

**BROTHERS AT WAR: A HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE
IMPLICATIONS OF COMMUNAL CONFLICTS ON SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT OF EZILLO–EZZA COMMUNITIES, 2008-2018**

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Abstract

The Ezillo-Ezza people are found in the Ezillo community in Ishielu Local Government Area of Ebonyi state. The Ezza people are perceived as non-indigenes or settlers in the community by the Ezillo. Sources had it that the Ezillo people invited in the 1930s about twenty-two Ezza men who helped them to fight against their opponents, the Ngbo people over a piece of land. Today, the two communities who hitherto were living in harmony have fallen apart. What are the factors that led to the Ezillo-Ezza conflicts? To what extent do the conflicts affect the communities involved? What are the implications of the conflict on the sustainable development of the Ezillo-Ezza communities? The paper adopts the historical investigative method to inquire into the causes and implications of the conflict on the two parties. The sources of this paper were both primary and secondary. Theoretically, the paper adopts the Marxist theory of social conflict to analyse the issues that led to the communal conflict. The paper found out that unresolved issues between the two tribes such as land, politics as well as biased historical information were behind the escalation of the conflict. The paper, therefore, recommends that it is only an impartial government peace committee that will bring lasting peace among the Ezillo and Ezza communities of Ebonyi state.

Keywords: Conflict, Ezillo-Ezza, Peaceful co–existence, Sustainable development, Insecurity.

Introduction

Conflict is a disagreement between two people over an issue or a cause. Wilmot and Hocker (2001) described conflicts as a struggle between two or more independent individuals over the perceived incomparable difference in desires for esteem, control and connectedness. They believe that conflicts occur when people are nested by some sort of social code. It does not occur in isolation, people must be relating or depend on one another.

Conflict, according to Otite (2001) is a reality of social relations. Conflicts at any level arise from divergence of interests, desires, goals and value aspirations in the competition for resources to meet imposing demands on social life in a defined socio-physical environment. Man in a socio-physical environment lives in a continuous process of interaction, dependence and interdependence which oftentimes results in conflicts. Conflicts are thus a pervasive phenomenon in human relationships and have been seen as the “basic unit for understanding social existence (Nnoli, 1998). Conflicts occur when two or more actors oppose each other in social interaction, reciprocally exerting social power to attain scarce or incompatible goals and prevent the opponent from attaining them.

Social conflicts constitute one of the major recurring problems bedevilling the socio-economic and political landscape in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Achieving sustainable development has become a difficult task for developing nations despite efforts by development experts to bring about desired development.

Sustainable development is defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Thus there is sustainable development when the said development did not impede the future of the citizens who are meant to benefit from the development. For instance, there is sustainable development when educational institutions built are affordable to the citizens without them having to pay through their noses to access the facilities as well as secure a job after graduation. If they cannot afford to use the educational facilities provided by the government using the taxpayers’ money, then the development is not sustainable.

Nigeria has witnessed many virulent intra/inter-communal conflicts waged by ethnic, religious, political or other identity groups across the country. The Ife/Modeke conflict (1999-2000), Aguleri-Umuleri conflicts in Anambra State (1995-1999), Itsekiri-Urhobo war crisis (1999-2000), Yelwa-Shendan conflicts (2003-2005), Tiv-Jukun-Wukari conflicts in Taraba State (1999–2001), Abagana-Ukpo crisis (2017-2019) Zango-Kataf conflicts in Kaduna state (1999–2001), (Best, 2005). This conflict raises doubts about the prospects of democracy and the future of the nation. How these conflicts were managed by state actors had implications for the escalations and de-escalations of the conflicts.

Ebonyi State is not immune to this situation since 1999, it has witnessed an astronomical rise in the spate of violence/communal conflicts across communities in the state. These include Amagu-Adadama conflicts which were between Amagu community in Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State and Adadama community in Cross River State (1980-2013), Izzi-Ikwo conflicts between Abakaliki Local Government Area and Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi state 2018 to present), Abbaomege-Ishinkwo Communal conflicts in Onicha Local Government Area (1989) and Ezillo-Ezza communal conflicts in Ishielu Local Government Area of Ebonyi state (1999) to date. One common feature of these conflicts has to do with their confrontational and violence dimension which led to loss of lives and properties of people who hitherto lived together in relative harmony. The Ezillo-Ezza communal conflicts has shown how communal co-existence could be ruptured with attendant disastrous consequences on the social, cultural and political life of the people, (Itumo, 2014).

The consequences of Ezillo-Ezza conflicts to the communities in particular and Ebonyi state, in general, is quite devastating and grievous. Such devastating impacts include general insecurity, armed robbery, prolonged dislocation of families, poverty, violent struggle for power, low infrastructural development etc. Those that suffered more losses in the conflict would always be getting ready to revenge, while those who may have gained an advantage would be preparing for any eventually and this has created insecurity in the area. The area was deserted and many members of the communities were helpless refugee in various parts of the state, especially the state capital Abakaliki which led to congestion of the city and the attendant increase in criminal activities, hunger and death. This research work seeks to assess the effects of communal conflicts on the sustainable development of the Ezillo-Ezza communities of Ebonyi state from 2008-2018.

Theoretical Framework

The Marxist-based theory of social conflict was adopted in this paper. The theory argues that individuals and groups (social classes) within society interact based on conflict rather than consensus. Though various forms of conflict groups will tend to attain the differing amount of materials and non-material resources (e.g the wealthy vs the poor). More powerful groups will tend to use their power to retain power and exploit groups with lesser power. Conflict theorists view conflict as an engine of change since conflict produces contradictions which are sometimes resolved, creating new conflicts and contradictions in an ongoing dialectic.

This theory is apt to this study because the conflicts between the Ezza and Ezillo communities were a result of a power struggle. One group/community tends to use their power to exploit the other community and exploit what belongs to them. Thus, those who

are powerful (wealthy) tend to lord it over those who are powerless (poor). By implication, the Ezillo was against the Ezza. The result was conflicted as no one will like to be exploited. The Ezillo wants to maintain both the economic and political power of their community against the Ezza who on the other hand would not allow the Ezillo to make them homeless after many years of occupying their present location.

In concurring, Isichei (1976) commenting on the causes of the Aguleri-Umuleri conflicts posits that the role of land disputes is marked in the history of these wars. Much value was not attached to Otuocha land by any of the two communities of Aguleri and Umuleri at the initial stage but as the 20th century progressed, each community began to value the area and efforts intensified to claim the ownership of the area. Claims and counterclaims were made in various courts by the two communities and those disputes resulted in combat in 1933. The same is true of Ezillo–Ezza's age-long conflict.

Historical Origin of the Ezillo–Ezza Conflict

The Ezillo and Ezza people are found in the Ezillo community in Ishielu Local Government Area of Ebonyi state. The Ezza people are perceived as non-indigenes or settlers in the community. The Ezza people came to the community in the 1930s following their invitation by the Ezillo people to assist them wage wars against the Ngbo people who were encroaching into their territory (Chukwu, 2008). After the war, the Ezza-Ezillo people were given some parcel of land at Egu–echara in the Ezillo community to settle permanently, by Ezillo elders, as compensation or reward for their contribution to the success of the war and equally, to act as buffers against their adversaries from Ngbo clan (Chukwu, 2008). As the war ended the two clans began to live peacefully together in the Ezillo community but sooner than later, the Ezza people began to expand their settlements to other parts of Ezillo, as they started acquiring titles over some pieces of lands even outside their original Eguechara area which incurred the wrath of Ezillo people. As a result of the above, problem ensued and the Ezillo people sought the relocation of the Ezza–Ezillo. The matter was taken to an Abakaliki Colonial Customary Court in 1959 and the court ruled in favour of the Ezillo clan, mandating the Ezza people to move back to Eguechara. The Ezza people appealed the matter before one O. P. Gunning, an Abakaliki Colonial District Officer, who affirmed the judgement of the Customary Court. But unfortunately, the Ezza people refused to relocate to the Eguechara area as directed by the district officer. Since then the relationship between the two clans had been that of Cat and Rat.

The present violent communal conflict between Ezillo and Ezza clans started on the 10th of May, 2008, as a little misunderstanding between one Sunday Idenyi of Ezillo and a

motorcycle (Okada man) from Ezza at Eke Ishimkpuma market square over a portion to erect a commercial phone booth (Itumo and Nwobashi, 2017). This disagreement culminated in a clash between Ezillo youths leading to the pulling down of the phone booth and later degenerating into burning of motorcycles belonging to both parties the same day. The following day, the matter escalated to a full-scale violent communal conflict between Ezillo and Ezza clans, leading to the blocking of the Ezillo region of the Enugu–Abakaliki highway and the killing of innocent citizens plying along the highway and loss of life and property worth millions of naira belonging to both parties, (Itumo and Nwobashi, 2017).

Causes of the Ezillo–Ezza Conflicts

Conflicts between people living in communities are inevitable. Human existence and relationships are hinged on interactions, dependence and interdependence in such a way that man cannot survive without another. In other words, no man is an island unto himself. All over the world, conflicts exist wherever there is human existence. But the causes of conflicts vary at all times. Finding a solution to any conflict is one of the human characteristics that made him exceptional among other creatures. The following factors are advanced as characteristics of the Ezillo–Ezza communal conflict.

Boundaries has being identified as one major cause of conflict among humans. This is because as human populations increase, there becomes a need for expansion. When the expansion encroaches into another person's territory, there is bound to be conflict. This is also true of the Ezillo–Ezza communal conflict. Oral tradition had it that the Ezillo community originally invited only 22 Ezza men to come and assist them to fight their enemies. After the war between Ezillo and Ngbo which the Ezza assisted the Ezillo, the Ezza were given a portion of Ezillo land as compensation for their assistance. But as time went on, they started inviting their kits and kins from Onueke and other Ezza areas and thus began to occupy extra portions of the land which resulted in disputes among them.

However, the problem started when the expansion of the Ezza people was exceedingly progressive in such a way that the Ezillo people could no longer tolerate their excesses and asked the Ezza to relocate to Eguechara which is a place Ezillo people insisted was the only place originally given to them. The matter was so serious that it was taken to Abakaliki colonial customary court in 1955 and the Court ruled in favour of the Ezillo people, mandating the Ezza people to move backwards to Eguechara.

In reaction to the above court rulings the Ezza appealed to Abakaliki Colonial District officer; Mr Guining who affirmed the judgment of the customary court, (Iheme, 2021) yet the Ezza remained in the land till May 10th 2008 when the dispute that led to the 19th

February 2010 mass killings as well as the December 31st massacre of the Ezillo people by unidentified suspects.

Again, biased historical information equally contributed in no small measure to the conflict. History as we know is the record of activities of a society handed down to the modern generation either in a written or oral form. Biased historical information handed to the people by their ancestors is one of the major causes of the Ezza–Ezillo crisis. The modern people of Ezillo decided that the Ezza must leave their land as a result of biased history/stories handed to them that the Ezza people are warmongers and land usurpers who have forcefully occupied other Ezillo lands other than the Eguechara that was originally given to twenty-two Ezza men following their mutual agreement forgetting that the twenty-two men must surely expand above the land given to them.

This assertion was buttressed by Ezike (2021) when he said that the Ezillo people were trying to be careful not to fall victim to subjugation by the Ezza people which they were pre-warned through ‘biased history’.

Another factor that contributed to the Ezillo–Ezza communal conflict was the indigene-settler conundrum. The indigene and settler issue has resulted in many crises all over the world with apartheid South Africa as a case in point. Egwu (1999) argues that Nigeria is an extremely tribal society in which various ethnic groups lay claims to territories to the exclusion of other groups. The constitution arising from the indigene–settler’s problem stems from the conception, definition and perception of who is an indigene and who is not or who is a settler and what one has that the other should not have.

The idea of human rights shapes the attitude and behaviour of settler communities. Egwu (1999) posits that the settlers import their culture and tradition into their new community to the discomfort of the host communities. This is true because wherever a man is, there is his culture and religion. This problem is further aggravated by the inability of settler or migrant communities to fully integrate themselves with the host indigene/native communities through acculturation. The allegations and counter allegations of desecration of cultural symbols and tradition such as the naming of markets, and schools in the dialectic of migrant communities illustrate clearly the Ezillo–Ezza communal crisis, (Memo to Ebonyi State Government Peace Committee on Ezillo and Ezza Conflicts 2008). Thus, the Ezza was consolidating on their imported culture to assume full membership of that community.

Politics is equally a major contributor to the Ezillo–Ezza communal conflict. Politics is a persistent pattern of human relationships that involves to an extent, power role or authority, (Elom, 2006). It refers to the political activities of individuals and their

consequences for political institutions. Politics like religion deals with human relationships. And any case where it is not well practised, it can be a source of conflict among communities.

The Ezillo and Ezza have often alleged marginalization against one another. This is particularly the case whenever either party is in a position of political authority. The Ezillo cited examples of such tendencies as the forceful acquisition of 12.3 hectares of land they donated for the construction of offices for Federal agencies like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), National Population Commission (NPC) etc. and the attempt to create Izzo community within Ezillo community, all of which were carried out when Ezza people were at the helm of affairs. On the other hand, the Ezza people alleged that they were being marginalized and denied infrastructural amenities because their Ezillo counterparts were occupying strategic positions in government. As long as this kind of relationship existed, conflict is inevitable among the people.

Furthermore, the culture, customs and tradition of people which governs the way people live in society has at one time or another other triggered conflicts. This could be seen when a culture is either anachronistic or needed to be modified or when there is neglect and abuse or discretion of such culture, customs and traditions. Ugokwe (2021) opines that conflict in culture arises if there is abuse or desecration of a cherished culture by a group in society. Thus trying to retain such culture and traditions will lead to conflict in society.

Echiagu (1999) posits that the settlement pattern of Ezza and their war-like behaviour led to the invasion of the lands of neighbouring sub-ethnic groups. The Ezillo attributes the denigration of their cultural and traditional heritage by the Ezzas as some of the causes of the disputes between them which include flouting of new yam festival rules by bringing new yam into Ezillo market by Ezza people before cultural rites of new yam in Ezillo, killing of fish in sacred ponds and rivers, desecration of the chieftaincy institution as evident in the beating of the traditional ruler of Ezillo, Eze Chima Onyibe and his wife in 2008.

The key immediate cause of the Ezza–Ezillo crisis is an inter-personal conflict between a commercial phone operator and a commercial motorcycle operator (Okada man) from Ezillo and Ezza tribes respectively on 10th May 2008 at Onunweke (Aron Camp) over the erection of phone booth on a portion of land which both parties claimed “ownership”. The disagreement attracted a crowd which increased the tempo of the conflict and consequent pulling down of the phone booth that belong to the Ezillo Phone operator. A source disclosed that these destructive actions at the scene of the disagreement were not taken by

the parties in conflict, but by other hoodlums who saw the scene as an avenue for executing their long-conceived satanic plan.

The Conflict further escalated to a full-blown war with both tribes burning houses that belonged to one another. The 19th February 2010 bloodshed along the Enugu Abakaliki highway by suspected hired militants fighting in the disputed land and the 31st December 2011 Ezillo massacre was the most devastating aspect of the crisis. This goes to justify the place of interpersonal conflict in the Ezillo–Ezza communal conflict.

Implications of Communal Conflict on Sustainable Development of Ezillo–Ezza Communities

The consequences of communal conflict on Ezillo–Ezza communities in particular and Ebonyi state, in general, are highly devastating and serious. General insecurity, armed robbery, infrastructure decay, general underdevelopment, prolonged dislocation of families, poverty, and violent power struggle. The implication of the conflict on the Ezillo–Ezza people, led to a massive loss of lives and property. This has negatively affected the socio–economic life of the people as many shops belonging to both indigene and non–indigenes of the war–thorn area were set ablaze and others destroyed. The entire economic life of the state was affected as business activities were brought to a halt. The movement of both human beings and goods was also affected during the crisis. Humana and goods moving in and out of the ebony state were suspended as no one would like to risk his or her life after learning what happened on the 10th of May 2008 and of December 31st 2011. There was also an increase in poverty as people can no longer go about their normal businesses especially farming. This increased their economic woes. According to the National Bureau of statistics (2013) report, about 73.6 per cent of Ebonyians are poor, thus women, children and the elderly were badly affected.

For his part, Chukwuemeka (2021) observes that infrastructure such as roads, potable water, electricity and other social services like education, and health centres, were destroyed. In the years to come such infrastructures that were destroyed in the war were never adequately provided in those communities. People especially youths from the above communities lost all the laboured for years living idle without a job. On the effect of the conflict on sustainable development, it should be remembered that can no longer provide all that was destroyed in the conflict and will be cautious of spending money on capital projects that will enhance the lives of the people because of their earlier experience. Thus sustainable development in the area will become a mirage.

Communal conflicts equally resulted in the dislocation of families. The areas were deserted and many members of the communities were helpless refugees in various parts of

the state, especially Abakaliki the state capital leading to congestion of the city and the attendant increase in criminal activities. Because families were dislocated and displaced, education, moral upbringing, and social ties were eluded. There were sickness, illiteracy, an increase in crime rate and abuse which were antithetical to sustainable development. Communities whose schools, churches, hospitals and other social facilities were destroyed will always experience poverty, underdevelopment, illiteracy as well as general insecurity. The Ezillo–Ezza communities as we see them today will continue to experience low-budget development because of this unfortunate crisis that bedevilled them.

Another major implication of communal conflict is that it reduces agricultural production and productivity. The land is often abandoned by agricultural workers who are either killed or displaced and those who stay may shift to lower–risk crops or cut back investment thereby compromising the needs of the people. Conflict also makes it harder to do business as farmers deal with labour shortages rising prices of farm inputs and disruptions throughout the agricultural value chain. Agriculture is the main economic activity in Ebony state, employing between 65 and 80 per cent of the population of her people inclusive of the Ezillo and Ezza communities. Thus, abandoning agriculture in Ebony state has long-term implications for the state and neighbouring states who survive through the agricultural products of Ebony farmers. Okwoh (2021) affirms that the conflict caused a great food shortage in the communities and environs thereby causing hunger and death among the people.

Conclusion

his study x-rayed the implications of communal conflicts on the sustainable development of the Ezillo–Ezza communities of Ebonyi state. Conflicts are inevitable; those who lost in the war will continue to bear grudges against those who won, and those who won will continue to watch their back knowing fully well that those who lost may stage a comeback at any time. Thus the feeling of insecurity and fear continues to torment those communities in conflict.

Theoretically, this paper adopted the Marxist-based theory of Social conflict. The theory argues that individuals and groups (social classes) within society interact based on conflict rather than consensus. Though various forms of conflict groups will tend to attain the differing amount of materials and non-material resources. More powerful groups will tend to use their power to retain power and exploit groups with lesser power. Conflict theorists view conflict as an engine of change since conflict produces contradictions which are sometimes resolved, creating new conflicts and contradictions in an ongoing dialectic.

The paper identifies certain factors as major causes of the communal conflict between the Ezillo and Ezza communities of the ebony state. Such factors are Boundary. This is because as human populations increase, there becomes need for expansion. When the expansion encroaches into another person's territory, there is bound to be conflict. This is what happened in the case of the Ezillo–Ezza communal conflict. Another factor is biased historical information. Biased historical information handed to the people by their ancestors is one of the major causes of the Ezza–Ezillo crisis. The history handed over to the modern Ezillo by their ancestors was that the Ezza people are warmongers and land grabbers. This biased history has psychological implications on the inter–communal relationships of the two parties as the Ezillo will always see any act of aggression by the Ezza people as a reality of history.

The paper particularly isolates interpersonal conflict as the immediate cause of the Ezillo–Ezza. The communal conflicts started as a misunderstanding between a commercial phone operator and commercial motorcycle operator (Okada man) from Ezillo and Ezza tribes respectively on 10th May 2008 at Onunweke (Aron Camp) over the erection of a phone booth on a portion of land which both parties claimed “ownership”. The disagreement attracted a crowd which increased the tempo of the conflict and consequent pulling down of the phone booth that belong to the Ezillo Phone operator. This altercation was later hijacked by hoodlums who saw the scene as an avenue for executing their long-conceived satanic plan.

It is not however, the emergency of conflict that matters most but the approach taken to resolve any given conflict situation since conflict is a common feature of modern societies. Sometimes the approach taken to resolve a particular conflict can escalate it instead of resolving it. One of the recommendations by the peace committee which seems to reflect bias and partiality is the relocation of the Ezza–Ezillo people to another piece of land called Eguechara, which is not only small, according to Ezza people but presently occupied by the Ezillo and Ngbo people. The decision of the government did not only augur well with the Ezza people but there is clear suspicion on both parties. This is why the government should not renege in its efforts to ensure peaceful co-existence among communities in Ebonyi state.

Invariably, the recommendations of the committee set up by the government ended up providing a palliative measure which cannot guarantee lasting peace in the area. This made Ezillo and Ezza continue to live in suspicion and fear. No meaningful development can be achieved in an environment where people cannot sleep with their two eyes closed. Government cannot comfortably administer development in such an environment. It has deliberating effects on the life of the entire Ebonyians and even visitors since Ezillo is the

major gateway to the heart of Ebonyi state. This is even more reason why government and other relevant stakeholders should rally around and hearken to the recommendations of this paper and other contributions made by Conflicts experts to ensure a lasting peace in the Ezillo community.

From the findings made and conclusions drawn in this study, the researcher recommends the following as measures to stem the tides of violent communal conflicts in Ezillo in Ebonyi state. First, there should be a strengthening of the border security network system to stem the tides of inflows and proliferation of arms and ammunition into the country. There is a need to strengthen the cooperation among various security agents in the country to checkmate the inflows of arms along the borders. This is most importantly applicable to ebony state borders where machinery is hired and ammunition smuggled into the state to cause mayhem.

Second, there should be the establishment of community intelligence and security services to work hand in hand with the security agents to fish out the perpetrations and or sponsors of violent communal conflicts. This will go a long way to stall violent clashes as such plans will be discovered and nipped in the bud.

Third, provisions of employment opportunities for the teaming unemployed youths to enable them to engage their energies on positive productive ventures and contribute to nation-building rather than destabilization and violent activities. When people vis-à-vis the youths are gainfully employed, they will be less busy engaging in unproductive ventures as their projections will be to make money and make their community proud.

Furthermore, the government should implement the recommendations of the reports of the previous committee/panel of enquiries on other violent Communal Conflicts in the Ebonyi state. This will serve as a precautionary measure to those who may wish to engage in similar acts or behaviours in future. Government should as well review her decision on the relocation of the Ezza people to Eguechara. With the dislocation of Ezza people from their present base, they would have to abandon four (4) primary schools, one (1) health centre, one secondary School and a good number of churches for a virgin land void of any social amenities. When these basic infrastructure and social amenities are not provided, the people would find it difficult to relocate to the area. Boundaries should be adjusted and each tribe or community warned to respect the boundary as any trespass to the boundary will be severely dealt with by the government.

Finally, there should be an enlightenment campaign to encourage and admonish the Ezillo–Ezza communities on the need to embrace peace at all times and why the rule of law must be observed in dealing with certain issues. The campaign team will constitute representatives of the governments and the communities especially those who have been

adequately counselled to accept the realities of the situation. In all the youths of the two communities should be educated on the implications of becoming idle and taking drugs such as marijuana, Colorado, and methamphetamine (Mkpuru mmiri) which makes them prone to violence at any slightest provocation.

This study implies that the lessons of history must be learnt. Otherwise, history will keep repeating itself. Yes, conflict is inevitable and should be managed amicably whenever it arises. It is quite unfortunate that the Ezillo who thought that hiring the Ezza people to destroy their Ngbo neighbour are now crying the cry of their enemies. They compensated the Ezza people with a portion of land at a border between the present Ezza abode in Ezillo and Ngbo boundary so that the Ezza will always ward off Ngbo encroachment but they forgot that evil begets evil. Now they are reaping what they sow long ago.

As if that was not enough as well as ignoring the lessons of history, it was gathered that those who blocked and attacked innocent people at the Enugu–Abakaliki road were machinery either hired by the Ezillo or the Ezza people. That was why they did not bother to know that the highway did not belong to either Ezillo or Ezza people while killing or maiming innocent commuters. We should always acknowledge the assertion of Winston Churchill that “war does not determine who is right or wrong but only who is left”.

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