

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN PRE-COLONIAL ESAN LAND

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Abstract: Esanland (Otoesan) constitutes the land and people located in the Edo Central Senatorial District, in Edo State, in the Southwestern Nigeria. In the process of their evolution, they experienced different categories of conflicts internally and externally, covering socio-political, economic, and religious aspects of society. The reality of conflicts and the imperative of peace thus compelled the people to devise various social conflict resolution mechanisms in order to foster cooperation in the land. This paper examines the context of internal conflict resolution in Esan during pre-colonial era. Traditionally, conflict resolution refers to measures attempting to resolve the underlying incompatibilities of a conflict, including the attempt to get the parties to mutually accept each other's existence. This study underscores these practices of Esan people before the advent of colonial masters. The paper deemphasized the notion of 'fatalism theory', which opined that the best is always outside the shore of Africa. Instead, emphasis is placed on the level of sophistication and effectiveness of the conflict resolution mechanism in Esan land within the limited knowledge at the time, before the intrusion of Western powers. The study employed the historical method of collection and interpretation of data in its analysis. Part of the argument of this paper is that, Esan traditional method of conflict resolution is rich in potentials from which we can draw to build modern societies.

Keywords: Conflict, Conflict resolution, pre-colonial and Esan.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a universal phenomenon that cuts across regions, religions and races¹. It is endemic in human social connections; there is no human culture which does not have conflict of some sort. It is an unpreventable aspect of human existence, when people interact there is revealed or hid inclination for conflict². The origin of conflict is traceable to the existence of humans; it is in line with this that Harvard evolutionary biologist David Haig³ observed that conflicts in our life start while we are still in the womb. Flowing from the observations of scholars cited above, it is safe to believe that pre-colonial (Agbon Oba) Esan people were not immune from conflict. Pre-colonial Esan communities like other parts of the world were afflicted with conflicts before the advent of the European colonial masters. These conflicts which were of socio-political and economic nature did not mark the crumbling of these various communities⁴. However, Pre-colonial Esan people were able to diverse a mechanism of conflict resolution that helped them to curtailed conflict and keep up a condition of balance and collaboration among different communities⁵. This situation was however, radically changed with the imposition of colonial system of justice administration that is unfamiliar to Africans⁶.

The thrust of this paper is on the method of conflict resolutions amongst the Esan people in the pre-colonial era. The study is divided into five parts: The first section is the introduction which is this part; follow by clarification of concepts, Esan: location and the people, the nature of conflicts in pre-colonial Esan land, method of conflict resolutions and then a conclusion.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The term Conflict is derived etymologically from the Latin word *confligere*, which simply means, to clash, or to part in a fight⁷. As indicated by Stagner, it is "a situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being obtainable by one or the other, but not both; each party is mobilizing energy to obtain a goal, a desired object or

situation, and each party perceives the other as a barrier to that goal⁸. The focal point of Stagner's definition rest on heated competition over scarce resources. Conflict is a state of discord instigated by the actual or apparent opposition of needs, values and interest. In a similar vein, Fisher sees conflict as hopelessness of objective or values between two or more parties in their relationship, so as to curtail the antagonist feelings of each other⁹. It is imperative to note that, conflict as portrayed above is considered as a product of disagreement that may be rooted in the belief system and perception of threat to peoples' goal attainment¹⁰. Pre-colonial Esanland had conflict as a social phenomenon derives from a clash of goals, both personal and groups¹¹. However, according to Albert, there is nothing amiss with conflicting situations, because it is a critical tool by which goals and objectives of individuals and groups are communicated; it is also a meaningful medium through which inventive human answers are derived and as well as means to the development of a collective identity¹². In other words, conflict is a necessary element for societal development, most especially when they are resolved amicably and do not degenerate into savagery lead to better society. Regardless of Albert's conception of conflict, there are actually sometimes when conflicting situation could result to loss of lives and properties¹³. In regards to this paper however, conflict is viewed as an antagonistic relationship that realizes negative result. Hence, there was a deliberate attempt to forge harmonious coexistence between the various communities in Esan land¹⁴.

Conflict resolution on the other hand, is an all-embracing concepts that incorporates all methodologies for managing conflict: from negotiation to diplomacy, from mediation to arbitration, from conciliation to conflict prevention, from conflict management to transformation, from restorative to peacekeeping¹⁵. In African setting and Esan specifically, conflict resolution is a mending process whereby all concerned give meaningful commitments in guaranteeing that social-attachment is kept up among individuals, families and communities. In other words, conflict resolution is underscored by the principles of reciprocity, all-inclusiveness and a sense of shared destiny between people on one hand, and restoring impaired relationship with God, the spirits and the ancestors¹⁶. As noted by Otite and Albert, conflict resolution helped to promote consensus-building, social bridge reconstructions, and the re-enactment of order in society¹⁷. The above logic were replicated in theory and practice in pre-colonial Esan communities.

3. ESAN: LOCATION AND THE PEOPLE

The Esan people constitute one of the major ethnic groups in Edo state, South-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Esan occupy a land mass covering about 2987.52 square kilometers¹⁸. It is located within longitude 5° 30' and latitude 5° 30' north, and 7° 30' east of Benin City, the capital of Edo State¹⁹. Perhaps, currently there are thirty-one well developed communities in the Esan land such as: Amahor, Ebelle, Egoro, Ekekhen, Ekpoma, Ekpon Emu, Ewatto, Ewohimi, Ewosa, Ewu, Ido, Igueben, Irrua, Okalo, Ogwa, Ohordua, Okhuesan, Onogholo, Opoji, Oria, Orowa, Ubiaja, Udo, Ugbegun, Ugboha, Ugun, Ujigba, Ukhun, Urohi, and Uromi²⁰. Each of these kingdoms is headed by a king – Onojie. As at today, the Esan is constituted into five Local Government Areas namely; Esan West, Esan Central, Esan North East, Esan South East, and Igueben.

The origin of Esan people has been a subject of great debate since the major tool for reconstruction of the early Esan history has been oral traditions in which various communities lay claim to one migration theory or the other²¹. The Oba Ewuare version apologists believed that the Esan people migrated from Benin kingdom in the 14th century during the reign of Oba Eware (the great). Oba Ewuare infuriated by the mysterious death of his only two sons on the same day enacted some laws to be obeyed as a mark of respect for his departed sons. The hardship and diseases that followed on the heels of these laws caused many people to flee. A great number of those who fled Benin and migrated toward the North-east and settled in what is currently known as Esan area are the ancestral fathers of the present Esan people²².

However, Okoduwa did not totally shared this belief, he maintained that the Ewuare version of Esan origin may mean the origin of more sophisticated political institutions in the area and the phase of radical societal restructuring due largely to increased migrants from Benin into the area, so it would not be proper to state in clear terms that marked the origin of Esan per se. He buttressed this point with the establishment of Irrua which according to oral tradition was the earliest kingdom founded in Esan by a warriors from Ifeku, an island near Idah²³. Despite, these divers' versions of origin, the Esan people are unique and highly vibrant group with a common language, custom and tradition. Although the Esan language is spoken and well understood by the people of Esan land, there are dialectal variants. In spite, of these observable varieties of Esan languages, they are mutually understandable, to such an extent that informative communication between speakers is not compromised²⁴.

4. THE NATURE OF CONFLICT IN PRE-COLONIAL ESAN SOCIETY

Conflict is a phenomenon that has always been part of human existence and part of day by day living. Generally, their occurrences are most often ascribed to “incompatibilities and differences between individuals and groups²⁵”. Conflict has multi-dimensional and multi-casual phenomena; there is no single cause for conflict. Conflicts arise for various reasons that are often a combination of politics, economics, and differing cultural identities²⁶. Conflicts in pre-colonial Esan were basically communal conflicts that ensued as a result of disagreement between two or more groups. Nevertheless, Okojie highlighted some causal factors that incite conflict in ancient periods as thus; divorce²⁷, struggle for political power, arson, kidnapping, and murder²⁸. The nature of conflicts in pre-colonial era Esan were embedded in many aspect of the people’s cultural existence.

Marriages for instance, in pre-colonial Esan were governed by tradition and custom. As noted by W.H Cooke in relations to Pre-colonial Benin “...generally speaking divorce is foreign to native laws and customs but it had crept in since the inception of our native court system”²⁹. In Esan society likewise, legal dissolution of marriage union were unheard of, once a woman entered into the covenant of marriage she bound to remain with her husband until death. Peradventure, a woman made up her mind to separate from her husband for any reason to her parents, she might as well decide to remain unmarried but in situation where she marries again, the later husband is naturally calling for war on his immediate family in particular, and the entire village. Unlike the Christian religion and Western marriages that underscored monogamy, the wealth of an Esan man was measured by the number of wives he got married to and therefore polygamy was practiced. It is imperative to note that, not adherence to the covenant of marriage has led to the following wars (height of conflict) in ancient Esan land.

The war between Uromi and Irrua of 1892-1893 was a case in this regard, Eromonsele the onojie of Irrua got married to Omanmoje a princess from the ruling house of Uromi, the marriage blossom for a short period, with the passage of time the once blossomed union dwindled and Onojie Eromonsele neglected the youthful princess with little or no care and when she could no longer bear the inhumanity melted on her, she decided to abandoned her matrimonial home to meet her parent in Uromi. Subsequently, she got married to another man in Uromi. Eromonsele could not bear the thought that another man would be sexually be intimate with his wife, he considered the act as a major affront on his throne, left with no option he declared war on Uromi in order to reclaim his escapee wife. The war eventually came to an end when a truce was brokered between the warring parties. In order to calm the raging Onojie, Omamoje’s cousin was used as a wife replacement while a woman was made to die for the atrocity committed by Omamoje³⁰.

The Udo-Ewatto War of 1890 also illustrated why divorce was uncommon in Esan. Eiyokho, the wife of the brave Eidenojie of Udo, deserted her lawful husband and went to her home in Idunsenu, Ewatto. Eidenojie haven’t seen the act as disrespectful decided to travel to Ewatto with his twelve armed men to showcase his brevity but unfortunately it boomerang he lost many of his men in the process³¹. Another example of war that occurred as a result of divorce was the war between Illeh-Ekpoma and Akho-Irrua of 1890. Iyinbo was once married to Akhimie of Illeh, Ekpoma the heir apparent to Ikhumun dynasty but deserted her husband to be re-marry to Eroanga of Akho, in Irrua, the brother of Okougbo, one of the warlords (Okakulos) of the village. Okougbo feeling much excited about the great exploit of his brother mocked the Illeh people for not been able to fight for their right by taking their wife back. Illeh people saw this affront as denigrating the pride of the great Ikhumun. Consequently, Illeh declared war on Akho³². Divorce was a major source of conflict in Esan land which had led to many wars.

The struggle for political power was another source of conflict in pre-colonial era. A case in point, was the war between Irrua-Opoji of 1845-1850, this was fought by the Opoji people to declare their political independence from the tyrannical regime of the ruling house of Irrua. The patriotic zeal of the Opoji people was seen by the just crowned king Ogbeide as an affront on the pride of the Irrua³³. This necessitated the war that began in 1845, which lasted for about five years with both communities suffered heavy death toll. One other area in Esan socio-cultural interactions that has attracted much conflicting setting was commercial activities, though carried out in very low magnitude it caused disagreement and distrust because of lack of fixed standard of measurement and method of exchange. Most often, these disagreements had led to major conflicts which usually apart from causing political resentments, also meant the leaving behind of trade and commerce between contending parties or groups for a reasonable periods³⁴.

5. CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN PRE-COLONIAL ESAN

Pre-colonial Esan had exceptional characteristics of conflict resolutions mechanism which are deficient in the global comity today. The notable feature of this conflict resolution mechanism stood Esan in the vantage position. In spite of the fact that, the Esan people are unique in the sense that the share common language as well as other cultural patterns but they were not centrally governed as in the case of Benin kingdom where the Oba serve as the political head of the entire kingdom and at the district and village level he was assisted by the Enigie (Dukes)³⁵. In pre-colonial Esanland (Otoesan), perhaps of the fifteen to twenty established kingdoms under the period of study, they were variously autonomous of each other, as they had their own king (Onojie) who rules his kingdom with the assistants of his appointed chiefs (Ekhaemhon) in the dispensations of justices. Historically, each of these kingdoms possessed the required state paraphernalia such as the traditional police, court and other executive as well as legislative organs³⁶. Although, Esan polities remained basically autonomous, they were by no means inaccessible from one another³⁷. In Esanland, resolutions of conflict were usually done through three level of government- the ward, the village and the Centre (the Palace)³⁸.

At the ward level (Uelen), which is made up of a man, his wife or wives, his children and younger brothers and their wives, his children and younger brothers and their wives, the unmarried sisters and his mother³⁹. The oldest male (Odafen) served as the hitherto head of the family, which could be single or extended. This may appear as if Esan people are gender bias but the rationale behind these practices is anchored on the belief that women will eventually leave their biological family and formed a new family. Esan people traced and preserved their family lineage through male folks. It is the duty of the Odafen to guarantee that serenity and dynamic union among individuals from the family is kept up at all times⁴⁰.

However, he was able to carry out these responsibilities with the coordinated effort of the family members. He also served as the family priest who offered sacrifices to the gods and ancestral spirits, in order to prevent impending dooms which would have otherwise befall the family⁴¹. The principle that underscored these practices is that when an impending conflict is nigh on board at the family level there is every possibility to have a peaceful community or society. In a situation where a man and woman had disagreement, it is the duty of the Odafen to call them to order so that harmonious relation is ensured but if it happened that the couple failed to adhere to his advice then a message is sent to the woman's parents to come over. The parents usually arrive very early in the morning and the parties involved are called to state their grievances, if the woman is found culpable she will be advised to apologize to her husband. Most often, the woman is asked to prepare a special meal in order to cement the once fractured relationship. Thereafter, her parents will entreat her to have a change of behavior. In a similar manner, if the man is at fault he will be advised to ask for forgiveness from his wife, in most cases it is at the man's discretion on manner to go about the apology⁴².

In Esan, in-laws are highly venerated, that is why there is a popular saying as thus: "Aigboruan oria rhamude, onogbe, ogbe ehiole" (One does not fight his in-law, he who does so fights with his own destiny)⁴³. In-laws, as mentioned above encompass not just the immediate family of the couple but both communities. Marriages in pre-colonial Esan were met to widen the bond of friendship among communities as well as strengthen solidarity and unity among people who would have ordinarily been hostile to each other. A case in point was the marriage between Queen Ebuade, the daughter of the Onojie of Ugboha and the Onojie of Irrua, the union created a peaceful and friendship ties between Ugboha and Irrua⁴⁴. Also, the hitherto animosity between the Onojie of Uromi and Opoji was brought to an end, when Ozedu the daughter of the Onojie got married to Onojie of Opoji. This alliance, which arises from the bond of marriages, promotes peace and stability. It is imperative to understand that until recent past marriage between members of the same community was forbidden because there was this belief that they are of the same close ancestors⁴⁵.

Another organ in pre-colonial Esan that helped in the administration of justices was the elder's council (Ikolo Edion). The elders were empowered to trial and administer appropriate punishment in practically all disputes and crimes. However, some capital offences such as murder, evils of witchcraft and land disputes were referred to the Onojie at Eguare (a place where the king is domicile) for his decisions. In the process of resolving conflicts, the Edion usually met at the village square (Okoghele) where all parties to the case at hand are given ample opportunity to air their views. In the event that all parties have all spoken, the Edion then moved away to confer (Iyi uma) and upon their return a decision is given by their spokesman. The decision of the elders are usually followed by a fine (Oko) or in some other cases, a goat is seized from the guilty one⁴⁶. In rare cases, when the found guilty refused to abide by the decisions of the elders, he or she might be ordered to swear to the village juju to prove their innocence⁴⁷.

The Enijie (kings) functioned as conciliators and reconcilers when disputes occur, so as to reestablish harmony and keep up agreeable relations among families and communities⁴⁸. The pre-colonial Esan conflict resolution methods encouraged the faulted to admit responsibility because of the co-operative measure employ to ensure peace and stability. In pre-colonial time injustice is addressed through healing and a rebuilding of rapport. Each party to the conflict is usually invited to state his/her own side of the story without interruption from the other party. It is believed that the persons will speak truthfully, but when in doubt they could be asked to swear on certain deities⁴⁹. Unlike, the western legal system approach that underscores establishing guilt and executing payback and penalty without reference to the victim or the wider families or future reincorporating the offender into the community. It is in accordance with this understanding that Bob-Manuel cited in Birgit Brock-utne claims that the gradual erosion of the values that existed within the traditional African societies and the replacement of these values by foreign ones introduced systematic problems for Africans because they were unable to adapt to the new system of political power⁵⁰.

In pre-colonial times, Esan land people had insightful inter-village relationships. Some Esan communities claimed very friendly union to the extent that no visible land boundary existed to strictly delineate one area from the other. For example, relationship that existed among Udo, Ubiaja, and Ugboha⁵¹. The Esan people valued and encourages communal living, where there is tendency to be conflict in respect to land disputes, or any other act of hostilities a blood pact (Okoven) was initiated to avert the occurrence. The system of Okoven served two major purposes, to put an end to already existing conflict between communities or to guarantee continuous peaceful co-existence. Once the Okoven oath was sworn to, it was expected to cement relationship, promote relationship, kingship and non-aggression between the affected communities⁵². The okoven pact initiated the spirit of Aneigbe (no shedding of each other's blood) among the Esan people. Aneigbe ensured that the people do not go against the tenets of Okoven pact. A case in point, is the cordial relationship that existed and still existing among the people of Irrua, Uzea, Oria, Uromi and Ugboha; these various communities believed they have eternal covenant of been their brothers keepers since they ascribed to a common ancestor⁵³.

Another area in Esan social-cultural relations that helped to ensure peaceful interactions was the phenomenon of Alimhin (spirit/masquerade) they played a pivotal role in ensuring peace and unity in the traditional Esan societies. Alimhin are regarded as ancestral spirit who directly shapes the world of the living, to this extent they were highly revered. They acted as a source of restraint to people's abnormal behavior which is not in line with the societal pattern. The people believed that Alimhin are part of their origin, so they play a vital role in ensuring peace and stability⁵⁴. This was profoundly established in the religious convictions of the people which are attributed to Elimin. These ancestral belief is so deep in traditional African system, as such it helped to bind present living members of family and lineage together especially in times of social upheaval⁵⁵. Azenabor cited in Akubor underscores the imperativeness of Alimhin when he emphasized that:

...in the Esan circle there three forces that rule the universe,
the power of man (which is physical), intellectual and spiritual,
and that though man may change the world through his physical
power for good or evil, he is however limited. On the other hand,
Spirit and ancestors (elimin) also influence the world because they
are nearer to God, and so, are less limited than man. These spirits
are those whose lives lived to an old age (Edion) with good
knowledge of society and died. Thus when these die, their spirits
continued to guide society in the right path of truth, security and
justice. He argues again that God supreme and his influence
overtakes all other influence⁵⁶

Generally, the above underscores the indispensable role of these spirits in maintaining peace and stability in pre-colonial Esan land. Also, it emphasized the pivotal influence of the elders living and dead in ensuring social cohesion of the Esan

communities. The elderly are highly respected in Esan land, because it is believed that they took decisions after a careful consideration of the matter before them based on their sound knowledge of Esan traditions. In doing this, they employed the use of Esan words and proverbs to flatters and nailed in moral lessons in order to avert impending conflict. The elderly played a pivotal in ensuring socio-cultural cohesion, they served as a rally points for imbibing wisdom and fortifying cordial intra and intergroup relationships⁵⁷.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper highlighted some Esan pre-colonial methods of conflict resolution, from the critical prism of appreciating traditional African mechanism for the promotion of harmonious coexistence in the society. Although, some of the techniques employed in ensuring peace and stability may be not be fashionable in today world, such as okoven trial by ordeal but the spirit behind it, which is been our brother's keeper should be imbibe in order to promote a safer world for all humanity. Esan pre-colonial methods of conflict resolution have the potentials of addressing and responding to new and emerging peace and security challenges if it is well harnessed.

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