

INTRA-COMMUNAL CONFLICTS IN NEMBE-OGBOLOMABIRI: A STUDY OF THE ISONGUFURO AND ISENA-ASAWO CONFLICT, 2000-2005.

STEVE IBUOMO LARRY PhD.

Department of History and Diplomacy,
Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island,
Bayelsa State.

AND

RAPHAEL ORAINGO ELDRED

Department of History and Diplomacy,
Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island,
Bayelsa State.

Abstract

Conflict, which is a disagreement or clash of interest between people is an inevitable and integral part of human life. While it is difficult to see a society without conflict, the case of Nembe-Ogbolomabiri has become worrisome as it appears conflict has become a norm in this community and has largely contributed to its underdevelopment. This work examines the Isongufuro and Isena-Asawo conflict in Nembe-Ogbolomabiri, one of the prominent conflicts that shaped the history of the community. In doing this, the study takes into cognizance, the objectives of the two cult groups that were engaged in the conflict, the cause(s) of the conflict, its resolution and impacts. The study will create awareness concerning the Isongufuro and Isena-Asawo conflict and bring to the fore, the effects of the conflict on the land and people of Ogbolomabiri. Significantly, the work reveals that the conflict between these two cult groups impacted both negatively and positively on the people of the community. The research adopted the historical method. Data is collected from both primary and secondary sources and is both descriptive and analytical.

Introduction

It is very hard to see a society without conflict. Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human existence. This means that as far as human beings are in existence, they are bound to have conflict. Conflict is a clash of interests or disagreements between parties or people that often turn out violence (Etekpe, 2007). The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defined conflict as a serious disagreement between parties or people with opposing opinions. In the same vein, Cambridge Dictionary also defined conflict as a serious disagreement between parties, groups or people with two different opinions which usually turn out violence.

According to Ambily Etekpe (2007), conflict does not only mean parties or people involving in a serious disagreement that often turn out violent, he says a single person can have conflict with himself. In order to buttress his point, Ambily Etekpe (2007) calls this type of conflict intra-personal. Accordingly, he says two ideas or opinions may disagree in someone's mind which may probably cause the person into a state of confusion (Etekpe, 2007). While it is very difficult to highlight a society or a community without conflict as conflict is seen as a clash of interest or disagreement between parties or people that often turn out violent, the case of Nembe- Ogbolomabiri has become a norm which perhaps has largely contributed to its underdevelopment. The conflict between Isongufuro and Isena-Asawo cult groups in Ogbolomabiri in the year 2000 is a practical example. The conflict between these two cult

groups has created both negative and positive effects on the land and the people of Ogbolomabiri in Nembe Local Government area of Bayelsa State.

Nembe is a plural name for both Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri. Talking about Nembe is equally referring to these two communities, though they are very close in terms of location and they also share the same environmental features. Nembe- Ogbolomabiri is located within latitudes 4: 33 to 40:40 North and between longitudes 6000 to 6027 East of the Greenwich Meridian (Ama-Ogbari, 2014). It is bounded on the east by Akuku Toru and Abua-Odual Local Government Areas of Rivers State and in the North and West by Ogbia Local Government Area, in the South by Brass Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The area is characterized by rivulets, creeks, creek-lets and canals. Climatic conditions of the area are high temperature, high humidity and heavy rainfall.

The area experience both rainy and dry seasons (Ama-Ogbari, 2014). The rainy season starts from July and ends in November, while the dry season starts from November and ends in July. These seasons also determines the level and maturity of their agricultural productions. The mangrove trees, palm trees, white and black afaras are among the physical features in the environment. The fauna of the area include animals of different species such as monkeys, antelopes, tortoise, crocodiles, alligators, Iguana, and grass cutters. Others include snails, crabs, crayfish, fishes, oysters and hippopotamus among the water resources found in the environment.

The land is very swampy and the soil is very fertile for agricultural production. However, the whole area is surrounded by water, creeks, lakes and canals. AS a result of this, the people engage themselves more in fishing than farming. The Nembe-Ogbolomabiri people are Ijo people and they speak the eastern Ijo language. According to Kay Williams, they belong to the group of language referred to as the "Ijoid language" (Williamson, 1988).

Nembe in Historical Times

The origin, migration and settlement of Nembe is a bit complex. Nembe is a collective name for Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri. Both of them have the same origin. According to D.O. Ockiya (2008), there is no account to justify or ascertain the first settlers of Nembe. However, he gave an account of the second line of settlers in Nembe. These were Opu-Bigabiri, Kala-Bigabiri, Obolo, Onyo and Oro. D.O. Ockiya (2008) reveals that Opu-Bigabiri and Kala-Bigabiri were named after their founders. These communities according to him were founded by settlers from the neighbouring Ogbeyan town and they have existed before the advent of Obolo, Olodi, Onyo and Oro. In the same vein, Alagoa and Okorobia (2011) in their work, *Nembe Se Congress...* reveals that the early settlers or migrants came from the Central Niger Delta led by Olodi, Obolo and Onyo. They founded Olodiana, Oboloma and Onyoma. Alagoa and Okorobia further reveals that these communities were ruled by kings called *Pere*. For instance, Olodiana *Pere* ruled Olodiana, Oboloama *Pere* ruled Oboloama and Onyoma *Pere* ruled Onyoma.

According to E.J. Alagoa and A.M. Okorobia (2011), these settlements did not last as the kings quarrelled and conflicted among themselves which eventually led to their self-destruction and virtual extinction. Another group of migrants came from Obiama but did not settle at the metropolis rather they established at the littoral communities of Okpoama, Olodiana, Twon as well as the Cape Formosa communities of Beletiana, Egweama and Liama, all of which are

presently in Brass Local Government Area located along the Atlantic Ocean (Ama-Ogbari, 2014). In its second period of development, Alagoa asserts that a group of Itsekiri (Iselemo) migrants arrived with *Ogidiga*. A war god and a sacred sword, *Ada*. The new arrivals were settled at the Oromabiri quarters of the metropolis (Alagoa, 1972). Their *Ogidiga* eventually provided the means of unifying all the component communities of the city-states through religious ties and sanctions. A third group of migrants came from Abureni (mini) area to the immediate northeast of Nembe metropolis.

From this period, a single line of Kings ruled the metropolis until about the 17th century when as a result of an un-reconciled succession dispute, the kingdom was split into two. Among the rulers of the United Nembe Kingdom were Kala-Ekule, Ogbodo, Nembe, Owagi, Ogio, Peresuo, Obia, Basuo and Ogbodo. Ogbodo gave way to Mingi and moved across the creek to Bassambiri making a dual monarchical system in Nembe (Alagoa and Okorobia, 2011).

Alagoa and Okorobia posits that the kingship institution laid by these settlements gave birth to the political development of Nembe people. Accordingly, they asserts that the people adopted a fragmentary system of administration. At the head was the Amanyanabo (king) who piloted the affairs of the people. There was also Orukariwei and Ogulasuwei. The Orukariwei was the chief priest who conveyed the messages of the gods to the people. The Ogulasuwei on the other hand was the spokesman who speak over all the issues presented before the people.

According to E.J. Alagoa (1972), the position of the Ogulasuwei was equal to prime minister and that; it was only an outstanding, eloquent and well-disciplined person that was allowed for this position. The Ogulasuwei was also like a diplomat who was tactful and careful in his expressions. The administration of the people also included a Council of Elders who worked with the Amanyanabo in order to yield the needed developments. Nembe just like the Greeks, decades before now, has developed a city-state system along the line of Kalabari, Okrika and Ibani (Bonny) in the Eastern Niger Delta. This system enabled the king (Amanyanabo) to easily administer control via the War Canoe Houses. This system evolved during the period of both the legitimate and illegitimate trades. The houses evolved into commercial trade outfits as founders or leaders of these houses organised members of their houses to actively paddle big canoes containing products to carryout trading activities with their European counterparts (Alagoa, 1980, Ikimi, 1977).

However, during the colonial period, the administrative structure of the people was affected. The British established native courts and made them places of settling disputes. The introduction of these courts reduced the powers and the authorities of the traditional rulers. Matters were no longer taken to the Amanyanabo's place for settlement as matters were referred to that court (Sorgwe, 1999). Today, the position of the Orukariwei and Ogulasuwei has gone extinct.

The people of Nembe-Ogbolomabiri also evolved a well-defined social system right from their historical past. According to E.J. Alagoa and Atei Mark Okorobia (2011), the social institutions of the people include religion, marriage and the various recreational activities such as Wrestling, festivals, football competitions etc. Religiously, the people have a bond that ties them together as one. Though the people served different kinds of gods in the pre-colonial times but above all they believed in the existence of a Supreme Being and that all other small gods were mere messengers to this Supreme Being. They called him *Ayiba* (who creates). The

people also believed their national deity whom they think protect and provide for them in times of needs. This deity was called *Ogidiga* or *Nembe-Nyana-Oru*. It was brought to Nembe by the second set of migrants who came from Iselenmo (Itsekiri). The deity was represented by the *Ekekoru* (Royal Python). However, the traditional religion of the people as well as the act of worshiping different kinds of gods is no longer well pronounced among the people as most of them are now converted to Christianity in modern time. Most of the people now worship God in churches and perverted the cultural practices of the people.

Isongufuro Cult Group

The date of the formation of the Isongufuro cult group is still of historical research. An oral interview held with Terry Thomas (2021), one of the members of the group reveals that the group was formed in the early 90s. This cult group according to Williams Amabebe (2021) is one of the most powerful groups in the 90s and that the group was affiliated to a powerful deity. Accordingly, Williams Amabebe further stated that powers were giving to them by this deity. On his own part, Nayambo Atebu (2021) stipulates that the statement “nothing goes for nothing was applied in this situation, that they sacrificed to this deity on yearly basis in order to get the necessary powers required of them. The founder of the Isongufuro cult group was Lionel Jonathan-Omo (late) (Amabebe, 2021). He was a native of Ogbolomabiri. A tall-black man who was ready to even sacrifice his own blood for the interest of the group. However, following the death of Lionel Jonathan-Omo, Gabriel Jonah took over the mantle of leadership. Gabriel Jonah is a native of Ogbolomabiri, a black-tall man who was one of the active leaders of the group.

According to Williams Amabebe (2021), at the time the Isongufuro was formed, the Isena- Asawo cult group was not in existence; that the group was later formed as an opposition to the Isongufuro group. Other members of the Isongufuro cult group include; Alfred Papa-Preye, also known as Sankara, Steven Ololo, Gbanyo Bonny (late), Nayambo Atebu, Terry Thomas and Williams Amabebe. As Alfred Papa-Preye (2021) revealed, the initial aim of forming the Isongufuro cult group was to protect one another as it was clearly depicted in their motto: “Brotherhood”. He further stated that the group later focused attention on the issues of politics within and outside Ogbolomabiri.

Focusing attention on the politics of Ogbolomabiri was necessitated by the inability of the leaders to share oil monies to the people as well as recognizing their members. According to him, the community leaders embezzled community funds that were meant for everybody. These leaders were also youths like them hence, there was need for correction and involvement.

The Isena-Asawo Cult Group

The Isena-Asawo was another dreadful cult group in Ogbolomabiri. It was founded in the year 2000 by Nimi Barigha-Amange. The formation of this group as mentioned earlier was a reaction to the Isongufuro group. According to Asari Mangite (2021), the Isena-Asawo was more powerful compared to the Isongufuro, that they got powers from three different sources and all these were deities who also included Egbesu. Others were from water spirits. However, this is to say that the Isena- Asawo was also connected to deities like the Isongufuro, but in the case of Isongufuro, it was one deity. Asari Mangite (2021) further said they also had a spiritual

leader in the person of Osei Clever. Members of the Isena-Asawo included, Nimi Barigha-Amange (leader), Osei Clever (Spiritual leader), Asari Mangite (member), Walter Fineroad (member), Ebinyo Ockiya (member), John Amange, (member), and Fred Preye (commander).

As a group, their core objectives among others were to ensure even distribution of the common wealth of Ogbolomabiri to all sons and daughters. Also, they wanted a community where respect for the traditional institution is upheld. This was because they felt the Isongufuro group bastardized the traditional institution in Ogbolomabiri. They also wanted absolute quietness in the creeks and rivers surrounding the Nembe territory as activities of sea-piracy at the time were at its peak. Unfortunately, they could not achieve any of these as they too fell far short of. Their era was seriously characterized by blood birth, greed and dishonesty as revealed by Asari Mangite.

Conflict between Isongufuro and Isena-Asawo Cult Groups

Economic and political factors are the basic causes of the Isongufuro and Isena-Asawo Cult groups. Though, there was high tension between the two groups over territorial control, it was not pronounced until 2005 when oil companies had successfully installed their operational activities in the area. These oil companies were led by SPDC (Shell Petroleum Development Commission). The issue was that, there was a stipulated amount of money these companies were to pay the host communities which also included Ogbolomabiri. Apart from the money, there are other benefits accruing to the communities such as company's properties (left-overs), employment opportunities and scholarships. As a matter of fact, he who controls the community equally takes charge of the resources as well as the benefits therein. Both the Isongufuro and the Isena-Asawo cult groups were interested in the leadership of the community so as to take charge of the resources.

Nimi Barigha-Amange, the founder of the Isena-Asawo group was then a Commissioner in Goodluck Jonathan's acting administration. Based on that, he wanted to install his own members in the various administrative posts in the community. This arrangement was strongly opposed by Lionel Jonathan Omo (late) and Gabriel Jonah, the leaders of the Isongufuro cult group. This raised tensions in the two cult groups and they were all ready for war. Consequently, in the early part of the year 2005, both groups clashed at Ogbolomabiri and engaged themselves in warfare. According to Gabriel Jonah (Gabriel Jonah, 2021), the Isena-Asawo cult group was the first to invade their gathering and shot one of their members. The fight continued and the whole of Ogbolomabiri was rattled with gun shots, smokes and fighters. People stayed indoors for over a week. In an interview with John Amange (2021), he stated that Nimi Barigha-Amange was the supplier of arms and ammunitions to the Isena-Asawo group while Lionel Jonathan-Omo performed the role for the Isongufuro group. However, the war lasted for about three months when both parties were finally called for peace talk.

The conflict that ensued as a result of the clash of these two dreaded groups left several homes mourning as sons and loved ones were brutally murdered. Among the persons that were killed are; Labokurogha Joel, Aka Odoko, Imbi, Inikio, Onikionyo, C.Y. Joel, Arthur, Atonbara Owugha, etc. It also made several Igbo and Hausa traders (business men and women) to flee the area as it was no longer safe for them. More so, fishing and other occupational activities were altered. Ogbolomabiri after the battle between these two groups became hostile as the younger generation became affiliated to or were initiated into different cult related groups as

they begin to threaten the peace of the community with the weapons that were used in the conflict period.

Several attempts were made by respected members in Ogbolomabiri to resolve the conflict, but they all proved abortive (Timinipre, 2021). According to Williams Amabebe (2021), the community leaders requested for the intervention of the state government with regards to the resolution of the conflict but, Nimi Barigha-Amange been a Commissioner obstructed the community delegates from seeing the Governor under the guise that the situation was in control. When the bid to involve the state government failed, they turned their attention to somewhere else where they can get solution. Finally, they invited people from Okrika to settle the two groups. According to John Amange (2021), while the two groups were still fighting, their leaders were called for peace talks. The peace talks lasted for about four weeks, before both leaders called for cease fire. It was agreed at the peace talks by the leaders of both groups that they should withdraw their interest from the leadership of the community. Both parties were also compensated by the oil companies with the sum of 4.5 million naira (Eldred, 2021).

Impact of the Conflict

The Isongufuro and Isena-Asawo conflict has affected the political structure as well as the political arrangements of the Nembe-Ogbolomabiri people. According to Steven Ololo (2021), the conflict did not only affect the political structure of Ogbolomabiri, it also affected of politics of Bayelsa State as stakeholders and political party members were restricted from holding their meetings in Ogbolomabiri. He went further to buttress his point by placing emphasis on the People's Democratic Party (PDP) which was to hold and appoint her local government executives ahead of the 2007 general elections, but had to reschedule the date for the meeting because of the conflict. Furthermore, before the Isongufuro-Isena-Asawo conflict, the government of Ogbolomabiri was in the hands of the youths; youths were in the helm of affairs in Ogbolomabiri but immediately after the conflict, political power shifted from the hands of the youths to the elders (Ikaebinyo, 2021). This development was ushered by the conflict resolution team invited from Okrika with the approval of some respected and influential personalities in Ogbolomabiri.

Apart from power shift, throughout the conflict, the community executive members never had any form of meeting with regards to constitutional review or in preparation of their next election as the time for such was drawing closer. The conflict also led some respected and credible people to lose their interests in communal politics. According to Walter Fineroad (2021), since the elders took over the government of the community, the administration is no longer effective as it was when the youths were in charge. Corresponding to the political impact of the Isongufuro and Isena-Asawo conflict, Asari Mangite (2021) asserts that the Community Chairman and his executive members spent so much money in hiring people from other communities to resolve the conflict. These monies according to him were met for developmental and welfare purposes, thereby bringing bad performance of the community government.

The Isongufuro and Isena-Asawo conflict had greater economic effect than any other conflict on the people of Ogbolombabiri. During the conflict, farmers were restricted from their farmlands. They could no longer go out for farming as a result of the fear of the gunshots. According to Bibobra Johnson (2021), during the Isongufuro and -Asawo cult clash, people

could not go out for their business activities and as a result, there was high rate of inflation. Furthermore, Bibobra Johnson asserts that farming and fishing activities were also suspended as the people were more concerned about the safety of their lives. In the same vein, Ebinyo Sarah (2021) also posits that during the said conflict, there was no inflow and outflow of goods in Ogbolomabiri. This means that people who were supplying their goods at Ogbolomabiri were restricted and vice versa. The whole community was occupied by cultists; there was no going out and coming in as people stayed indoors for more than a week. The people do not have enough food to eat as there was no opportunity for them to venture out.

A big blow to the economic structure of Ogbolomabiri during this period was the suspension of operational activities by the oil companies operating in Ogbolomabiri. Company workers could no longer go to work as the whole community was surrounded by cultists coupled with the sound of gunshots. Apart from this, there were stipulated amount of money these oil companies were paying Ogbolomabiri but as a result of the conflict, payments were suspended throughout the conflict. According to Mangite Ebipre (2021), the conflict lasted for about three months and for this period, payments were not made by the companies to the community. In the same vein, Andrew Selepre (2021) also said that during this conflict Ogbolomabiri lost about 5.6 million naira. From her analysis, she said the two oil companies operating in the area were to pay the sum of 1 million naira at the end of every month. On his own part, Henry Omabiri Timipade (2021), a fisherman in Ogbolombiri said that he lost about 800,000.00 (eight hundred thousand naira) during the Isongufuro and Isena-Asawo conflict. Accordingly, he said that at the end of every month, he usually gain about 200,000.00 profit in his fishing profession. This could not be realized throughout the duration of the conflict.

The Isongufuro and Isena-Asawo conflict had negative impact on the social life of the Ogbolomabiri people. Before the conflict, there was a great unity among the youths but immediately after the conflict, they were separated and there was a great hatred and disunity among them. Up till now, members of the two cult groups are not in a good terms. Apart from hatred and disunity among the people, the conflict claimed people's life. Both the Isongufuro and the Isena-Asawo cult groups lost members. Chief Lionel Jonathan- Omo and Gbanyo Bonny were among the members who lost their lives during the conflict. Apart from these people that lost their lives, many other people also sustained serious injuries as most of them were taken to hospitals. Such people included Steven Ololo, Terry Thomas, Asari Magite, Walter Fineroad, Williams Amabebe and Naibo Atebu (Amabebe, 2021).

Restriction of movement of people is another social impact of the conflict. Throughout the conflict, people could not move freely from one place to the other as the community was occupied by cult members with their guns. Religious activities were also affected. Church houses were shut down as people could no longer go to churches as a result of the conflict. In fact, all social activities were suspended during this period. Burial dates were postponed, football competitions were suspended, etc. Schools were equally shut down as students could no longer go to schools. According to Ebinyo Andrew (2021), the gun shots and other sounds caused by the conflict further created psychological effects on the people. At each gun sound, people always believed that someone has been killed. Parents whose sons were members of the cult groups almost died of hypertension.

Conclusion

This study has carefully examined the Isongufuro and Isena-Asawo conflict from 2000-2005. It reveals that Nembe is a plural name for both Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri and that they have the same origin. It was discovered that the present settlers in Nembe are descendants of the second set of migrants in Nembe, the Iselemo (Itsekiri) people. Politically, the study reveals that the first settlers in Nembe were ruled by kings and that has been the case up till now. The people also had a well-organized and sophisticated social system. Their social system is depicted in their recreational activities such as clubs, festivals, wrestling and football competitions, religious world view, marriage, etc. The Isongufuro-Isena-Asawo conflict was an intra-communal conflict fought by two renowned cult groups. The study reveals that this conflict claimed people's life and also destroyed valuable properties. It also led to the restriction of movement and retarded economic growth and development in Ogbolomabiri community.

It is open-secret that Nembe-Ogbolomabiri has been a place of conflict since their time of settlement, and a critical assessment reveals that most of these conflicts were caused by chieftaincy tussle as well as leadership struggle. The root cause of the Isongufuro and Isena-Asawo conflict is not an exception in this regard. Examinations of most of the conflicts that have occurred in Nembe-Ogbolomabiri clearly show that none have impacted positively on the land and the people. Therefore, this is a clarion call to the people of Ogbolomabiri to avoid conflict and embrace peace; to love one another and be a brother's keeper as peace is the most cherished tool for development.

References

- Alagoa, E.J. and Okorobia, A.M., *Nembe Se Congress: A Study of the United Approach to the Development of Nembe Se*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, 2011.
- Alagoa, E.J., "The Eastern Niger Delta and the Hinterland in the 19th Century" in O. Ikime (ed) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: HEBN Plc, 1980.
- Alagoa, E.J., *A History of the Niger Delta: An Interpretation of Ijo Oral Tradition*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1972.
- Alfred, Papa-Preye, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021
- Amange, John, Ora Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Ama-Ogbari, O.C.C., *The Story of Bayelsa: A Documentary History*. Yenagoa: El-Mercy Global Resources, 2014.
- Andrew, Selepre, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Asari, Mangite, Oral Interview, Yenagoa, 2021.
- Bibobra, Johnson, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Ebinyo, Andrew, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Ebiyon, Sarah, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Henry, Timipade, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Ikaebinyo, Jonah, Oral Interview, Yenagoa, 2021.

- Ikime, O. *The Fall of Nigeria*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1977.
- Jonah, Gabriel, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Mangite, Ebipre, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Nayambo, Atebu, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Ockiya, O.D., *History of Nembe*. Port Harcourt: Micrown PCBS Resources, 2008.
- Sorgwe, C.M., "Impact of Colonial Rule" in E.J. Alagoa (ed), *The Land and People of Bayelsa State: Central Niger Delta*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, 1999.
- Steven Ololo, Oral Interview, Yenagoa, 2021.
- Terry, Thomas, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Timipre, Odiongo, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Walter, Fineroad, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Williams, Amabebe, Oral Interview, Ogbolomabiri, 2021.
- Williamson Kay, *the Pedigree of Nations: Historical Linguistics in Nigeria*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press, 1988.