Land Disputes between the Hausa/Fulani-Elele and Elele Community, 1890-2006: Lessons in Intergroup Relations in Nigeria.

By

Independence Chinonye Enyindah
Department of History and International Diplomacy
Faculty of Humanities Rivers State University
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt
E-Mail: Ice_Enyindah@Yahoo.Com Phone: +234 (0) 8023092776, 08066595926.
&
Frank O. Amugo
Department Of History and International Diplomacy
Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State University
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt
E-MAIL: frankamugo@gmail.com PHONE: +234 (0) 8037063542.

Abstract

The Hausa/Fulani Elele, known and called Osukpa by the people of Elele, have been in protracted disputes over the ownership of lands in Elele community. With the establishment of the colonial administration in the area, the British colonialists found the Hausa/Fulani Elele as suitable allies for their imperialistic objectives. With the support of the colonialists, the Hausa/Fulani rose to prominence in the community, with one of them serving as the President of Ikwerre County Council. During this period the attempts to establish their hegemony over Elele people was stoutly resisted. This was soon followed by disputations over political representation and ownership of lands between the Hausa/Fulani Elele and their hosts, which has lingered since 1950s till date. The study mainly relied on primary sources for data. The research findings revealed that in spite the lingering disputes over land, it has not degenerated to violence leading to social dislocation and death in the community. The focus of the paper, therefore, is to evaluate and document the Hausa/Fulani Elele and Elele community relations in the context of conflicts over political representation and land ownership. It concludes that conflict in intergroup relations does not always lead to violence and social dislocations, and hope that others would learn some lessons from this for harmonious intergroup relations in Nigeria.

Introduction

About the 1890s, a band of Hausa/Fulani hunters and traders under the leadership of Mallam Dikko, left Katsina-ala in the Benue basin through the Cross River basin to Awka in present Anambra, and finally settled at Elele. According to Elele oral tradition, they were

invited by Elele community through some Awka traders and artisans to come to assist in eliminating elephants that were a menace to the community. Soon after they had settled down, land was given to them for residential and agricultural purposes, amongst others. Having been integrated and assured of a secured base at Elele and other parts of Ikwerreland, they felt safe to extend their enterprises to other parts of old Rivers State and beyond. The Hausa/Fulani Elele maintained cordial relationship with Elele community and Ikwerre people until the establishment of the British colonial rule and the introduction of the policy of indirect rule in the administration ofthe area, which was more favourable to the Hausa/Fulani. With the backing of the British colonialists, the Hausa/Fulani in Elele rose to prominence and to the extent that they attempted to establish hegemony over Elele community, but without success. It was during this period of their enhanced socio-economic and political relevance accentuated by the British colonial rule that conflicts over political representation and land ownership between the two emerged. However, it is significant to note that in all of these conflicts serious crisis, characteristic of most intergroup conflicts in Nigeria, have not resulted. The paper argues that conflict in intergroup relations over limited life opportunities and resources does not necessarily lead to crises, and that the friendly and hospitable dispositions of the Ikwerre of Elele to outsiders is responsible for the harmonious relationship still existing between Elele and the Hausa/Fulani of Elele. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate and document the harmonious relationship between the Hausa/Fulani community in Elele and Elele people despite protracted conflicts over socio-economic and political opportunities. And to achieve the foregoing, the paper has been divided into sections. The first section deals with clarification of concepts. The second section is the Hausa/Fulani migration and settlement at Elele, while the third treats the Hausa/Fulani Elele during the colonial period. The fourth section deals with the Hausa/Fulani and Elele relationship. The paper deals with disputes over land between the Hausa/Fulani Elele and Elele people in section five, and section six is conclusion.

Conceptual Clarification

Ethnicity

The term ethnicity, according to Cookey (2016, pp.35-36), remains difficult either to describe or conceptualize because of its character. However, some scholars have made attempt at defining the concept. It has been described as a situation where ethnic groups engage in competition for valued things which are scarce in relation to the demand for those things. It is believed that such struggle inevitably creates hostilities and inter-ethnic tensions (Nyitse, T, 2014, p.20).

Nnoli in conceptualizing ethnicity, believes that socio-economic competition between groups in contact, and not contact alone, generate ethnicity (1978, p.70) as was the case between Puyall-up Indians of North America and later white migrants' destructive competition over land and timber exploitation (Taras snd Ganguly, 2008, p.19; Babawale, 2007, p.33), and competition for land between the Kikiyu and the white Settlers (Nnoli, 1978, p.71). He notes, that even when no racial and cultural differences exist, intense socio-economic competition may create ethnic like identifies and antagonism in plural societies (Nnoli, 1978, p.75). He further opine that whenever individuals desire to organize themselves in ways or manners that will enhance their competitive advantage over those they perceive as competitors for socio-economic opportunities, ethnicity will result.

This accounts for the conflicts between the Hausa/Fulani in Elele and the Ikwerre people of Elele. Since 1950s the two groups have been in various courts over ownership of land in the community and political representation, although these conflicts have not resulted to destruction of lives and property as in most conflict situations in Nigeria.

Cookey believe that ethnic diversity does not necessarily produce conflict, although the interaction of the group may create latent tension. He agrees with others in identifying economic competition as one of the sources of inter-ethnic conflicts (2016, p.38).

William (2004) contends that the inability of the various groups in Nigeria to accommodate their differences has largely hindered the process of nation-building in Nigeria. However, he believes, that inter-group as a social phenomenon, is still desirable (William, 2004).

For Kukah, ethnicity has not been bad in Nigeria. He asserts that ethnic associations in Nigeria have always provided platforms for political activities from the colonial period till date, and "… were the womb in which national politics was later conceived" (2011, pp.343-344). Babawale has advised, in spite of the fact that "ethnicity has contributed to the heightening of tension in the polity, and has remained an important part of the national question," that the "intrinsic significance of ethnic differences" be appreciated and not to be eliminated, but rather put in place and strategies "to ameliorate these differences for a strong united Nigeria" (2007, p.36).

From the foregoing, it is evident that the scholars are in agreement in their conceptualization of ethnicity as a situation where ethnic groups engage themselves in a struggle or competition for something of value which is scare. It is, therefore, this definition that will be used since it depicts Elele relationship with the Hausa/Fulani of Elele.

Conflict

Conflict is a situation in which individuals, and, or groups have divergent pursuits, interests, goals and aspirations. Furthermore, conflict characteristically involves competition or rivalry between the parties over the objects to which they attach value (Yinusa and Adeoye, 2005, p.90). In other words, mere divergence or differences of opinion, values, goals or interests does not give rise to a conflict situation, but the desire or resolve of the parties to achieve these objectives (William, 2004, p.6), probably by all means and at all cost.

Class, status and power, according to Max Weber, are critical factors in the occurrence of conflict (William, 2004, p.1). It has been argued that conflict does not necessarily involve violence, for instance, where opponents scheme to eliminate themselves as they pursue their goals. Though beneficial to the society as it 'establishes or re-establishes unity and cohesion' (Alananu, 2004, p.54), conflict is destabilizing to the system when it becomes violent, as in most cases in Nigeria, although it is a means of solving the problems of inequality, marginalization and exploitation in society (Alananu, 2004). It is significant to note that the key element in the definitions of conflict as stated above is not violence but competition or rivalry between parties over the object of their desire. In other words, struggle by parties over some interest(s) as in the conflicts between the Hausa/Fulani community in Elele and Elele community.

Migration and Settlement

The Elele oral tradition has it that the Hausa/Fulani community in Elele was founded by some elephant hunters led by one Mallam Dikko, also known as Umaru Dadi. Others who came to Elele with him were his younger brothers Mohammed Dadi also known as Ododo and Jaji, also known as George (Gabriel Igwe Ndah, 28/12/2016). They came from Katsina-ala in Benue State through the Cross River basin to Awka before settling at Elele Ikwerre. They were informed about the abundance of elephants at Elele by Awka traders before they moved to Elele in search of elephants (Chief Emma Okah, 2/4/2016). Others believe they were invited by Elele people to come over to assist them get rid of elephants that were harassing the community.

On their arrival at Elele, they were received by the people of Omuadi, where they were accommodated by the elders of Omuadi family in Mgbuayim village. They were subsequently given land by Omuadi people for residential purposes close to *Igbo Onino* tree and without charge. The informants stated that from the areas given to them they had expanded through acquisitions and trespass into other villages' land in Elele (Gabriel Igwe Ndah, 28/12/2016; Alex Amadi, 30/6/2018).

Hausa/Fulani Elele influence during the Colonial Era.

Historical evidence abound to the effect that the British colonial rule, especially the indirect rule system, has been identified as being responsible for inter-group cleavages in post-colonial Nigeria.

Uji contends in his work: "Hausa-Fulani Imperialism and Ethnic Minority Struggles in Central Nigeria", that the British conquest and annexation of the Central Nigeria, which brought the people under the Northern Region brought various ethnic groups under the dominion of the Fulani-Hausa leadership (Uji, 2015, p. 67), which further helped to reinforce Hausa-Fulani domination (Nyitse, 2014, p.55; Pongri, 2015, pp. 109-120). However, in Elele, the Hausa hunter/settlers co-existed peacefully with their Ikwerre hosts during the pre- colonial period. At this time, Chief Dikko did not express any ambition to subjugate the Ikwerre of Elele, although he was a great elephant hunter that was sought after by many communities within the rainforest region of Nigeria. They found in Elele a peaceful location where they could stay to pursue their economic interests. However, things began to change with the establishment of colonial administration in Ikwerreland. They were very close to the Whiteman (colonial officers) (Don Elechi, 2016; Wokne et al. (Ed.), 1993).With the success of the indirect rule system in the north they found them worthy partners in achieving the goals of colonialism in the area. Chief Alhaji Haliru Dikko, a descendant of Chief Dikko, was at a time appointed the head of Ikwerre District Council at Choba at the time W.S. King, the then District Officer in-charge of the Ahoada District Council. By this appointment, Dikko was in-charge of the affairs of the Ikwerre. The protest by the Ikwerre Chiefs and Elders was ignored by the District Officer (D.O.). But in 1953, the then Ahoada Divisional Officer, Mr. Concraine appointed Chief Ajoknu Kpoku of Elele the paramount Chief of the Ikwerre on the advice of Wopara Wokawhuo, the oldest man in Elele at that time. Another descendent of Chief Dikko, Umaru Dikko, succeeded his father Chief Dikko, as the head of the Hausa community in Elele, and was appointed the British representative at Elele.

Woke et al. (1993), asserts that with the backing of the British colonialists, Alhaji Haliru Dikko tried to threaten the powers of the paramount ruler of Elele. They claim that it was in his time that Elele community witnessed what they described as "mad rush" for expansion and land grabbing by the Hausa in Elele, which was intensified during the reign of Chief Ododo and Alhaji Umaru Haliru Dikko. It was during Chief Ododo's reign as the leader of the Hausa community in Elele (the Sarki Muslimi Elele) that Elele people were tricked by the Whiteman (Woodman called "Uduma" by the natives) to surrender their weapons (arms and ammunitions) of defence in time of aggression, popularly known as Ogbaji Egbe (destruction of guns). According to Talbot, Chief Ododo was "an enterprising

Hausa, who followed the steps of a mighty elephant hunter of his race settled in Elele and made himself a Chief of the town" (Talbot, 1967, p.116)

However, these acts of impunity did not go unchallenged by Elele people, as one wonah Wuguzo of Omualikor, Elele, defied his order that nobody should roof house with corrugated iron sheets without first obtaining his consent, by roofing house with corrugated iron sheets. He reacted by directing his men to de-roof the house and the materials taken to his house, but he was resisted by the Omualikor people, who rose in stout defence of their own and against the overbearing authority of chief Ododo. He died in 1936, and was succeeded by Alhaji Haliru Dikko, who despite using "diplomacy and marriage to mend fences with Elele people, continued expansion of the Hausa/Fulani community through land grabbing and disputes beyond their original place of settlement given to them by their hosts (Wokne, et al.,1993).

Cordial Relationship between the Hausa/Fulani Elele and Elele Community

One thing that has sustained the cordial relationship between the Hausa/Fulani and the Ikwerre people of Elele is marriage. According to Don Elechi, the Hausa/Fulani did not give their daughters' hand in marriage to Elele men because of the fear that their daughters might be converted to another faith. However, Chief Emma Okah informed that only those natives who converted to Islam were allowed to marry their daughters. According to the informant, the expansion of the Hausa to other parts of Elele land beyond Omuadi, their original settlement, was made possible because they were now treated as in-laws by Elele people. He revealed that the first son of Ododo, Sanni, was born by an Omuadi daughter (Elele woman), and the former Military Administrator of Cross Rivers State, Col. Bakwo Dikko, was also the son of the Omuadi daughter (Elele woman).

The Hausa/Fulani in Elele are very fluent in Ikwerre language. According to Alhaji Saidu Haliru Dikko, a grandchild of Chief Dikko, and the Chief of Muslim community in Elele, although the two groups have a cordial relationship which dates back to the beginning of their settlement in Elele, there is no cross cultural borrowing beyond the language of the host. However, he noted that they exchanged visits and gifts during their festivals, such as Christmas, the New Yam festival (Hozuzu), and Sallah (Alhaji Saidu Hilaru Dikko, 16/4/2016).

Igwe Ndah revealed that the relationship between the Hausa/Fulani and their Elele hosts was so cordial that some of the strangers registered themselves as members of various families in Elele, especially those on whose land they settled. For instance, Adam George, "Jaju's Son" was part of Chukwu's family in Omunmkpuru, where he lived and farmed.

Haliru Dikko registered at Omuadi family meeting as a member. Yakubu Ododo was a member of Ohna Omenele (Red cap elders) and a Warrant Chief. It is said both groups always settled their matters out of court as the Hausa/Fulani people of Elele were hardly seen or viewed as strangers by their hosts, but as members of Elele Community (Gabriel Igwe Ndah, 28/12/2016).

The cordial relationship between the two groups was tested during the Nigerian civil war, especially before and after the civil war in 1966 and 1970, as it made the extermination of Hausa/Fulani of Elele by the Biafran soldiers and the Igbo difficult. The Hausa/Fulani enjoyed the protection of Elele people during the 1966 crisis and the actual civil war in 1967. For instance, Haliru Dikko was given protection by Elele people before he was rescued by the Nigerian Police, who took him to Port Harcourt, from where he was taken to Kano.

In another account, Haliru Dikko was said to have escaped during the crisis into his rubber and cocoa plantations at *Igbo Onino* sacred forest, which was then inaccessible, and all attempts and efforts made by the Biafrans to get him out, and probably kill him proved abortive. With the aid of Elele people, he was moved to Ahoada en route Port Harcourt, where the federal soldiers assisted him back to the North, and only returned to Elele after the Civil War in 1970 Some other Hausa/Fulani Elele were harboured and given protection by some families in Elele to demonstrate their long-time relationship, such as Opara Oyindah Wogu, a Native Court messenger from Omungwu-Elele. It was stated that Elele people hid some of the Hausa/Fulani people as a result the Igbo and Biafran soldiers could not harm them (Don Elechi, 16/4/2016).

Gabriel Igwe Ndah further informed that Haliru Dikko returned to Elele after the community and the entire Rivers State had been liberated by the federal forces. Haliru was said to have reciprocated the kind gesture shown them (i.e. Hausa-Elele) during the 1966-67 crisis in Nigeria by Elele people when he came back to Elele after the Nigerian Civil war in 1970. Being Hausa, he greatly assisted the Nigerian soldiers within the area. Because of this role, he became the head of Elele Community during this period, and used his relationship with the Nigerian soldiers, who were predominantly northerners, to protect Elele people from soldiers' harassment.

Although the two communities had always been engaged in protracted land disputes, but their cordial relationship subsists.

Land Dispute between the Hausa/Fulani Elele and Elele community

Our research revealed that disputes over ownership of land between the Ikwerre Elele and the Hausa/Fulani Elele in 1956 began with the request for land from Elele Community to plant Kolanut and promised to give a basket of kolanut as royalty to the land owners, which he failed to fulfill. Apart from reneging from his promise to give a basket of kolanut, he exceeded the portion of land given to him by Omumkpuru family and trespassed into Ogbakiri- Elele land. And Nwanjoknu and Alubi Amadi brought action against him for trespass. But the matter could not go on as one Marcus Eze of Omuoluma in Elele and Mbamara Dikko (Dikko's servant) withdraw the case for out of court settlement, but could not settle it.

The efforts of Lazarus Ndah of Egbeda town to settle the matter out of court still did not yield positive result. In 1956, Wagbara family demanded for the basket of kolanut as Haliru promised, but was turned down as he claimed that the land in question belonged to his father, Dikko. As a result, Wagbara brought action against Haliru in suit No. 1935/56. But Haliru countered by taken action for claim of ownership of the disputed land, which was struck out by the court. Wagbara again, brought another action against Haliru at Elele Native court in suit no. 1064/56 claiming title to the land. The court awarded Wagbara ownership of the land as he claimed, but was reversed on appeal by the Ikwerre Native Court of Appeal in suit no. INCA/411/56. The current dispute over a land between the Hausa and Elele community began in 2002.

Hausa/Fulani Elele have always engaged in land disputes with all the host communities in Elele in various courts in the State asking that they be granted title to all the land in question. Some of the land disputes pending in court are the following:

- Suit No.1HC/96/96: Alexander Amadi v. Lt. Col. Yakubu Bako and Rivers State Govt-. The dispute is over the ownership of a portion of land left side of Owerri Rd very close to Elele Motor Park. The case of the defendant in this matter is that his ancestors deforested the land and that he inherited same from his father, Mallam Bako.
- Suit No.ECC/15/2006: Chief Emma Okah and ors (representing Omuadi village) v. Lawal Sanni and ors. Chief Okah and Omuadi village are asking for forfeiture of the land given to the Hausa/Fulani settlers when Mallam Dikko and his people came to Elele.
- Igwe Ndah and ors. (Representing Omuashe family of Omumkpuru village, Elele) v. Alhaji Saidu Dikko and Anor (For and on behalf of Alhaji Aleru Dikko's family).The matter is for declaration of title and forfeiture of the defendant's residential compound. Our findings reveal that the persisting disputes the

Hausa/Fulani and their hosts emanated from the encroachments of the Hausa/Fulani on the lands of their hosts and the failure of the former to restrict their developments to the portions of lands originally given to them. Secondly, the practice of land sales by the Hausa/Fulani to the public when relocating or leaving the community. These practices have been the main issues that elicited disputes and conflicts between the Hausa/Fulani and their hosts.

Conclusion

Frequent altercations by different ethnic groups in the country have continued to pose very serious challenge to Nigeria's corporate existence. And with limited socio-economic opportunities confronting the country things are likely to get worse in this direction as groups compete for these limited resources. However, it is possible as the paper reveals for groups to go about this without necessarily creating room for social disharmony amongst themselves and causing crises in their communities. Indeed, the Hausa/Fulani community of Elele and their hosts. The study has revealed that harmonious intergroup relations in Nigeria is still possible, even when the groups are enmeshed in protracted land disputes, or other disputes for that matter, as it is the case of Hausa/Fulani Elele and Elele community relationship.

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