always a continuous interaction among the individuals and groups that make up the society. One group tends to dominate the other probably due to the constantly changing pattern of vested and competing interest. Under such a situation, groups in such societies tend to protect their values for survival and advancement of their aspirations. Everyone thus has vested interest in the continuity and prosperity of his/her family or community.

A society that is made up of such dominant group tendencies was bound to possess keen competition, rivalry and conflict with regard to their values. This is because the interests of one group are most often inconsistent with that of another. A political system that is dominated by these egocentric competitive tendencies often finds its segments or groups at loggerheads and so can hardly survive the test of time. The problems of peaceful co-existence which pervaded the life of the Igbo during the pre-colonial period were the result of multiplicity of political, social and economic factors which included land ownership, territorial boundaries, murder and inheritance among others.

Land epitomizes the socio-political and economic well-being of the individuals and communities. Walter Brueggemann (1978) posits that land is normally a place with historical meaning and provides continuity and identity across generations - "where important words have been spoken, which have established identity, defined vocation and envisioned destiny..." (5). One of the basic needs of human beings include the tendency to belong to a well ordered and secured society in order to be able to live in peace with one another. Land has much to do in human affairs and whatever human beings do on the land affects the land positively or negatively; whether it is to grow food and cash crops, extract mineral resources or abode for its inhabitants. The importance of land is emphasized in the Holy Bible, especially the Old Testament,

You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The Lord will grant you abundant prosperity in the fruit of your womb, the young of

your livestock, and the fruit of your land which he swore to your forefathers to give to you (Deuteronomy, 28:2-11).

For the Israelites, land was linked with the presence of God. This interconnectedness of human story in relationship with God and land runs as a continuous thread throughout the Holy Bible. During the era of the monarchy (ancient Israel), history was about acquiring land, keeping it and defending it. The conflicts between Israel and Palestine till date are mainly over land and security.

The crises bedeviling some Nigerian communities today: Ife/Modakeke; Tiv/Jukun; Itsekiri/Ijaw/Urhobo; Aguleri/Umuleri; Yelwa/Tarok were caused by the ownership, use and administration of land. According to Nnodimele,

Disputes about ownership of land and about land boundaries were the major causes of inter-village conflict, eventual war and murder. A situation whereby the land in question was a fertile ground for farming and for such economic trees as raffia palm, palm trees, Iroko, oil bean, among others, the disputes were intensified. (Interview with Nwachukwu Nnodimele)

What made land disputes more complex is that all land is usually owned; whether it is cultivated or not, it belongs to somebody or community. Hence claims and counter claims over land ownership became the order of the day in pre-colonial Igbo society. That Chinua Achebe (1964) centers a major part of his novel, *Arrow of God*, on the land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi is a clear illustration and confirmation of the fact that land is a major source of unrests and crises in most societies.

Land ownership and territorial boundaries generated a lot of conflict in the Igbo society in the pre-colonial period. Increase in population which necessitated the pressure on land accounted for the majority of the crises especially wars that erupted in pre-colonial Igbo society.

wars were fought mostly over land issues. We are told that in the early days, there were few people in the clan and these had no need to quarrel over land. When the population of the clan grew, land became very scarce. And as no one could be told to build his home in the air, the people of the clan began to share the available land space more equitably... soon, however, this honest and peace-loving generation died off and the few that remained either got confused about the actual boundaries or were overwhelmed by the majority who preferred the might is right approach. This was the major reason for wars (Isichei, 1976:79).

History has it that territorial boundary was the major cause of conflicts between Obibi, a village group in Owerri and two of her neighbours; Iheagwa and Nekede in the 1880s (*Ibid.*). Obibi shared common borders with nine village groups which included Ihiagwa, Nekede, Naze, Agbala, Upe, Umunam, Amafor, Emeabiam and Okolochi. It is said that when the portion of land owned by Obibi became inadequate for her needs, the people had no alternative but to extend their boundaries into their neighbouring communities. The forceful encroachment triggered serious conflicts between Obibi and Ihiagwa on one hand and Nekede on the other. According to Amadi,

the chief belligerents were Obibi and Ihiagwa, but Nekede, because of long historical association, went to the aid of Ihiagwa as a chief ally. In the olden days, Ihiagwa and Nekede were one, but because of increase in population, a separation occurred but this separation was not permanent as there were strong ties between the two communities especially in the areas of religion, culture and social activities. (*Ibid.*, 98).

The name by which the conflict is remembered is *Ogu Mkpuru Oka* (the war of the grains of corn) (*Ibid.*). Not much is known about the number of casualties that were recorded due to paucity of information. It is however said that the victims of

the *Ogu Mkpuru Oka* were few in number as a result of the law of “an eye for an eye”, which was the cardinal principle of Igbo inter group relations. This greatly limited the loss of life in wars, for the combatants knew that a balance sheet would be drawn up at the end of the war. The side which had the lower casualty list would have to give the other side, victims to equalize (*Ibid.*, 79). However, Obibi is said to have defeated Ihiagwa and Nekede. The three villages eventually made peace with each other. The peace was achieved through the instrumentality of the village council in conjunction with the *okenne* or *nwa-diala* who were person(s) from one village whose mother hails from another village. In the past, the *okenne* or *nwa-diala* played vital role in the resolution of disputes especially land disputes, between their paternal and maternal villages or individuals from both villages. These individuals were highly respected in the past and tradition forbade the warring parties to attack or harm them in the course of their effort to resolve any dispute. It was however, the responsibility of the village councils to resolve land disputes between kinsmen or other persons from the same village, but those between two villages were resolved by the combined meetings of the village councils of the affected villages. It was when the efforts of the elders (village councils) to resolve any such disputes failed that the *okenne* or *nwa-diala* stepped in.

However the conflict between Obibi and Ihiagwa was resolved following the meeting of delegation of elders of the villages at the boundaries between Obibi and Ihiagwa. After the resolution, the two villages took a common oath of friendship and non-aggression. As a sign of the restoration of peace, the villages presented kolanuts, palm wine and alligator pepper to the elders. Among the Igbo kolanut is regarded as a symbol of life. An Igbo adage has it that, “*onye wetere, oji, wetere ndu*”- “he, who brings kola nut, brings life”. The kolanuts were mixed with the blood extracted from the elders of the villages involved while prayers for unity, oneness, mutual help, cooperation and peace were said. After the prayers, the kola nuts were broken, served and eaten to seal the oaths which bound them together. Henceforth, Obibi, Ihiagwa and Nekede saw themselves as brothers and were thus forbidden to shed one another’s blood and destroy each other’s property. This is the method by

which most of the crises, most especially land disputes in pre-colonial Igbo society were resolved in the spirit of brotherliness.

Land also led to conflict between individuals in the past just as it is today. In pre-colonial Igbo society, almost everybody was engaged in farming which was the main economic activity. There was initially no scarcity of land among the Igbo but as a result of the growth in population in the course of the nineteenth century, the pressure on land became intensive and this led to crises among individuals, families, villages and communities. For instance, the ownership of land was the major cause of conflict between Nwannunu's and Ezenwoko's families in c.1880. Nwannunu and Ezenwoko families belonged to Umuacha and Amuzu villages respectively in the former Okporoahaba autonomous community in the present Obiahaba autonomous community in Isiala Ngwa South of Abia State (Interview with Moses Uhegwu).

According to Moses Uhegwu, Nwannunu, on the death of his fathers, was taken to his maternal village at Umuajuju at the tender age of five. While he was away, some people from neighbouring villages encroached on the portions of land he inherited from his father. When he returned to his village after several years, he was left with no land to sustain himself and his family. He therefore solicited the assistance of one Ezenwoko Nwaegweke, a friend of his late father, from Amuzi village, who assisted him in reclaiming some plots of his land (*Ibid.*). In appreciation, Nwannunu transferred the ownership of a portion of the land where there was a pond "*Ohia Onu*, and palm trees to Ezenwoko Nwaegweke. Both men then took blood covenant to cement their friendship (*Ibid.*). However, this act of benevolence would eventually lead to a protracted land dispute between the two families after the first generation of those involved in the transfer of the land had passed away. The attempt by the progeny of Nwannunu in later years to reclaim the said land was seriously resisted by Ezenwoko's family. The dispute eventually ruptured the bond of friendship which the forefathers of the two families had cultivated and handed to their progenies but the situation did not provoke any physical combat or warfare. This was due to the intervention of the council of elders (*Ndi isi okpara*) from both villages who decided the case in favour of Ezenwoko's

family. The decision of the elders was based on the recognition of the fact that the forefathers of the two families entered into blood covenants when the land was transferred. The elders therefore reasoned that such an important agreement [oath] was binding on the offspring of Nwannunu. The elders therefore, poured libation with hot drink (*etieti*), threw pieces of kolanuts on the ground and stroked the *ofo*, which signified the symbol of purity, truth and uprightness, to seal their decision and consequently declared that any violators would incur the wrath of the earth goddess (*Ala*), the ancestors and the generality of all the spirit forces that governed the community (*Ibid.*). The conflict between the two families was thus resolved by the elders who were known to be impartial in decisions taking.

Murder

Incidents of murder were also factors that engendered conflicts in Igbo society in the pre-colonial period. In dealing with the issue of murder, it is necessary to distinguish four categories of cases as the peculiarity of the cases determined the method of resolution. The first category was when the victim and the murderer belonged to different communities; the second when they belonged to different quarters of the same community; the third when they belonged to different families or extended family in the same quarter and fourth when they belonged to the same family.

In resolving the first category of cases, emissaries made up of the victim's experienced and warlike kinsmen were sent to meet with the murderer's kinsmen with demands accompanied by ultimatum which must be met by the murderer's kinsmen. A state of war may be declared by the aggrieved kinsmen of the victim, if the murderer's kinsmen failed to meet their demand and deadline (Isichei, 1977:100). This situation is clearly illustrated in Chinua Achebe's (1959) *Things Fall Apart*, when the wife of Ogbuefi Udo from Umuofia village was murdered by a man from Mbaino. Umuofia immediately dispatched emissaries including the main character in the book, Okonkwo, to Mbaino with demands of a boy and girl as reparation and an ultimatum of when the demand should be met. War between the two communities was averted as Mbaino acceded to the demands of Umuofia.

Cases where the victim and the murderer belonged to different villages of the same town were usually resolved by the town council which would make the kinsmen of the murderer to pay reparation similar to what happened between Mbaino and Umuofia. If the murderer kinsmen refused to pay reparation, the victim kinsmen would decide to kill an important personality from the village of the murderer. This would settle the case and war would be averted. In some areas such as Ogidi and Umundu, the murderer would be forced to commit suicide by hanging himself on a tree. If he refused and escaped, his houses or that of his family would be set ablaze and their property and livestock forfeited to the community.

In the case of a man killing his kinsman, the case would be resolved by the town council ordering the murderer's family to pay reparation by handing over a boy if the victim was a boy or a girl if the victim was a girl, to the family of the victim. In some extreme cases, members of the family of the murderer would be ostracized from the community; their property confiscated or destroyed; and anyone of them found within the community after a specified period was caught and sold into slavery (Northcote, 1913:12). In cases of murder in which the murderers were not identified, those suspected to be involved in the crime were brought before the village shrine to take oath to prove their innocence. Those who agreed to take the oath were discharged and acquitted but those who refused were made to face the wrath of the law similar to the ones illustrated above. Murder of a kinsman in Igbo society was regarded as a serious crime committed against the earth goddess; an abomination (*nso ala*). The person who committed such a crime was either sentenced to death or banished from the land even after the kinsmen had paid reparation. However, if the murder was accidental or unpremeditated – female murder - such an individual would be banished from the community for a specified number of years while his house and other property destroyed to appease the gods and ancestors of the land. An example of such banishment can be found in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, when Okonkwo accidentally killed a kinsman and was subsequently banished from Umuofia for seven years - a period he spent at Mbanta, his maternal village (Achebe, 1959). Okonkwo's case would have been different if

the murder was premeditated. Conflicts usually resulted when the relations or kinsmen of the murderer refused to compensate the family of the victim.

Ezinihitte, one of the five communities in Mbaise division of present-day Imo State of Nigeria, witnessed this type of conflict in 1802 (N.A.I., C.S.O.26/3/No.27937). There had been series of inter-communal conflicts between some Ezinihitte villages most especially, Onicha and Eziudo and Onicha and Obizi among others. However, the murder in c.1802, of the son of Anusie of Umawada Onicha by a man from Amakpaka Eziudo led to a major conflict between the two communities. A man named Akatobi Osuagwu from Amakpaka Eziudo was said to have married three wives out of which, the first two had children for him while the youngest was yet to have. Akatobi was not comfortable with men coming very close to his wives especially his youngest wife whom people described as a paragon of beauty. However, Akatobi Osuagwu had on several occasions caught one Anusie's son exchanging pleasantries with his youngest wife. He then accused the young man of committing adultery with his wife and eventually conspired to kill him (Irozu, 1977:34-35). As tradition demanded that reparation be paid for such death, the family of the Akotabi was ordered to bring forward some young men from whom one would be chosen by the victim's family. It is no exaggeration that Elizabeth Isichei observes that "one of the things that struck the first Western visitors to Igbo land was the extent to which democracy was truly practiced" (Isichei, 1976:100). On the strength of tradition, the people of Umuawada-Onicha demanded compensation for their murdered kinsman but surprisingly, the people of Amakpaka-Eziudo refused to meet the demand. The refusal of Amakpaka-Ezuido to pay the reparation, led the people of Umuwawada to raid the community - a situation that led to war between them. The war assumed a wider dimension when the other Eziudo villages came to the aid of Amakpaka, and eventually, Onicha saw herself fighting in defense of her Umuawada village (Irozu, 1977). As it would be expected, the people of Umuawada appealed to the rest of Onicha for help. When the people of Onicha gathered at *Orie-Onicha* (market square), Anusie, the father of victim, spread maize seeds on the floor before the assembly which symbolically means that his first yam

tuber (first fruit) had been destroyed. In pre-colonial Igbo society, a man's wealth was normally measured by, among other things, the number of yam tubers he had in his barn. The first set of yam tubers were usually made up of the biggest in his barn and thus signified his wealth and strength. Therefore, by referring to the murder of his son as the destruction of his first set of yam tubers, Anusie meant that his family root had been cut off. The people of Onicha noted with regret that not only had their tradition been violated by murder of their son but also that the people of Eziudo had united to wage a war against them which lasted for one year (*Ibid.*).

In the course of the war, only one pitched battle – the battle of Ukpabi-Eziudo - was fought and that was in the first week. Ukpabi-Eziudo was the boundary town between Eziudo and Onicha on one side and between Eziudo and Obizi on another. These two warring parties exchanged gun fire in which both of them recorded heavy casualties but with Eziudo recording the highest. As a result of this, Eziudo constructed '*Mkpaelu*', a sort of stand post from where they spied the movement of Onicha troops. Onicha fighters eventually discovered this post and raided it in the night and captured the chief spy whom they took to their village square and displayed before their people before executing him. It was recorded that after this incident, both parties resorted to guerilla warfare and this led to increase in the death toll (*Ibid.*). However, after about one year of fighting, Eziudo sued for peace through the instrumentality of Chief Abii of Eziudo, an *Okenne* to Onicha. As already stated, *Okenne* played significant roles in resolving disputes involving his village and that of his grandparents in the pre-colonial Igbo society. It is noteworthy that the *Okenne* involvement in dispute resolution was usually out of their free will. In pre-colonial Igbo society, *Nwa-diala* or *Okenne* enjoyed immunity and was held in high esteem and so, could not be harmed by his maternal kinsmen as he was regarded as their blood relation (Ogbalu, 1983:27). Chief Abii thus, used his status as *Okenne* to appeal to warring parties to end the war. It is said that he volunteered to be killed if that would bring the war to an end and that he abandoned his homestead to build a house at the boundary between the two warring communities.

The intervention of Chief Ebii is said to have contributed greatly to bringing the war to an end.

At the end of the war, it was said that Eziudo recorded the highest casualties and tradition demanded that Onicha should pay reparation for these deaths. However, Onicha relied on the fact that the war was instigated by Umuawada of Onicha village and that she should be responsible for the reparation. The reparation was thus, never paid. So, although the war between Onicha and Eziudo eventually ended, the bitterness which it engendered still exists till date and this has made peaceful co-existence among the present generation of both communities problematic.

The conflict between Umueleagwa Onicha and Umuosisi Obizi villages in the course of the nineteenth century was the result of the murder of Nwohuocha Agbiogwu of Umueleagwa Onicha by Apu of Umuosisi Obizi. According to James Otuka, Nwohuocha was deliberately shot dead as a result of land dispute between him and his assailant. In line with Igbo tradition, the people of Umueleagwa demanded for one of Apu's sons as reparation for the murder of their kinsman. They insisted on being allowed to make a choice of whom among Apu's children to accept as reparation. They eventually demanded for a particular son of Apu who they alleged was the mastermind of the killing of late Nwohuocha (Irozu, 1977). This demand was not acceptable to Apu and his kinsmen. Umuosisi village thus refused to comply with the demand and instead, instructed the man whom Umueleagwa village demanded, to go into hiding. In the ensuing conflict with Obizi, Umueleagwa entered into alliance with Onicha, a neighbouring village while Obizi sought the assistance of Eziudo village. The battle was fought at the boundary between Onicha and Obizi with Umosisi and Umueleagwa at the frontiers of their respective communities. However, having suffered heavy casualty in the course of the war, Obizi sued for peace and as usual, stock was taken to determine the number of the casualties from both sides. When it was discovered that the death tolls was higher on the side of Obizi, Umueleagwa, as tradition demanded, requested to produce some men as reparation for the casualties suffered by Obizi.

Umueleagwa complied and that settled the conflicts between the two warring communities.

This method of reparation is not peculiar to the Igbo as it was also practiced among the Nuer people of Southern Sudan. But while the Nuer accepted cattle in lieu of human being, the Igbo insisted on human beings as reparation. Another example of conflict and conflict resolution among the pre-colonial Igbo is the case Chinatu, a spectator from Uhum village, who was murdered during a wrestling competition - *Igba mgba* at Mbutu in the 1890 (Interview with Ozurumba & Ohaya). This case engendered a serious conflict which destroyed the mutual relationship that had existed for centuries between the two villages. The various villages of Mbutu had met and divided themselves into groups, for the purpose of annual wrestling competition held every December. The competition took place at *Eke onye ugba* market in Umuduru. In the midst of the joy and exhilaration which was associated with the competition, a group of dancers gathered around the *Eke onye ugba* market dancing. It was however, customary that these dances were punctuated with gun shots to add colour and grandeur to the occasion. The gun shot which was fired by Onyebuch, from Umuduri village, accidentally killed a man from Uhim village. In the melee that followed, Onyebuchi was lynched by the kinsmen of the dead man – taking the law into their hands. This resulted in a serious conflict between Umuduru and Uhum which however did not result into pitched battles. The conflict was however resolved by the councils of elders of both villages who declared that since the life of the murderer had already been taken, peace should reign. The conflict which emanated from this murder eventually brought to an end, the wrestling competition which had provided avenues for social interaction and entertainment between two neighbouring villages (*Ibid.*).

This tradition of reparation did not totally eliminate conflicts in Igbo society in pre-colonial period as some communities were ready to trample on others by deliberately eliminating prominent individuals in such communities only to compensate for same with never-do-well or slaves bought from distant markets. This perhaps, accounted for the reason why in spite of the obligation to compensate

with human beings, communities were still prepared to go to war with each other (Obina, 1984:304).

Slave Raiding

Slave raiding was another factor that gave rise to conflict in Igbo society in the pre-colonial period, especially during the era of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Initially, people that were sold into slavery Igbo land were debtors, war captives and those who committed serious crimes ranging from murder, adultery, stealing, and defiling the ancestral shrines and sacred grove among others. It was only the wealthy members of the society who could keep slaves as they were basically used as domestic helps. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the European began to buy large number of slaves from the coast of West Africa. With the lucrative nature of the trade in human cargoes, some prominent Igbo began to organize the hunting and raiding of their fellow human beings for sale (Isichei, 1977). However, some poor members of the society could sell one or two out of their children in order to provide food and other basic needs for their families.

slave raids were rampant in the olden days and raids were conducted by specialized individuals who were hired to retrieve debts from debtors by capturing persons believed to be of great importance to the debtors. Such captives would be released to their families only when the debts were liquidated, otherwise, they were sold into slavery. At times, the pursuit of raiders and the desire to avenge raids led to wars between two communities. (*Ibid.*, 100).

Olaudah Equiano, has argued that most of the wars in pre-colonial Igbo society were waged for the purposes of acquiring slaves [of which he was a victim] or instigated by slave dealers. According to him,

From what I can recollect of these battles, they appear to have been irruptions of one little state or district on the other, to obtain prisoners or booty perhaps they were incited to this by those traders who bought the European goods I mentioned amongst us. Such a mode of obtaining

slaves in Africa is common; and I believe more are procured this way, and by kidnapping, than any other (Equiano, 1969).

However, there were occasions when neighbouring Igbo communities came together to enter into agreements, which were usually sealed with blood oaths [oath of friendship], against enslaving each other's citizens or selling them into slavery. Henceforth, persons from communities that entered into such accords took themselves as brothers and sisters who were not expected to harm each other.

Inheritance

Inheritance was also a source of conflict in pre-colonial Igbo society. Inheritance involves the sharing of the property of the dead (*Ike Ekpe*) among his children and other family members. In the pre-colonial period, the spiritual and temporal interests of each "*Usoekwu*" or "*ezi*" were vested in the oldest member of the family, and the law of inheritance was based on age alone to the exclusion of outstanding physical or mental endowments (N.A.E., CSC 1/85/3708). On the death of the eldest man in *Usoekwu*, the man next to him in age took his position. In Igbo society, the property of a man on his death was inherited by his sons while that of a woman inherited by her daughters. However, the cardinal principle of succession to the leadership of family, village or town in Igbo land was primogeniture, that is, the first son or eldest man, known as "*Okpala*" or "*Diokpa*" succeeding his father or village head (Obi, 1953:206-208).

In the pre-colonial period, the method by which family property was shared among the members of a monogamous family differed from the way family property was shared from that of a polygamous family. On the death of the head of a family, his eldest son exclusively inherited his personal "*ofo*", and other objects of worship. The eldest son also exclusively inherited his late father's *Obi* (the house where he lived and died), distinct plot of land known as *ala isi obi* or *ani isi obi* – a plot of land specifically meant for the head of the family (Nwogugu, 1974:40), furniture and dresses. The other properties such as farm land, farming implements, economic trees, livestock etc. were shared among his male children (Chubb, 1961:40).

On the death of a man without male a child, the eldest brother had the right to inherit his property but if the deceased was the eldest, his immediate younger brother inherited his property. According to Igbo tradition, women do not possess the right to inherit land. Neither the daughters nor the widows of the deceased have right in respect of their father's/husband's landed property but have the right to be catered for by the person who inherited their father's/husband's property (Obi, 1953:202). In some parts of Igbo land however, women had the right to inherit their father's property. In Idemili for instance, a daughter who had performed the *nrachi* ceremony could inherit her father's property.

In Igbo society the *Okpala* played an important role with regard to his deceased father's landed property, other than the family house the deceased lived and died. Since he held his father's property in trust for his brothers, it was his duty to manage and administer them for their collective benefit. However, in the exercise of this duty, the *Okpala* was accountable to his other brothers (Interview with Nnamdi Ezenwoko). If he desired to sell or lease any of the plots of land he had to inform his brothers who were also stakeholders.

However, family inheritance generated a lot of conflicts in Igbo society in the pre-colonial period because some eldest sons after inheriting their father's property especially landed property converted some to themselves by planting economic trees like palm trees on them. Attempt by the other brothers to reclaim such property from their eldest brothers usually led to conflict in pre-colonial period, just as it is today (*Ibid.*). Attempt by younger sons to outwit their eldest brother, *Okpala*, in the management of their late father's property was also a major cause of conflicts in pre-colonial Igbo society. This was the major cause of conflict that occurred in the family of Ahuruonye of Mgbedela village (Ngwa) in the pre-colonial period (*Ibid.*). Ahuruonye had married five wives who bore him many sons and daughters. On his death, his eldest son, Uzoma inherited all the property and was charged with the responsibility of taking care of every other member of the family which he obliged. But about seven years of their father's death, his immediate younger brother and some other members of the family conspired against him and unlawfully took

charge of administering the property. This resulted into conflict between the *Okpala* and his brothers. The *Okpala* was almost murdered in the process of trying to prevent his younger brothers from conspiring against him. In fact, he was said to have received several machete cuts in the conflicts that erupted between him and his brothers. As a result, the council of elders intervened and decided that the family property be shared among the sons for peace to reign (*Ibid.*). Thus, Ahuruonye's family property was shared amongst his sons with the eldest giving the lion's share. The sharing was effected by the council of elders in conjunction with the representatives of the maternal family of the deceased children. At the end of the sharing, the deceased children provided refreshment of pounded yam *fufu*, kola nuts, palm wine and *ugba*, an Igbo delicacy made from oil bean to the elders as a sign of reconciliation (*Ibid.*).

Sharing of property of the deceased among his children in some cases, could take up to two days depending on the quantity of property most especially if the landed property were based in distant locations. In the course of this sharing, the deceased eldest son, *okpara* and the son next to him were expected to provide one goat each, while the remaining sons collectively provide one goat. These goats were slaughtered and the meat used to prepare food for the elders and for reconciliation purposes in case there was dispute over property before the intervention of the elders (*Ibid.*).

Oracles and Resolution of Dispute

The Igbo relied on some aspects of their culture such as oracles and deities in the resolution of conflicts. In pre-colonial period, most people and communities took their problems to the oracles in search of the divine impartial wisdom of the gods (Alagoa, 2001). The oracles are extra human forces usually represented by carved wood, stone or iron, rivers, trees and hills. Igbo oracles are believed to possess supernatural powers and so, played important roles in dispensing justice among the people. The Igbo invoked the judgment of the Oracle by special appeal to them through their priests – *Ndi Eze Mmuo*, who usually administered oaths (*Idu isi*) to the accused person(s) brought before them. Each community had its deities and idol,

some of which were believed to be more powerful than the others. Some Igbo oracles included *Ogwugwu*, goddess of fertility and child bearing, *Aro*, goddess of season and weather among others. However the four powerful ritual shrines among the Igbo were the *Ibini Ukpabi* of Arochukwu, the *Igwe K' Ala* of Umuoha, the *Agbala* of Awka and the *Amadioha/Kamalu* of Ozuzu (Uchendu, 1965:35). The duties of the priests were among others to serve the oracle and offer sacrifice to it on behalf of the people, in accordance with the stipulations of the *Dibia Afa* (diviner). It was *Dibia Afa* whose responsibility it was to relate to the people the wishes and prophecies of the oracles. It was also his duties to appease them [the oracles] on behalf of the people and communities to avert their anger. The oracles could be compared to the modern high court because they were, for the people the only legal institution with an appellate jurisdiction. However, only serious cases that defied the resolution of the traditional machinery of conflict resolution were referred to the oracles (Oltentbert, 1971:212). The Igbo regarded the oracle as an omniscient judge of all human affairs and that was why disputes were only referred to them for adjudication as the last resort - a sort of appellate court (Amadi, 1978:25). In spite the fact that the institution of the oracle lacked any visibly constituted executive machinery, it however, had enforcement capabilities. It was capable of compelling whoever disregarded or faulted its rulings to obey.

Mysterious and controversial cases which defied solution by the traditional authorities were usually referred by the Igbo to the oracles, especially the *Ibiniukpabi*. Such cases included accusation of sorcery (*Mgbasi*) witchcraft, among others. When such cases were brought before the oracle, the priest opened the proceeding by pouring palm wine or *Etieti*, or local gin as libation on the shrine; a piece of kola nut was also thrown at the oracle in a loud voice saying,

Umu gi, your children have come to seek truth and peace. He, who knows the truth and conceals it, kill him, he *who* takes sides, kill him, let justice and fair play reign supreme (Interview with Evuka Okechukwu).

Then the accused person(s) would then be made to swear to an oath of the innocence before the oracle. Oaths administered in Igbo oracles were regarded as legally binding on the people involved. After swearing, a period of seven days or a year was given depending on the seriousness of the crime committed within which the oath was expected to act. The justice of the oracle took its course on the guilty persons by killing them but if the accused did not die within the specified period, he was presumed innocent and thus exonerated. Such persons would then go to the shrine with gifts to thank the oracle for vindicating him. On the other hand, if the accused died, his corpse and property would be deposited at the shrine of the oracle and the family would appease the oracle with costly sacrifice. The people had a firm belief that the verdicts of *Ibiniukpabi* were usually correct and represented the wishes of God (*Chukwu*) and the ancestors. However, some of the priests had intricate chains of agents almost everywhere who knew about the matter under dispute which they conveyed with as much details as possible to their masters. In such situation, verdict was narrated by the thunderous hair-raising and fearful tone of *Chukwu* himself. Under such circumstance, justice was perverted through bribes while innocent people were said to have been killed by *Ibiniukpabi*. Ironically, such victims were not killed rather they were led through a dark, labyrinthine tunnel to a secret depot in the forest, where they were bound and then transported to the coastal slave markets for sale. At a diversionary exit from the tunnel, a shallow pool that led into the forest was painted with the blood of animal such as goat, to create the impression that the victims(s) had actually been sacrificed while the guilty persons went home free (Onyewuenyi, 2002:431). This situation was however, not a general rule but an exception in the method of conflict resolution in pre-colonial Igbo society.

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that continuous interaction among the individuals and communities cannot always be peaceful. Conflicts will always occur due to ideological, political, social and economic differences which usually resulted in rivalry and competition. The pre-colonial Igbo society cannot be said to differ as

individuals and communities engaged in one form of interaction or the other - a situation which at times led to conflicts. This paper therefore examines the varied factors that engendered conflicts in Igbo society and how the conflicts were resolved for the benefit of the individuals and communities.

Igbo society as in other pre-colonial Nigerian societies witnessed one form of conflicts or the other. These conflicts resulted from murder, land dispute, trade, witchcraft, inheritance among others. There existed within Igbo society, various machinery by which these conflicts were resolved. Such machinery included the village councils, oracles and in some cases *Okenne* or *nwa-diala*. These individuals and institutions usually took their decisions based on the tradition as instituted by the ancestors. They were therefore impartial, fair and objective in their judgments and decisions. Whatever the status of an individual – rich or poor, powerful or weak – in the society, he/she had access to justice. Conflicts in pre-colonial Igbo society were resolved in the spirit of brotherhood.

It is however, the abandonment of these highly respected traditions and institutions in favour of modern judicial system that has led to escalation of conflicts between individuals and communities in Igbo society today. Unlike in the past, obtaining justice today is usually based on the financial resources available to the parties in dispute. The parties who are able to hire the highly reputed attorneys are most likely to get favourable justice. In order to ensure peaceful coexistence among the various communities in Igbo land, it is the view of this paper that conflicts resulting from tradition be subjected to the adjudication of traditional judicial system.

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