

Peace and War in Ilaje-Ugbo/Arogbo-Ijaw Relations from the Pre-Colonial Era Up to 1999

Oluwafunke Adeola ADELEYE¹, David Olanrewaju OGORU², Johnson Olaosebikan AREMU (PhD)³

^{1,2,3}*Department of History and International Studies, Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria*

Abstract: - This paper examined the twin factors of peace and war that have defined inter-group relations between the Arogbo-Ijaw and Ilaje-Ugbo communities in present-day Ondo State, Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study are to: identify the elements of intergroup relations between the two communities; analyse the dynamic nature of relations between the two peoples; highlight the remote and immediate causes of conflict and war in their relations and; suggest ways of restoring harmony and peaceful co-existence between the two ethnic groups. Data for the study was generated through primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include archival materials, private diaries of some community leaders as well as unstructured interviews conducted with some informants. These were purposively selected based on their presumed knowledge of the subject-matter of the paper. Secondary data was generated from relevant textbooks and journal articles, as well as newspaper publications, magazines and government publications. These were analysed using qualitative technique of content analysis. Findings revealed that the Ilaje and Ijaw communities have lived together for long as neighbours right from the pre-colonial era till date. They have related in peace through socioeconomic and political interactions for the most part of their existence. The paper noted further that, on at least three occasions, 1848, 1914 and 1998; the two groups were engaged in conflicts and war. These came with attendant carnage and wanton destruction of property. It concluded that only a sincere and careful intervention of Government and Non-Governmental Organisations can bring about a lasting peace in their relationship in the face of conflicting ethnic nationalism of the two groups.

Keywords: Intergroup relations, Arogbo-Ijaw, Ilaje-Ugbo, Nigeria, War, Peace

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of intergroup relations between the Ilaje-Ugbo and Arogbo-Ijaw in present-day Ondo State of Nigeria is a mixed record of peace and war. The crux of the matter is that the two groups have lived together from time immemorial. As such, the exigencies of proximity, survival and development brought them in close contact with each other. As next door neighbours, people of the two groups related peacefully in the economic, political and social spheres of life for the most part of the pre-colonial era. With the introduction of the British colonial rule in the late 19th Century, relations between them became volatile. Conflicts ensued in interpersonal as well as at group levels due largely to the scramble for resource control, fishing waters and political offices. The situation of things, however, got out of control between 1998 and 1999 when the two groups engaged

each other in a violent war that brought deaths, destruction of property and significant number of internally displaced persons in its trail. It is in view of this that this paper examines the factors of peace and war in the volatile relations between the two groups. The paper is divided into six sections viz: introduction, meaning of inter-group relations, elements of peaceful relations, the 1998-1999 Ilaje/Ijaw war, with emphasis on its causes and effects; and conclusion.

II. DYNAMICS OF ILAJE-UGBO/AROGBO-IJAW RELATIONS FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES TO 1999

The concept of inter-group relations has generated a lot of interest among scholars such as Ikime (1969) and Afigbo (1987) among others. It should be emphasized, that the dynamics of inter-group relations in Nigeria has evolved dramatically, based on the exigencies of each period in her history. This largely explains why relations between groups in Nigeria differed greatly in each epoch of the country's development, namely, the pre-colonial, colonial and the post-colonial periods.

According to Falola *et al* (1989, p.122), 'all Nigerian groups took measures to ensure good relations with one another during the pre-colonial period. Some of the major factors that promoted relations among them during the period included trade, religion, migration, diplomacy and war (Falola *et al.*, 1989, pp.122-132). Similarly, Ikime (1973, p.116; cited in Afolabi, 2006, p.148) reported that:

They were not isolationist in orientation; the mundane needs of daily life brought our diverse peoples into close and continuous contacts with their immediate neighbors. The fact that geographically, Nigeria falls into different vegetation and therefore, occupational zones produced a situation in which the mutual exchange of day to day requirements became a major determinant of inter-group relations.

It should be noted that the colonial officials showed increasing interests in inter-group relations during the colonial period and this introduced new dynamics to inter-group relations. Afigbo (1987, p.1) lend credence to this view when he said: "the rulers of colonial Nigeria showed keen interest in the subject because they were desirous of finding a common cultural and ethnological basis which would justify applying the principle of indirect rule universally throughout the

country". A cursory perusal of colonial records reveals that Nigeria's colonial administrators "believed that Nigerian peoples enjoyed, at a very deep level, an ethnological and cultural unity whose origin goes back to antiquity" (Afigbo, 1987, p1).

From this narrative, it would appear as if the colonial period was appreciative of the ethnic and cultural diversities and relations obtainable in Nigeria. However, colonialism eventually introduced centrifugal elements into inter-group relations in Nigeria and in our context, Ilaje-Ugbo and Arogo-Ijaw relations. As a matter of reality, colonialism affected inter-group relations adversely. It "manipulated ethnic differences and the differing cultural backgrounds of many Nigerians" and "ruptured the organic inter-dependence amongst and between the various pre-colonial social formations" (Okpeh, 2006, p.19).

But, paradoxically, colonialism also brought about significant positive developments that facilitated inter-group relations among Nigerian peoples at large, and the Ilaje-Ugbo and

Arogo-Ijaw in particular. These included road and rail transport systems, communication system, educational infrastructure, and even the proselytizing activities of Christian missionaries during the period.

The post-colonial period, in many respects, inherited the new dynamics of inter-group relations introduced during the colonial era. During this period, ethnic and identity questions, as well as inter-ethnic conflicts became prominent. Adding to this problem is the failure of the post-colonial state to meet the expectations and aspirations of the mass of the people. Indeed, this factor of state failure ensured that the varying Nigerian groups have relapsed into an intense struggle for the visible structural and material resources that can improve their socio-political situations in the new polity. What is even more alarming is the failure of the state to effectively manage these growing tensions between and among the peoples of Nigeria. As a result, at the twilight of the 21st century, the preponderance of intra and inter-ethnic squabbles and inter-religious conflicts have seriously diminished the sanctity of the State.

What this brief introduction has revealed is the unique character of the different epochs in Nigerian history, and their overall impact on inter-group relations. A detailed, though not exhaustive, analysis of relations between the Ilaje-Ugbo and Arogo-Ijaw ethnic groups follows in the next sub-section.

III. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF INTERGROUP RELATIONS

Everybody is born into one group or the other. Incidentally, no man has control over where he is born. Not minding the group into which man is born, his group can never be self sufficient to meet all its needs. Interdependence may thus be seen as the hallmarks of survival in intergroup relations. This also largely explains the inevitability of group relations in human societies. It need be added, however, that when

members of different groups interact at individual or group levels, there is bound to be contestations and sometimes conflicts in their relationships. This may largely explain why multi-ethnic nation-states like Nigeria have been prone to frequent inter-ethnic or inter-communal conflicts over the years. This philosophy may probably have informed Sherif's (1966; cited in Ofili, 2016, p.163) description of inter-group relations. According to him, "whenever individuals belonging to one group interact, collectively or individually, with another group or its members in terms of their group identification, we have an instance of intergroup behaviour. "It may be gleaned from the above submission that intergroup relations involve the existence of mutually exclusive groups that are in constant interaction with one another. These groups, due to the mode of their social bond, usually exhibit the 'we' attitude toward members of their mutual group while exhibiting the 'they' attitude to the other members of the out-group. Such relations and interactions between groups and between members of various groups come in different forms. These include cooperation, collaboration, competition, conflict and at times, war. Given the above discussion, the exploration of the themes of war and peace in Ilaje-Ugbo and Arogo-Ijaw peoples of Nigeria becomes very essential.

A THEMATIC EXPLORATION OF ELEMENTS OF PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN ILAJE-UGBO-AROGBO-IJAW INTERGROUP RELATIONS SINCE THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA

Intergroup relations between the Ilaje Ugbo and Arogo Ijaw ethnic groups date back to time immemorial. Both groups have experienced the good and ugly sides of relations between each other. This sub-section is thus devoted to a documentation and analysis of the nature of relations between the two peoples under discussion. This is done sequentially under the following themes: economic relations, political relations, religious relations, socio-cultural relations and war.

IV. ECONOMIC RELATIONS: TRADE, MARKETS AND TRADE ROUTES

Pre-Colonial Period

Economic relation is undoubtedly one of the most common bases of interaction among and between peoples, communities and Nation-States of the world. This is largely because geographical locations are not equally endowed with resources and no particular area is self-sufficient. The Ilaje Ugbo and Arogo Ijaw are no exceptions. Among the many economic-related factors that promoted interdependence and intergroup relations between the two groups, trade was particularly of great significance. Markets and trade routes, in particular, ensured that the two groups came in close contact. It should be noted that the geography of the area determined, to a large extent, the predominant occupation in the area. Being a riverine area, fishing was the major occupation in the area. Nevertheless, while the Ilaje-Ugbo area was predominantly swamps, creeks and lagoons; the Arogo Ijaw had their terrain divided between dry/ sandy land and swamps.

Thus, for the Arogbo Ijaw, apart from fishing, canoe making was a very prominent occupation given the availability of the raw materials in their own area.

As noted by Smith (1970, p.521) "for hundreds of years, the canoe, both as a ferry and as a means of lateral communication, has played a major role in the political and economic life of West Africa" and in our case, coastal Nigeria. Indeed, the fact is that while mountains divide, rivers unite people during this period. The specialized skill of the Arogbo in canoe building was highly sought after in the area. Ilaje traditions affirms that the "Ijo introduced the use and art of canoe building to Ilaje and their Ikale neighbours "while both the Ijo and the Ilaje introduced the art of canoe paddling and building to other Yoruba of the coast (Ajetunmobi, 2003, pp. 146-147).

What this clearly shows is that the geographical and occupational differences between the two groups fostered a lasting form of economic interdependence. This evolved first through trade in canoes, which were reportedly sold for around 60bags of cowries or 50 pounds and further, through the introduction of the art of canoe building, thus, promoting interdependence between the two groups (Ajetunmobi, 2003, p. 147).

This trade was, however, not limited to canoes. Tradition reveals that the Ugbos in their early contacts with the Arogbos, sold fish to acquire items such as raffia palms, mahogany, white mangrove (omeghen) for the building of bamboo houses, palm wine and gin (ogogoro). It has been said that the Ugbos were skilled in acquiring different species of fishes. Thus, it is not surprising, that this was a major article of trade between both groups. In fact, the importance of fish and fishing to both groups is said to have led to the evolution of Atijere market which became 'a major fishing center' (National Archives, Ibadan: Annual Report, for Okitipupa Division, 1935).

Furthermore, trade between these two groups was fostered with the presence of markets such as Atijere. Atijere was regarded as the 'centre of a big trade in fish, palm produce, planks, crocodiles and foodstuff generally which even attracted traders from Lagos' (National Archives, Ibadan: Annual Report for Okitipupa Division, 1935). It should be emphasized that the significance of this market continued much into the colonial period. Other important markets that attracted traders from both groups included Agadagba, Obon and Akotogbo (Ajetunmobi, 2003, p.146).

It should be stressed that the trade and transport routes in the area also facilitated relations between the two groups. The Oluwa river for instance, connected to both Arogbo and the Ilaje areas. Indeed, the river ran through 'Okitipupa to Gbekebo, down to Atijere...and further east to Arogbo' (Ajetunmobi, 2003, p.146). This route, though not the only route in the area, was significant because it straddles across Atijere market.

Meanwhile, it is essential to note that while the trade in commodities promoted harmonious relations between the two groups, the slave trade era instigated hostility in Ilaje Ugbo-Arogbo Ijaw relations. The Arogbo Ijaw community was notorious for its slave raiding activities and piracy in the area. It is said, that 'the need for social security from the predation of Ijaw slave raiders instigated the migration of some Ilaje to other parts of coastal Yoruba land' (Ajetunmobi, 2003, p.34). During this period, very few people were willing to enter into the Ijaw country for fear of the Ijaw pirates. Therefore, it is apt to claim that these activities ensured and fostered antagonism between the Ilaje-Ugbo and the Arogbo- Ijaw at the time.

Colonial Period

Much of the relations that existed between both groups particularly, their economic relations, largely retained their character during the colonial period. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that colonialism introduced new dynamics to these relations. One of these was the development of modern transport infrastructural facilities to facilitate trade and agricultural production. Some of these facilities included roads, rails and railway, inland ships and boats for cabotage among others.

Post-Colonial Period

During the post-colonial period, economic relations between the two groups did not change drastically. In fact, during this period far from the observable fissure in the political realm, relations between the two groups were still facilitated by trade and trade routes. Femi Orisa, a correspondent reporter with Afromedia, Lagos, while recounting his experience as a young boy, noted that the Ilajes used to pass through the Ijaw region on their way to Akotogbo market and that "when it was dark, most of the women going to these markets were allowed in the homes of the Arogbo Ijaws." (Personal Communication, Femi Orisa, 27 April 2017). Similarly on one occasion, illustrating the hospitality of the Ijaw Arogbo, the correspondent recalls an event whereby an Arogbo Ijaw man had to vacate his bed for him and her mother (an Ilaje woman) to sleep. The essence of this personal experience is to drive home the point that even with the growing divide between the two groups; trade, markets and trade routes are still sources of interdependence between the two groups. However, this has changed drastically after the crisis of 1998-1999.

V. POLITICAL RELATIONS

Pre-Colonial Period

The nature of political relations between the two groups during the pre-colonial period, have been controversial. Indeed, among the Ilaje, it is commonly held that the Ijaws' arrival in their area coincided with the reign of the 10th Olugbo in Ilaje, Oba Akereti. It is said that the with the arrival of the Arogbo Ijaw into the area, they met Prince Omodogbe a prince of Ugbo who agreed to introduce them to the Olugbo in their bid to establish a permanent settlement in the area

(Personal Communication, Femi Orisa, 27 April 2017). In fact, according to Ilaje traditions it was this discussion with the Olugbo that led to the provision to settle in their current area as tenants to the Olugbo. From then onwards, the Ijaws were locally known as Ijaw Ero Ugbo which the Ijaw mispronounced as Arogbo. While this narrative might be true for the Ilaje Ugbo, it raises so many questions.

For instance, how can we reconcile arguments made by scholars such as Alagoa who states that the name Arogbo, came from the combination of two Ijaw words Aru-canoe and Ogbo-forest; a canoe maker's camp. Also, one might also add that from the traditions of the Arogbo, there is no clear sign that the Ilaje had serious political clout or influence in her political structure. Similarly, it seems odd that if the Ilaje had such a dominating influence over the Ijaws, how come the socio-political and cultural distinction of the Ijaws, have not been blurred over the years as with the case of the Apoi Ijaw?

Colonial Period

In line with the psychology of indirect rule, the colonial period saw the use of traditional rulers for colonial administration under the supervision of British colonial officers. Indeed, during this period the Ilaje Ugbo (including the Ilaje generally) and the Ijaw Arogbo (including the Ijaw Apoi) were grouped in the Ilaje and Ese Odo districts, respectively, under the Okitipupa Division.

It should be emphasized that this division regularized and systematized all activities between both groups. All contending issues and disputes were resolved through this new administrative platform, so much so that the form of political relationship that must have existed hitherto, (like the land-owner-tenant claim of the Ilaje over the Arogbo) was ruptured. In fact, the division had the authority to impose decisions on any community found in the area. For instance, on one occasion 'the Divisional Council at its meeting held on the 28 June 1957 made 30 pounds the maximum standard dowry on marriage and recoverable on divorce by four councils in the division (Olugbo of Ugbo, personal papers, nd.).

On another occasion, the decision to make the title of the Olugbo of Ugbo hereditary was considered an "unprecedented record in Ilaje chieftaincies... and was rendered null and void" (Olugbo of Ugbo, personal papers, nd.). In another related development, a proposal to merge the Ilaje and Ese-Odo districts was even considered to foster relations between the Ijaw and the Ilaje. This was, however, stalled due to a letter dated 7 May 1958 from the Ilaje Progressive Union, Lagos against the merging of the two Councils (Olugbo of Ugbo, Personal papers, nd.).

In another letter to the Resident Officer, Ondo Province from Okitipupa Division dated 21 September 1938, on the towns that should appear on a map aside Okitipupa; a list was created which divided towns in the division into 'most important places', 'slightly less', 'and those places which

should be added, if there is room on the map after the first two parts have been included. These may be labelled as 'less important.' (See Table 1 below).

TABLE 1

Most Important Towns	Slightly Less	Less Important
Ikoya	Igbotako	Igbobini
Ilutitun	Gbekebo	Igbotu
Aye	Ajagba	Ugbo
Mahin	Arogbo	Igboegunrin
Irele	Ipepe	Agerige
Shabomi		
Atijere		
Akotogbo		

SOURCE: Adapted from: Map of Ondo Province, Okitipupa Div. Ok. 644, National Archives Ibadan

From this table, it is obvious that Ugbo was not even considered at the time so important as to be included in a map of the division. In fact, it should be recalled that at the onset of the colonial period, Ugbo was not recognized as an independent political entity but as subjects to the Ilaje Mahin who they considered superior. The Arogbo were, however, considered slightly better in terms of significance. This probably explains why groups such as the Arogbo Ijaw might have been favoured politically than the Ugbo.

Incidentally, however, this attitude changed in the closing years of the colonial period. Indeed, colonial records revealed that the Ese-Odo district received less attention during the period. This attitude continued even in the post-colonial period. It should be emphasized that this changing attitude affected inter-group relations between the two groups negatively.

Post-Colonial Period

Nigeria's independence on 1 October 1960 introduced new dynamics to intergroup relations in the country. The political division created by the restructuring during the colonial period, for the purpose of indirect rule, was retained in the post-colonial period. However, it must be stated that while both groups were under the Okitipupa division during the colonial period, the 1976 states creation exercise by the Murtala Mohammed's military government led to the creation of Ondo State. Interestingly, in this new political setting, the Arogbo Ijaw became a minority.

The then Military Governor of Ondo State, Ita David Ikpeme, created 17 local government areas among which were the Ilaje/Ijaw Local Government Council. However, the name was reverted later to the colonial tag of Ilaje/Ese-Odo local government council (Eshonfonie, 2005, p. 21-22). Thus, both groups came under the same constituency politically and as such had to share resources and revenue. It must be

emphasized, however, that members of the Arogbo- Ijaw group were not pleased with this political arrangement given their minority status. This feeling of discontentment subsequently led to the agitation for the merger of Arogbo-Ijaw in Ondo state with the then Bendel state, now Edo state. This was gleaned the work of Eshonfonie (2005, p. 130) who states that:

The Arogbo Ijaws had been agitating for a merger with their kith and kin in Bendel state on the grounds of general neglect...they admitted however, that the Apoi Ijaw did not want to go to Bendel state with them because as they alleged, the Apoi Ijaws had been assimilated into the Yoruba culture.

What this means essentially, is that the Arogbo Ijaws were not quite pleased with their political situation in Ondo state after independence. Similarly, they also sought a distinct local government that would not even carry Ese-Odo as its tag, but rather a name that would reveal the difference and identity of the Ijaws in Ondo state as an ethnic group against the dominant Yoruba sub-groups in the state. This was why the name Arogbo/Apoi local government council was proposed as a much better alternative. Nevertheless, due to agitations of the Ijaws for autonomy, a new local government was created by the Sani Abacha military government in 1996 known as the Ese-Odo local government (Eshonfonie, 2005, p.131).

The post-colonial period saw many groups in Nigeria seeking political autonomy to secure their socio-political survival. Thus, minor groups in the various states as was the case of the Arogbos, opted out from any political arrangement that would place them in an inferior position even if it might foster interdependence.

VI. RELIGION

Colonial Period

Before the advent of Christianity in the area, there were no noticeable relations between both groups in terms of traditional religious practices. Indeed, it was not until the colonial period that one observes a departure from this trend.

According to available record, it was during the colonial period that Christianity was introduced to the area. This was largely facilitated by the Zion Movement in Ugbonla spearheaded by Lene Ogunfeyimi. This led to the formation of the 'Zion brand Cherubim and Seraphim church (C & S)' in 1948 (Amasuomo, 2014, p.55).

It is widely agreed that the charisma and spiritual fervor of Lene found universal acceptance in the area. The church grew quickly and spread outside the Ilaje district to the Ijaw areas so much so that the church in Ugbonla had worshippers and members from among the Ilajes and Ijaws. In fact, one report states that in 'less than ten years ...an Ijaw man, Apostle Williams from Ezeto town in the present Southern Ijaw Local

Government Area, who was afflicted by a strange ailment went on health tourism to Ugbo-Nla where he got healed. He was reported to have returned to his hometown to establish the first Zion Church at Ezeto in 1956 (Amasuomo, 2014, p.55).

That the Ijaw man was from Bayelsa showed how prominent Lene's church must have been during the time. But much more than that, it implied that an Ijaw man could enter the Ilaje area without fear of harm or intimidation; an indication that Ijaws in the area were shown care and hospitality by the Ilajes. Indeed, the Christian religion enhanced cordial and harmonious relationship among indigenes of both communities. It is worthy of mention that the Ijaw were not just accommodated in the church as worshippers; they were equally allowed to hold important offices in church administration. For instance, Lene Ogunfeyimi's deputy called Jemine was from Arogbo and was even nominated as Lene's successor after his death (Personal Communication, Dr. Yewande, Ntekim-Rex, 20 February 2017).

The activities of the Zion Movement led to the establishment of schools, such as Ugbonla Modern Secondary School and Zion Pepe Secondary School among others. These schools were attended by students from both communities and fostered peaceful co-existence between the two groups (Personal Communication, Dr. Yewande, Ntekim-Rex, 20 February 2017).

Post-Colonial Period

As has been rightly asserted above, the Christian religion was a significant factor in fostering inter-group relations between both groups. However, after independence, there seem to have been growing hostilities. Indeed, the case of the leadership crisis in the Cherubim and Seraphim church at Ugbonla after the death of its pioneer leaders provides a useful example. It should be recalled that Lene Ogunfeyimi who died in 1996, was said to have named Isaiah Jemine, his Deputy from Arogbo Ijaw group, as successor but this created factions within the church. Supporters of Jemine, who described him as the second king of Zion supported his choice while another group supported Durojaiye Ogunfeyimi, Lene's son, as the leader of the church simply because he was an indigene (Personal Communication, Dr. Yewande, Ntekim-Rex, 20 February 2017). The Jemine group, however, claimed that Durojaiye was not an active member of the church before his father's death. This schism was, however, later resolved in favour of Durojaiye who became the leader of the Church. According to Ayoyo (2015, p. 330), some Ilaje people equally felt that an Arogbo-Ijaw man should not be allowed to rule over them. This led to the exit of Jemine and his people from Ugbonla, the headquarters of the Church. Thereafter, Jemine proceeded to establish Bolowou Zion Cherubim & Seraphim's church in Arogbo.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that this event did not totally blur the relationship between the Ilaje and Arogbo as "most Ilajes still paid strong loyalties to Isaiah O. Jemine and came

to him for ordination programmes at Bolowou Zion" (The Controversial King, 2017).

VII. WAR IN ILAJE-IJAW RELATIONS

Pre-Colonial Period

During this period, both groups witnessed the eruption of hostile relations which tradition notes to have led to two major wars the so-called "Larogbo" and "Toto" War. Although the exact time frame for this war is not known, what is clear is that *Ogun Totor* (or the Totor war) was said to have been led by an Ijaw man named Totor, who sought to increase the original territories of the Ijaw by acquiring more from the Ilaje (Ugbo included). However, he was decisively defeated thereby putting a temporary hold on hostile relations. For another scholar, the "Larogbo" and even the "Totor" war broke out as a result of Arogbo- Ijaw's refusal to recognize and honour the tenancy agreement which they entered with the Ilaje Ugbo when they arrived as well as the disagreement over ownership of disputed land (Ayoyo, 2015, p. 323). He went further to state that the Larogbo and Toto conflicts were also exacerbated by the demand for tribute made by the Ilaje on the Arogbo Ijaw and the subsequent refusal of the Arogbo Ijaw to honour this demand.

Ilaje-Ijaw War, 1998-1999: Causes, Course, and Impact

It is essential to note that the Ilaje-Ijaw war is perhaps the most covered aspect of the relations between the two groups. In fact, it is probably the most written aspect in the history of both groups in Ondo State. Indeed, the severity of the conflict ensured that even with the cessation of violent attacks and counter attacks by both groups, there remained an underlying tension between the two groups, even till date.

It may be observed that the drive for survival has ensured indigene-settler crisis, boundary disputes, political divisions, alienation, and competition for scarce resources among the two groups. To graphically illustrate this point, a table is provided below to show how widespread ethnic conflict took center stage in Nigeria during the post-colonial period.

TABLE 2

Location/State	Crisis/Identity	Frequency	Year
Zagon-kataf, Kaduna	Ethnic	Occasional	1992
Jukun-Kuteb, Taraba	Ethno Religious	Perennial	1991
Urhobo-Itsekiri, Delta	Ethnic	Occasional	1999
Ife-Modakeke	Ethnic	Occasional	1997
Aguleri-Umuleri, Anambra	Communal	Perennial	1964-1999
Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Lagos	Ethnic Militancy	Perennial	1990s
Ilaje-Ijaw, Ondo	Ethnic	Occasional	1998-1999

SOURCE: Adapted from: Duro Oni, et al. eds., *Nigeria and Globalization: Discourses on Identity Politics and Social Conflict* (Oyo: Stirling-Horden Publishers, 2004),p. 240.

While this list is not exhaustive, it goes to show that the Ilaje-Ijaw crisis was not a unique or isolated phenomenon but was a strong feature of the existing realities of the 1990s in Nigeria. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity there is the need to pin point some of the underlying causes and course of the conflict between the two groups.

Causes of the Ilaje-Ijaw War

The remote causes of the conflict revolved around the religious dispute between the factions of Jemine and Durojaiye mentioned earlier and the indigene-settler question between the Ugbo and the Arogbo. It is noteworthy, that the Ilaje Ugbo has been largely to blame for this narrative. Indeed, interviews with correspondents revealed that the Ilaje Ugbo do not consider the Arogbo, to be of equal status with them but rather they were regarded as tenants in the land of the Ugbo. This was, however, largely disputed by the Arogbo who believe that 'since they had lived in the area for many years, the term, tenants would be debasing and inappropriate for their description' (Ayoyo, 2015, p.329).

Also, as one scholar puts it, resource control and the fear of domination and marginalization between both groups may also be considered as significant causes of the war. It should be emphasized that this last point has become the dominant rhetoric among the Arogbo who consider themselves victims of this domination. According to one Arogbo opinion leader who claimed anonymity, the Ilaje are 'selfish and greedy people and will always want to corner all the economic and political resources in the coastal areas of Ondo State to themselves'. But the Ilajes retorted back saying:

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

Interestingly, it is said that even the membership of the Ondo State oil Producing Area Development Commission (OSOPADEC), and the distribution of the community development projects by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) have always been sources of conflict between the two groups.

Meanwhile, the immediate cause of the war may be said to be boundary and territorial disputes between the two groups. On the one hand, was the dispute over the Akpata territory, a boundary community between the Ilaje Ugbo and Arogbo Ijaw. It is interesting to note, that the escalation of conflict over this territory was due largely to recent belief that the area was oil rich. For the Ilaje, *Apata -Ilaje* is a portion of land and water 'within Ugbo-Ilaje territory and was founded originally and occupied by an Ilaje fisherman, named Odudu whose descendants and kinsmen had been there till date' (Ehinmore,

2014, p. 278). For the Ijaw Arogbo, Apata was founded by "migrant Ijo fishermen" (Ehinmore, 2014, p.278).

What is clear from the foregoing is that both groups seem to have established fishing settlements in the area. Also, it can be said that given the itinerant culture of both groups, an argument could be raised over the possibility of the inexistence of a permanent settlement. Nevertheless, the discovery of oil added a new dimension to the importance of the territory for both groups, particularly for the Arogbo. Indeed, they must have considered the acquisition of the territory as a means of boosting their socio-political significance in the area, and thus initiated the attack that led the war.

Similarly, as Babatunde (2009, p.147) has argued elsewhere,

Apart from oil rich land, conflicting claim to fishing areas as communities jostle for whatever benefits that might be available is another cause of communal disturbances... The economic activities of the rural communities have been adversely affected by oil industries activities. Consequently, fishing, the main source of livelihood has been made unprofitable. The dwindling catch of fishermen has intensified competition over areas where fishes can be found in abundance.

Course of the War

The event that provoked the violent conflict of 1998 was initiated by the Arogbo Ijaw on 19 September 1998. It was reported that the Ijaw attacked some Ilaje towns at around 2am in the night. Houses were set ablaze while many others were shot dead or kidnapped (Ayoyo, 2015, p. 332). According to an eye witness report, some of the towns attacked included Obenla, Awoye, Ilepete, Orotu and Ilowo (Personal Communication, Femi Orisa). The attack led to the desertion of many towns in the area. On 28 September 1998, in spite of the security troops deployed in the town by the state government, Ode-Ugbo, the capital of Ugbo-Ilaje was attacked by the Arogbo Ijaws (Ehinmore, 2014, p.279).

The frequency of attacks by the Arogbo-ijaw against the Ilaje was not left unattended. It was said that after the initial turmoil, the Ilajes regrouped in the town of Aiyetooro which became the military headquarters of the Ilaje side.

Surprisingly, the conflict intensified in 1999 when it ended. For instance, the Ilaje organised counter attacks against the Ijaw in areas such as Orotu (30 July 1999) and Ajapa (2 August 1999). Furthermore, the Ilaje were also accused of making spirited attempts to drive the Ijaw out of Ondo state once and for all from 19 and 23 September, 1999. Then, the Ilaje advanced their military campaign to Sekelewu near the border between Ondo and Delta States. The war came to an end with the entry of the Federal Government troops on 24 September, 1999. Immediately on arrival in the area, they took occupation

of all strategic locations that served as geographical links between the two belligerent groups (Ehinmore, 2014, p.280).

Suffice to say that the war was kindled or lasted so long due to the inactivity, unseriousness and indifference of the government at the time. According to one informant, the then military Administrator, Navy Commander Anthony Onyearugbulem in a peace meeting held in 1998 in Akure invited both the 'Agadagba of Arogbo and Olugbo of Ugbo to fight in his presence.' (Isike, 2009, p.130).

It should be emphasized that the war has been described as a war not only involving the Ilaje Ugbo. Informants argue that the Arogbo-Ijaw directed their attack at the Ugbo-Ilaje. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that during the course of the conflict, there seem to have been a general consensus among the Ilajes, to join forces against the Arogbo-Ijaw attacks.

The Impact of the Ilaje-Ijaw War

The war had devastating effects on both groups. Some of these included: demographic, involving loss of lives and internal displacements; destruction of properties and collapse of public infrastructures; economic, involving the blockage of inter-group trade instigating loss of revenues for itinerant traders and low standard of living among petty traders;

In one account, the war cost the Ilaje side the loss of "10,313 houses, 29 primary schools, 8 secondary schools, 9 health centers, 29 jetties, 254 churches and 24 bridges" (Egboworomo, 2001). In another report, the Ilaje claimed that they lost 25 primary schools, 3 secondary schools, 11 health centers, over 50 petrol stations, one bank (a branch of the United Bank for Africa at Ode-Ugbo) and the electricity and water projects at Ode-Ugbo were claimed to have been vandalized, and over 76 communities in Ugbo were said to have been destroyed (Ehinmore, 2014, p.279). On the Arogbo side, there was the destruction of over '10 communities including towns such as Ajapa, Opuba and Bolowo' (Personal Communication, Ezekiel Peretei, Okitipupa, 20 May 2017). There was also the displacement of people from the Arogbo Ijaw side to areas like Gbaraun, Bayelsa. It should be stressed, that while the figures for the Ilaje side are to a large extent not uniform, a sizeable estimate of the destruction caused is feasible. Also, it seems that the pre-emptive strike of the Ijaws accounted largely for more losses on the Ilaje side.

Similarly, there was destruction of lives and property on both sides, including petrol stations, boats canoes among others. It should also be emphasized, that during this period there was mass migration on the Ilaje side particularly the Ugbo to other Ilaje areas in Mahin, Etikan and Aheri. According to some informants some Ilajes left the state to areas such as Lagos to avoid the onslaught. Interestingly, to avoid the spillover of the conflict into Lagos peace meetings were held by stakeholders during the period.

The war really had far reaching implications for inter-group relations. Isike (2009:129) reported the lamentation of an Ilaje market woman as stated below:

The fight affect our trade bad bad because right now we no dey fit enter Ijaw area to buy and sell and them too no fit enter we side. Even our sistas wey marry them no fit cross because our oga no go gree. How we go come take make enough money feed our pickin dem now?

The conflict affected our trade negatively because as we speak we are not able to trade with our Ijaw women across the river because of fear and restrictions posed by the conflict. Even our fellow women who married on either side cannot break the barriers because our husbands will not permit. How then do we now make enough money as we used to and be able to feed our children?

In another account regarding the impact of the war, it was mentioned that 'the transportation system came to a standstill as traders could not move their goods to the local markets around' (Personal Communication, Ezekiel Peretei, Okitipupa, 20 May 2017).

In a bid to restore the status quo ante bellum, series of peace initiatives were embarked on in the closing years of the 20th century, and the early years of the 21st century such as the Peace Meeting of Nationalities of the Niger Delta and Ondo State held in London on Saturday 20 February 1999. which was organized by the Association of Nigerian Scholars for Dialogue (ANSD) to promote unity between both groups; the peace workshop organized by Foundation for Democratic Development with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) between 2 and 20 April, 2001 at Okitipupa; as well as the National Youth Peace Summit in conjunction with Presidential Youth Initiative (PYI) and Community Development Committee (CDC) organized by the Ondo state government in 2007 at Igbokoda with representatives of both Arogbo Ijaw and Ilaje present. It is, however, apt to note that even with these so-called peace initiatives sponsored by the State Government and NGOs, discussion with informants revealed that both sides had not totally overcome the tension, and still consider themselves enemies with both sides claiming to be victims of war.

VIII. OTHER RELATIONS

From the foregoing, it is quite obvious that trade was an important conduit, that fostered inter group relations between both groups. However, other forms of relations though not as glaring existed between both groups. On the one hand, it would seem that the strain of the Yoruba language which was common among the Ilaje (Ugbo) most certainly diffused to other Ijaw groups. Interestingly, while the Apoi Ijaw have

absorbed the language so much so, that one can say it has become the dominant means of communication, the Arogbo have not been absorbed totally by the language. What is common is that while we find some speakers of Yoruba, the Arogbos have largely retained their linguistic identity.

Similarly, while the Arogbo Ijaw have managed to retain their ethnic uniqueness, probably due to minimal relations (particularly inter-marriages) with their Yoruba neighbours, it is said that 'it is no more an exaggeration, to say that there is no family be it nuclear or extended among the Arogbo Ijo which traces its origin to the third or fourth generation without sourcing from the 'Yoruba', Urhobo or other Nigerian tribes.' The Yoruba mentioned here include mainly the Ilaje Ugbo and Mahin. To support this point we find Ilaje names such as Demehin, Jolowo, Gbamire, Ehitemi among others common among the Arogbo Ijaw.

IX. CONCLUSION

As this analysis has shown, intergroup relations between the Ilaje-Ugbo and the Arogbo-Ijaw have not been passive to the external stimulus of each epoch, be it pre-colonial, colonial or the post-colonial period. Each period added its distinct feature or dynamics to relations either in the political or economic sphere. It was noted further that there was some level of interdependence between both groups particularly in terms of economic relationship during each period. It would seem, however, that the once sweet interdependence, turned sour with the escalation of conflict between both groups in what became known as the Ilaje-Ijaw war of 1998-1999. Indeed, as this analysis has shown the conflict had far reaching implications for relations between the two groups even till date.

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