

## **Ezza-Ojiegebe and Mgbalukwu-Obeagu ISU Intermittent Conflicts of 1910-2007: A Review of Migration and Culture of Hospitality to Internally Displaced Persons**

**Ani, Kelechi Johnmary\* & Osisioma, Samuel Ugochukwu\*\***

*Lecturers, Department of History and Strategic Studies, Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria*

### **ABSTRACT:**

*The Nigerian State from the era of amalgamation till date has experienced one form of conflict or another. Some of these conflicts became frontline issues for international and national debate, while others were completely localized due to the lack of interest of scholars and its negligence by the media in course of their agenda setting role. This paper looks at the Ezza-Ojeigbe and the Mgbalukwu-Obeagu Isu intermittent conflicts of 1910-2007. It adopted document analysis methodology to show that the conflict generated massive loss of lives and properties as well as the pull and push effects on internally displaced persons. It also accounted for the forms of hospitality these casualties of the conflict received and called for private-public partnership in proactively nipping conflicts as well as reducing multi-dimensional burdens on the victims of conflict in contemporary Nigeria.*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The Ezza people have been presented as the unsung warriors of Igboland (Anyanwu, 2005A:17-25). This is because of their history of brevity and gallantry in pre-colonial warfare across many Igbo communities as well as their history of warfare with their neighbours. They engaged in mercenary warfare in many places like the Ohofia, Edda as well as Ariba and adopted the strategies of warfare that easily leads to the destruction and victory over the enemies by those communities that invited and paid for their services (Isichie, 1977). It would be recalled that the rise of European imperialism witnessed massive opposition, revolt and armed opposition among the people of Igboland in general and Ezza in particular. In that era of colonialism, the Ezza people rose up in their numbers to challenge the increasing presence of the Europeans in Northeastern Igboland (Anyanwu and Ijoma, 1999; Anyanwu, 2004: 55-70; Anyanwu, 2003: 51-62; Anyanwu, 2005B:1-6). While the Ezza people were traditionally migrating from one location to another, the wars of resistance with the British colonial lords pushed many of their townsmen to resettle in new Ezza colonies, outside their ancestral homeland. Ezza Ojiegebe is one of these new areas of Ezza settlements, outside their ancestral home, which are generally referred to as Ezza Diaspora (Onuoha and Ani, 2011: 1-14; Afoke and Nworie, 2010; Echiagu, 1998). It is in

those new settlements (Ezza Diaspora) that inter-communal conflicts became intermittent and recurrent.

Inter-communal conflicts have remained a progressive challenge in the contemporary human history, especially among Nigerian communities. This paper presented the intermittent communal conflict amongst the Ojiegbe and Mgbalukwu/Obeagu Isu of Ebonyi State, Nigeria, which occurred in 1910, 1959, 1966, 1975, 1986, 1989, 1993 and from 2005 to 2007. The researchers adopted hybridized method of data collection through extensive interview and written sources analysis, which revealed that the conflict generated both primary and secondary migration patterns. The paper showed that the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) received hospitality in form of land lease, support to build and rebuild houses, marital and business support as well as integrating them into the socio-political society of the other Isu and Ezza communities where they became new settlers. It recommended multi-dimensional private and public efforts towards eliminating the multiplier post-conflict problems of negative conflict psychology, rehabilitation and capacity building.

## **BACKGROUND HISTORY**

The Ojiegbe, Mgbalukwu and Obeagu communities are three different communities that were traditionally found in Isuland, Onicha Local Government Area, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The Ojiegbe people, on their side were the descendants of Ezza community, who moved from their kiths and kiln (the Ezza people) to Isuland. They were given a portion of land by the Mgbalukwu and the Obeagu people of Isu to live and pay tribute to them after assisting them in fighting and winning their then Onicha enemies. However, the growth in the population of the inhabitants of the land, made both the Ojiegbe people to extend their area of settlement, on one hand, while on the other hand, the Mgbalukwu and Obeagu communities desired to stop the rapid expansion and annexation of more land by the Ojiegbe people (Dada and Ani, 2009). Thus, the long-run effect became an inter-communal conflict which started in 1910. For the next ninety seven years, the three communities recorded many documented and undocumented conflicts till 2007, when the conflict was resolved.

Eze (2007:2) recorded that the communities fought each other in 1910, 1959, 1966, 1975, 1986, 1989, and 1993 as well as from 2005 to 2007. The years of the conflicts were characterised by massive killings on both sides, destruction of properties and all manners of conflict-driven violence. In 2005, some townsmen from the affected communities invited the Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Centre of Ebonyi State into the conflict. The centre searched for international support for the management of the conflict. Soon, the Centres' peace initiative started in 2006. The sponsors included *MANAS UNIDAS* of Spain, Catholic Relief Services, and *CORDE AIDE*. On 20<sup>th</sup> November, after a long-held meeting at St Michaels' Parish Isu, a religio-cultural motivated boundary was accepted by the trio communities. Rev Fr. Prof. Ede after a strong religious ritual that was widely attended by the inhabitants of the conflict-ravaged communities planted a cross and offered covenant prayer for the three communities on the accepted boundary on 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2007. Later, on 29<sup>th</sup> November, 2007 a peace pact was

signed by the three communities in the office of the Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Centre, Abakaliki. Since then, all forms of post conflict integration, rehabilitation, inter communal marriages and inter-communal trades have started. This work is an assessment of the migration pattern of Internally Displaced Persons and the culture of hospitality shown to them. The migration pattern was in two major forms; primary and secondary conflict-induced migrations.

## CONFLICT-BASED MIGRATIONS

Migration is a very important factor of contact in the conflict or war-time social dynamics and relations within and amongst nations as well as societies. Individuals and groups continually fled from areas where there is recurrent history of conflicts and war. The term primary migration would herein refer to the initial population dispersal from the different original settlement the people at the wake of the conflicts. The wave of primary conflict migration started when the Obeagu people invited some warrior sons of Ezza from Onueke Imoha in present Ezza South Local Government Area of the same state to come and assist them in the inter-communal conflict against the Onicha Igboeze people that were encroaching into their ancestral land. This band of warriors who were traditional experts in guerrilla warfare landed and helped the Obeagu people to expel the Onicha people from their land 'with the speed of light'. While some people referred to them generally as the Ezza Agu at that time, others saw them as the Ezza Obeagu. They demanded for a piece of land, which was happily granted to them as an act of appreciation for their gallantry. The land which extended to the Obeagu boundary after Afor Ogboji market, near Ogbu Udene and Ebo Egu Ogudu was so vast that some of their Ezza kiths and kiln living in Onueke ancestral home and those searching for inhabitable space in Ezza 'Diaspora' (a term used to refer to other Ezza settlements in Igbo land, outside their original Onueke and other nearby homelands) began to migrate and settle there.

The Mgbalukwu people entered this primary migratory picture when the quest for more land by the new Ezza settlers forced them to approach the Mgbalukwu for a piece of land for habitation in their then largely unfarmed Abanaba swampy land which created a natural vegetation that separated them from the Nara Unateze people of the current Nkanu West Local Government Area of Enugu State. That plea was easily granted without suspicion of future negative implications. As time went, the time-bomb in the relations of these hitherto friends, who jointly fought in the Isu-Onicha conflict, became population growth and its pressure on land, the culture of Ezza people paying tributes to the Isu landlords as well as the imperial culture of taxation during the colonial period. To make matter worse, the newer generation of Ezza offspring in the area and those that joined them later that had a poor trace of their settlement history began to avoid and question the culture of paying tributes to their original landlords.

Consequently, by the time the British colonial lords landed, they worsened the already heated-scenario, with their inhuman taxation on the people, at a time; the Ezza people there were already resisting the payment of royalty to their landlords. Unfortunately, the terrible and widespread negligence of the colonial masters to the cultural history of the people as long as their

exploitative interest was involved, divided the Ezza people in Isuland of Obeagu and Mgbalukwu into the Afikpo and Abakaliki Divisions, where they would pay tax to avoid the threat of clashes between the Abakaliki and Afikpo District Officers (For more on the migratory and economic implications, see; Ani, 2012: 221-237). To resolve the conflict, a tax boundary was drawn from Efuru stream at Okpuru Nwaneke pond back to Mgbalukwu by the British colonial lords. “Those who live between Mgbalukwu and Efuru stream were to pay tax at Afikpo, while those who live between Efuru stream to Abanaba were to pay at Abakaliki Division though living in traditional Isuland that is in Afikpo Division. Those who paid to Afikpo were given the name Ojiegbe to differentiate them from their kiths and kiln who paid to Abakaliki” (Ani, 2008:5). Due to this tax policy, there was migration from one Ezza settlement to another within their new locations in order to pay the least amount of tax to the colonial lords at that time.

The next stage of the migration, here-in referred to as secondary migration is the form of migration that characterised the inter-communal conflict era migrations. This is the form of migration that took place in the years of intermittent conflicts among the Ojiegbe, Mgbalukwu and Obeagu people. Amongst those who migrated in this phase were individuals and groups that fled from collapsed fortunes due to the conflicts as they continually moved to other parts of the Isu and Ezza clan thereby making them a strong factor for the culture of hospitality in intra and inter-group relations both with their kiths and kiln as well as their neighbours. Ani (2008:32) revealed that “the productive population fled the communities for their security”. The migration was not only done by the productive population but by anybody who felt threatened and has anywhere to migrate to as well as the means to do that throughout the phases of the conflict. Following the onset of the 1910 and later in the 1959 conflicts, some people of Ojiegbe decided to relocate to the other side of Isuland, where they can pay their colonial tax at a cheaper rate and sometimes evade it. They were those who crossed-over to the Abakaliki Division side of the divide, due to patriotic and micro-nationalist sentiments that arose in the course of the conflict as Abakaliki Division was the division of their origin while Afikpo was the division of their Isu landlords that have now become enemies.

The post Nigerian independence era witnessed conflicts in 1966, 1975, 1986, 1989, and 1993, 2005-2007. After the conflicts of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were court actions at Isu Native Court, Afikpo High Court and the Court of Appeal, Port Harcourt, which all favoured the Isu landlords but when the Ojiegbe could not grant the wish of the courts for continued tributes, the scope and intensity of the conflict escalated, hence, the 1980's and 1990's witnessed the few years settlement of mobile police men in the buffer zones of the communities and its inherent effects. One of which was that their coming created the ‘militarization’ of the area and increased fear thereby forcing people to migrate farther. Again, the mobile police officers engaged in all forms of exploitation of the people’s resources while putting a number of girls in a family way in Mgbalukwu and Obeagu, whom they would finally abandon to their fate. While the guerrilla fighters from both sides attacked these security personnel, it was the contingent of soldiers that were sent in 2007 that quelled the progressive confrontation of 2005-2007, which caused widespread destruction of lives and properties as well as massive migrations within and outside the state and the need for intensified hospitality in order to reduce the effects of the conflicts on the victims and casualties.

## THE CULTURE OF HOSPITALITY

The culture of hospitality is manifested in many ways to the casualties of the intermittent conflicts, one of which was to assist them and members of their family with a portion of land in safer areas. In the post 1910 conflict, many of those internally displaced persons from Ojiegbe relocated to Nkomoro, Ezzagu and other parts of Ezzaland, like Ezza Ezillo and Ezza Akpoga while those displaced from Mgbalukwu and Obeagu simply migrated to other parts of Obeagu and Mgbalukwu as well as other Isu communities to ask their kiths and kiln for a portion of land, which they would develop into their dwelling place. Ani (2008) revealed that peasant farmers went to places like Mgbaleze, Nara, Umuniko, Agueke, Umuanegu and Agu Nwanja to farm on the Isu side. When the village, kindred or kith and kiln that have large expanse of land agrees to grant the land, the Internally Displaced Person(s) would then give some keg of palm wine, goat and kola nut in appreciation for the land. The elders of the village, kindred or family that is giving out the land to the displaced victim(s) of conflict will fix the boundaries using some specialized traditional trees (*Ogbu*) around the borders. Some others would grant a portion of land on lease, by the same group of people mentioned above.

The difference between the act of granting the land as lease and giving it as a permanently sealed property is that in the later, some ritual prayers is made to God and the ancestors, who are believed to be the spiritual custodian of properties. They are equally believed to be the determinants of the future peaceful as well as prosperous settlement/ exploration of the land. The traditional Nigerian societies “believed that whatever cultural heritage they had was safe with their ancestors” (Eze-Uzoamaka, 2007:100).

It should be noted here that the act of granting land on lease is equally different from the act of annual sharing of plantable land. In the Isu and Ezza clans, due to the large expanse of land left to fallow for years; communities, villages, kindred and families usually take those who needed a portion of land at the end of the conflict and give them portions to cultivate. This group of people which is mainly made up other settlers in the communities, few indigenous farmers (as most indigenes have large land mass to cultivate on) and Internally Displaced Persons would be given different plots of land to cultivate on. “Nowadays with much more inhabitants, the villages usually return to the same land every third year! The ceremonies that villages follow to determine where they will farm are not as elaborate in all communities” (Steensel, 2009: 43).

Another act of hospitality was to erect a house where Internally Displaced Persons can live. Ironically, the Igbo traditional family system was extended and not nuclear in nature, hence the members of a displaced family seeking for assistance to build a house often comprise the surviving members of a nuclear family, the grandparents and related uncles as well as aunts (with their dependent in some cases). While other men of goodwill help the male members of the Internally Displaced Persons to erect the structures, the women fetch the water, prepare their delicacies as well as plaster, polish the wall and paint them. Sometimes, the wall paintings carried the traditional messages of their conflict experiences; their struggle, the loss of loved ones and the pictorial story of their moment of victory. “The enclosure of the *Onuama* (extended

family) for example, was a way to oblige the members of the family to remain, at least physically, within the family fold. Also, the presence of several nuclear families within the same enclosure engendered inevitably a competitive spirit in the members. Hence, each nuclear family could be seen as always working for its own unity and development in a struggle not to let itself down by washing its dirty linen in the public" (Aligwekwe, 1991:50).

There was equally, the culture of integration into the socio-political system of the community. In the course of the conflicts, many Obeagu and Mgbalukwu people relocated to other parts of Isu clan, where their 'customary-believed elder brothers' did not waste time to integrate them into their socio-political organization. On the other hand, it was far easier for the migrating Ojiegbe people to be integrated into the socio-political organization of other Ezza communities in Igbo land based on the traditional culture that allows the sons of a man to relocate and join other Ezza kiths and kiln, while leaving the father's structure and compound for the last son.

The culture of hospitality was also manifested in another form. Some of these Internally Displaced Persons were given *Ogwu* (medicinal and magical item) as part of the people's hospitality. In Igbo traditional philosophy, it is not easy to pin the concept of *Ogwu* down to a definite meaning as it is used for a lot of things. One of which is that Native Doctors (*Ndi Dibia*) prepares it as a curative medicine for those wounded in the course of a conflict. It was equally used for the treatment of ailments that have befallen people, especially women and children in the course of the conflicts. Significant was the fact that it was used for the treatment of ailments that have befallen people, especially women and children in the course of the years of conflicts. The medicinal and magical item was equally given to some the displaced persons as a tool of protection, which would ensure their safety, whenever they would visit their conflict ravaged home. However, another brand of the *Ogwu* called *Odeshi* (Insurance) was given to those who were to go for a repeat attack in the recurrent years of the conflicts.

*Ogwu*, according to their belief, could be used for protection or aggression that is for both defence and attack. It could be used to enhance (defence and security). As protection, people use *Ogwu* to ward off the malignant *Ogwu* of other people. It could be an anti-dote. It could also be used to ward off the power of spirits generally and especially the powers of malignant spirits. It is used to protect oneself against dangers such as the possibility of epidemic, drowning and to protect oneself from bullets or even machet-cut. During the civil war in Nigeria, most Igbo soldiers who fought on the Biafran side had protective *Ogwu* in one form or the other. So also did those who fought on the Federal side (Nwala, 1985:68).

## CONCLUSION:

This paper has presented the nature of primary and secondary migrations that the Internally Displaced Persons in the Ezza-Ojiegbe and Mgbalukwu-Obegu Isu people engaged-in during their ninety seven years intermittent conflicts. It revealed that the Ezza society has remained an

example of a people in transition and migration from one part of Igboland to another (Anyanwu, 2005C). However, it went on to show that the massive negative effects of the conflicts on the lives and properties of the people forced the neighbours of the victims and casualties to offer different forms of assistance to the victims and casualties of the conflicts. There were many dimensions to the loss of lives and properties as well as its negative effects on societal building in the communities affected by the conflict. Many of the abandoned and destroyed building are still there. The communities have not aborted the memories of their lost ones, while the Agbani-Amagunze-Ezza-Isu federal highway is still largely deserted and unused, thanks to the years of the conflicts.

In conclusion, the paper has shown how the internally displaced persons have migrated from one place to another, where they received different forms of support. However, there is the need for multi-dimensional private and public efforts towards eliminating the multiplier post-conflict problems of negative conflict psychology, rehabilitation of the largely unemployed and abandoned guerrilla fighters in all the communities as well as human capital development in the current post-conflict peace building stage. This is an assignment that cannot be easily implemented by the different community development initiatives and unions that have been ravaged by the conflicts. Thus, the leadership of Onicha Local Government Area and Ishielu Local Government Area as well as the Ebonyi State Government must as a matter of urgency begin to implement special post-conflict reconstruction projects that are principally targeted on the Ezza-Ojiegbe and Mgbalukwu-Obegu ISU people. The role of civil society groups in peace building and developmental initiatives cannot be neglected at a time their presence remains largely unfelt. The assistance of domestic and international Non Governmental Organizations in the peace building process is very urgent.

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