Eleme and Okrika Relations, 1800-2020

By

Michael, Thomas Blessed PhD
Department of History and Diplomatic Studies
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni
P.M.B. 5047 Port Harcourt
Email: michaelthomasblessed@yahoo.com,
&
Lale Owate Promise-Iwezor PhD
Ministry of Information, Rivers State
Broadcasting Corporation, Radio Rivers
Port Harcourt
EMAIL: laleowate@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper examined Eleme and Okrika relations during the pre-colonial, colonial and the post-colonial periods. Eleme and Okrika have had contact since the pre-colonial era and both groups depended on each other for economic, political, religious and socio-cultural survival. The paper discussed the relationship between both groups with emphasis on trade, politics, education, religion and social ties. The researchers used primary and secondary sources of information to generate the needed data. The data generated was carefully analysed. The study revealed that the relationship between Eleme and Okrika encompasses all aspects of human society. The paper also revealed that the relationship between Eleme and Okrika during the pre-colonial era was cordial, peaceful, and harmonious and as such promoted economic, social-cultural ties that impacted positively on the overall development of the affected groups. However, the colonial and post-colonial eras ushered in conflicts and confrontations due to land use, creation of administrative units, industrialization, and boundary disputes among others. Despite pockets of wars, Eleme and Okrika have continued to be good neighbours, helping each other in times of need to ensure continuity and brotherliness. The relationship between Eleme and Okrika was facilitated by trade, trade routes, markets, socio-cultural activities, religion, among others. The paper recommended that inter group relations should be encouraged and in times of instability, indigenous diplomacy, Alternative Dispute Resolution Strategies, among others should be employed to ensure peaceful and harmonious relationship between the affected groups.

Keywords: Intergroup relations, Peaceful coexistence, Conflicts, Eleme, Okrika.

Introduction

The classic definition of intergroup relations was originally provided by Sherif (1966), who suggested "wherever 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, Sherif (1966:12). The term intergroup relations refer to both individual interactions involving members from different ethnic groups and the collective behaviour of ethnic groups in interaction with other groups. The study of intergroup relations has recently enjoyed a considerable resurgence from scholars in history and social sciences. This resurgence has been driven in part by contemporary conflicts and crisis between the ethnic groups under study (Eleme and Okrika) that have highlighted the importance of understanding the origins of intergroup tensions and how those tension can be reduced or eliminated. It reflects also increasing recognition of the importance of intergroup cooperation. However, Eleme occupies a rich well-watered plain with abundant rainfall. The plain is very fertile and has proved most suitable for farming hence the people are predominantly farmers. Their major farm products are tubers and vegetables. Okrika on the other hand occupy a mangrove swamp, rainfall made up of creeks and rivers. The Okrika people are predominantly fishermen.

Basically Eleme people interact with the Okrika people more than their fellow Eleme people in the areas of economy and social activities. The surplus generated on their farms is purchased by the Okrika people who also sell their own sea products to the people of Eleme in the 'Echieta' Market located at Nchia-Eleme. Any unfavourable economic situation in Eleme quickly reflects on Okrika whose economy depends on Eleme and the same is applicable to the Okrika who also depend on the people of Eleme for agricultural produce. The result of this strong economic tie with the Okrika people is that the Eleme culture is highly influenced by the Okrika culture and vice versa, especially through marriage contracts, dance, masquerade displays and dressing. On the whole, Eleme and Okrika has trade contracts that later influenced the political and socio-cultural history of their existence. Eleme and Okrika have experienced conflicts and wars as a result of land disputes. However, the conflict have always been amicably resolved by the Chiefs of both groups. Eleme and Okrika have had interaction since the pre-colonial era and that relationship has continued till date.

Brief History of Okrika

Recent archeological works by a team of researchers, led by Prof. E. J. Alagoa, shows the earliest Okrika migrants settled at the Okrika mainland between 860 AD and 1515 AD (Alagoa and Tamuno, 1980 p.114). Another source suggests that the earliest settlers in Okrika include those who migrated directly from Central and Western Niger Delta. The

migrants from Okopiri and other parts are still littered with some myths. For example, it was believed that Tamoniaro crossed to Okrika Island with her husband Oko, children Sangatan-aro in about 1255 AD. Tamuniaro has been associated with Fenibeso, a tough looking young man, a marauder and fugitive offender who migrated to Okopiri from Ilotombi, also known as Idotoru or Andoni country Talbot, (1932, p.83-84). Fenibeso, Tamoniaro and her family were said to have lived together in Okopiri for about two decades before they crossed to Okrika Island. Other settlers at the time on the Island also include a man called Kirike, Oputibeye, Opuambe, Ileya (Eleya) Ekeregbani,Inyiaso, Kala-Owulo, Iga, Amakiri, Opuogulaya (Fiberesima 1990, p.2). Those to whom primacy of arrival on the Island has been attributed were Oputibeye and Kirike (Abam, 2005, p.22).

Akalubo (2021) has it that the first settlement of Okrika nation is Okochiri (an anglicized name for Okopiri). The founder, Oputuya I moved from Okochiri and founded Okrika itself. He is from Amasoma, somewhere in Kalabari, who migrated and settled first at Okopiri, now Okochiri. The Kirike people are said to belong to a branch of human family called the Delta people. Their original home was probably somewhere in Benin or Edo corrupted to Ado and Warri or Iseleme Kingdoms. Traditions maintained that the Kirike groups were not fugitive, fleeing from victorious forces of invaders. This fervent belief accounted for Kirike people's boast and arrogance, that Kirike had no abandoned settlement: *Kirike mi ani olomu amanyanake*. Those founders included Kirike, Ambeme, Ngiako, Bile-Ogbolo, Sangatan-aro, Opulibeya, Opudubaye and many more. All these founders did not arrive at once, but a whole series of successive migrations before the climax was reached.

The earliest settlements were first seen on the Island, namely Okrika Town (Kirike and Ogoloma). There is continuous controversy between the two over which arrived first on the Island. Abam (2005, p.16) assert that, the earliest settlers who made up the Okrika Kingdom have a variegated history. As a matter of fact, Okrika does not trace her origin to one ancestor. The Ogu people believe that the communities that made up Okrika nation were independently founded. There are different accounts that point to migration from different places and times. This is because many migrations happened all over Africa, most of it neither organised nor planned. But particularly, from central Ijo land, it is not very clear as to when such migrations started and settled at Okrika. Hence, one can say that these movements were spontaneous and suggested that each Okrika settlement has its distinct history of migration and settlement but later become a federation for mutual defence against external aggression. When might was right for its people solidarity of the different settlements with the Kirike settlement was achieved and perfected for mutual defence. The acceptance of the leadership of the Kirike settlement by all other Okrika

settlements was mainly due to its population and might; and also enhanced by its cultural affinity sacredly consolidated in an everlasting manner through a covenant (*Oboku*), believed to have no limitation in time or space. The 'Oboku' bound not only settlements or communities, but also the individual members of the settlements to one Okrika nation (Abam, 2005, p.17).

One oral tradition has it that the earlier Okrika settlement is Okopiri (Oko's bush), today's Okochiri on the mainland. It was derived from the name 'Oko' - the name of the man believed to have settled there first (Talbot, 1932, p.830). He migrated from Amassoma on Wilberforce Island in Central Niger Delta as noted by Alagoa (2005, p.146). 'Oko' is believed to be the undisputed leader of the groups of migrants that settled in Okopiri for both security and greener pastures. Okrika is one of the ancient city states of the Niger Delta. It is at present located in two of the twenty three local government areas of Rivers State (Ogan, 2008, p.25).

According to Porter (1933), the two main Okrika-speaking local government areas (Okrika and Ogu/Bolo) lie between latitudes four degrees thirty-five minutes ($4^{o}35$) and four degrees fifty minutes ($4^{o}50$) north of the equator and longitudes, six degrees fifty minutes ($6^{o}50$) and seven degrees fifteen minutes ($7^{o}15$) east of the meridian. Okrika covers an area approximately 237 square miles or 613.83sq km in extent (Porter, 1933: para. II). Abam (2005, p.1) posited that if the area of Okrika communities in the Port Harcourt local government area, which is 13.25sq miles out of 25sq miles, the total Okrika territory covers an area of 250.25sq miles or 648.15sq km in extent.Kirike, otherwise called Okrika or Wakirike reside on the sea-port island along the ship route to Port Harcourt, the capital city of Rivers State. It is an important gateway to all places of the River Niger. Okrika is bounded on the north by Port Harcourt, south by Bonny, west by Kalabari, and the east by Eleme and Ogoni. Wakirike people received the extended name of Okrika from the early European merchants who traded with them. Okrika, presently the headquarters of the Okrika local government area (WALGA), is situated on the land with three other towns Ogoloma, Ibaka and Ogbogbo - all of which make up the Wakirike local government area, and have several satellite towns and fishing settlements which are spread around it. According to Opuda (2021), there are about 40 towns and clans, communities and settlements. As Akalubo (2021) put it: "We have many communities, but during the pre-colonial times it was only ten clans; right now we have about twelve clans. Konuju as he said used to be part of Okrika, but it has been separated and it is now a clan of its own. The areas they occupy lies tucked away in the deep rainy forest at the head of the numerous creeks of the Niger Delta."

The Okrikans are mostly fishermen because it is an island except few clans like Daka-Ama, Port Harcourt, Okochiri, Ibuluya/Dikibo who inhabit the main land. Okrika has government projects sited on it. For example, the Okrika General Hospital, Okrika Grammar School (founded in 1940), a Modern Jetty, Post Office and several oil servicing companies. It also hosts some important national oil and gas infrastructure, including a network of pipelines, a loading jetty and gas plant facilities. The people of Okrika speak a dialect of the Ijaw language (close to Kalabari and Ibani dialects). However, as Alagoa and Tamuno (1989, p.47) asserted "the only exception to the use of Okrika as a common dialect among the ethnic kingdom is Abuloma, wherein addition to Okrika, they speak Abuloma classified in the same linguistic group as the Abua, Odual, Bukuma and Kugbo-Ogbia."

The Okrika people dress like their Kalabari counterparts. The women of Okrika, according to Amiesimaka (2021), have a very unique way of dressing - very beautiful in their lace blouse and two wrappers up and down during ocasions. These wrappers must be 'popo,' 'gom,' kente, fieni, and george. The Okrika women hardly tie 'wax' or 'alu' wrappers for occasion (Akalubo, 2021). The men on the other hand dress in 'Etibo,' 'kaftan,' 'senators,' jumper suits, or 'woko,'and dons - all these go with wrapper. During the pre-colonial era, the men tie 'george' (ijiri) wrapper with 'etibo' and 'don' (Amiesimaka, 2021) and all the traditional native wears. The 'Don' and 'Etibo' are adorned with studs largely made of gold. These dressing go with a walking stick and bowler hat. The women too adorn themselves with beads on their neck and beaded hats. During the pre-colonial times there were several religious beliefs and practices in Okrika clan. The founding father of these ancient communities in Okrika resorted to worshipping idols such as the sea, sun, thunder. These beliefs which were and are abstract reasoning strategies for coping with the environment, step by step had to be concretized in actions, rituals and ceremonies.

Today Christianity, with its advent 1878 in Okrika, has overtaken the traditional worship (Kalio, 2005, p.1). Christianity was brought to Okrika by Atorudibo Fubarada. Obuoforibo (2005, p.1) posited that Atorudibo Fubarada, a chief priest and one of the chiefs of King Ibanichuka, became a Christian convert during one of his trade visits to Bonny where mission activities had thrived including the building of a school in 1864. The people of Okrika have an interesting culture consisting of their language, moral and belief systems - the entire set as reflected in their habits, skills, plays and dress.

Ogan (2008, p.35) asserted that Okrika is also famous for various performing arts, dance and music. The notable dancing groups include 'Ekpete,' which Eleme and her neighbours borrowed, 'Owoko,' 'Asiko,' 'Adu,' 'Pioru,' 'Isakabari,' and the 'Eremini Ogbo' - singing and drumming accompany most of the displays.There are so many masquerades in

Okrika. They represent diverse characters. Each has its own story, style and significance told by its carved headwear, music and spells involved, the hues dabbed and designs of its costume, the dance or display it does, the sounds of the drums. Some masquerades are displayed for entertainment but have also enriched her culture; and were copied from their upland and riverine neighbours (Jamabo, 2021). Some masquerades were imported into Okrika from Akwa Ibom in the 1960s like the 'okpo.' The 'Mingi Oporopo' may have been imported from Opobo. All these masquerades have very unique dancing steps and their colourful dressing. They all dance simultaneously to a talking drum to the admiration of spectators. Most times they feature in the Rivfest, organised by the state government.

Akalubo (2021) noted that during the pre-colonial era when people go to the river, whatever thing they see they mimicked way back home - for instance mermaid and fishes. That is why the Okrikas of old so much believed in water spirits. They will come back and carve it on a stick and they will display it as masquerades. As Akalubo puts it, our major culture that the whole world knows about is the *Odum masquerade* displayed once in 10-20years. That is the greatest masquerade display we use to have with other simple masquerades like *pioru*. It is a source of tourism attraction that generates money whenever they are displayed. The 'Odum' festival is held in high esteem by the Okrikas and Rivers State in general. This festival, according to Amiesimaka, is a project of its own because so much resource is sunk into it.

So many age grades (male and female) exist in Okrika and they are grouped by their birth year. Akalubo and Amiesimaka (2021) are in the same age grade called Awolibi Kalanda Progressive Club of Okrika. Akalubo (2021) opined that their duty is to empower youths, teach them how to live an upright life. They teach them skills like:

- carpentry, sowing, fishing, hair barbing and many more.
- how to engage in meaningful activities without going to steal or engage in bunkering.
- clearing blocked drainages during the rainy season when flooding is prevalent to make for easy flow in culverts and gutters.
- how to fish and giving them net and other fishing gears at the end of the course.

Young men also form dance, masquerade and drum groups. The women also have their age grades. These women usually teach young girls how to fish, pick periwinkles and other sea foods. Another culture and tradition of the Okrika people which is so fascinating is their marriage. The *Iria* (or *Irigha*) is an important festival that reflects the culture of the Wakirike people. The ceremony involves young girls between the ages of 17-20 years who

are ready and of the age of marriage. Every young girl is expected to perform this ceremony before she loses her virginity (Nengi, 2021).

The Okrika people are predominantly a fishing folk. Their founding father, Opuogulaya left the legacies behind. The Okrikans who inhabit the main land area are farmers but on a very small scale. Ibulubo (2021) reiterated that Okrika people did not practice any significant farming. If at all they ever did, it was quite negligible and left no relics behind. However, they either planted or gathered some fruits such as 'tenwa', 'tololo' and 'mgbusu' (of these three fruits the first two are rarely seen, so my informant does not know the English name for it while the third 'mgbusu' is of the raffia palm tree and is still common). These fruits provided food for Opuogulaya and his followers.

Pre-Colonial Eleme-Okrika Relations

Eleme has a longstanding relationship with Okrika, both economically and socially. While it is true that the commercial and cultural spheres provided avenues of relationships between Okrika and her neighbours since pre-colonial times, the area that has attracted greater attention as far as Okrika and Eleme are concerned is that of land disputes. Gobo (2008, p.308) stated that:

> There is hardly any group sharing boundaries with Okrika that has not had some disagreement with her, in land-related matters, be they the Eleme, Ogoni, Ikwerre of Diobu (Rebisi) and Elekahia…

The Okrika community has maintained both friendly (ambivalent) and occasionally, hostile relationships with the Eleme people. Gobo (2008, p.314) asserted that the contacts cover many areas of human endeavour such as war, peace, trade, marriage, culture, and the more wide-ranging network of interrelations mainly economic, religious and rituals which bind the two groups together.

The Okrika people refer to the Eleme people as 'Okoni' meaning inhabitants of the land of 'Oko'. Oko was one of the primeval ancestors of the Okrikans. Okochiri was his place of domicile during his life time (Ibuoforibo, 2012, p.412). From the pre-colonial times, Eleme and Okrika have been trade partners. The Okrika people, predominantly fishermen, usually sold fish and salt to the Eleme people who are farmers. The Eleme people, in turn, sold their farm produce such as cassava, yam, cocoyam, three-leaf yam, sugarcane, and vegetables to them. Their trading relations continued even during the slave trade and palm-oil trade eras. The Okrika merchants acted as middlemen during these trades. They bought items of each trade from the Eleme traders and sold to the Europeans dealers.

Developments between the two people were as summarized by Mr. J. G. Mackenzie in his intelligence. Report on Eleme clan (1932):

> The Eleme have been more in touch, through trade with the Okrikas which did not stop the latter from exploiting them also from hindering the spread of Christianity and education in the area for fear that it should bring their supremacy to an end. It was not till 30 years ago that any schools were started in the area.

The trade routes were track roads leading from Okrika (Okochiri) to the 'Echieta' market at Eleme and sometimes at Eteo market near Ogu. These markets were held on specific market days. As Ngofa (2006, p.242) put it:

> The markets grew in importance as the economy of both communities as well as that of Aros depended solely on them. In time, many settlements were dotted along the creeks by Okrika people, not only fishing and trading, but also to learn the Eleme methods of growing farm crops.

The Eleme people also go to Okrika to buy fish in their fish markets. Till date, this trade relationship is still on. On Sundays the Okrika people sell their fish at 'Echi-Ejiye' at Agbochia and on every other day they trade with the Eleme people at the 'Echieta' market which is a daily market.

The indigenous religion of the Eleme and Okrika people during the pre-colonial era was based on spirits. These spirits were worshipped with the help of certain symbols. These symbols which were of various materials and forms depict the physical presence of the gods or spirits amongst his worshippers and it is carved in wooden images, trees and rivers. The gods and spirits were consulted and offered sacrifices in times of sickness, war and drought. These sacrifices which were accepted as gifts to the god or spirit include cows, rams, foodstuff, drinks, fowl, goats, clothes, etc. The symbols are kept in shrines where consultations take place. The practice of the religion is supervised by a priest who was appointed by the owners of the god or spirit, and is normally from the lineage of the house or family that own it. The priest was the liaison between the past and the living, thus he was to undertake the passing of demands made by both the dead and the living.

The Eleme people worshipped deities such as, *Gberebeka Ndorwa, Ejian, Onura, Ejilee* and *Ebaajor*. While the Okrika people worshipped ancestral gods like *Fenibeso, Agbaba, Amakiri*, *Odobiri Kulu-kulo-Orumo, Mingi-Owu*, including the ancestral gods of the various houses, individuals or families. These gods/spirits perform different jobs and were thus consulted according to the need of the person or town requesting its assistance. Fenibeso is the

communal deity of the Okrika people. He was said to be a great warrior leading the Okrika people in their wars with neighbouring towns.

Eleme-Okrika Relations during the Colonial era

In April 1898, a British force entered Eleme from the south-east and camped at Ebubu led by Captain James. This signaled colonization in Eleme. Eleme from then on was administered as part of Degema Division, of which Okrika was part, and the Eleme native court was established in 1922 at Echieta and tax was collected first in 1928.

The new dispensation did not affect Okrika settlers at the Eleme waterfronts. In 1929, Eleme was transferred from Degema Division to Ahoada Division; this again did not alter the Okrika position because they still belonged to the Owerri Province. In 1937, the Eleme people requested and were granted transfer to Opobo Division in Calabar Province, reason being that, according to Igwe (2018):

> They are Ogoni and wish to be in the same division with their brethren; join their fellow Ogonis in the Ogoni native treasury and that Opobo station was nearer than Ahoada.

This completely moved her from the same administration with Okrika. However, Eleme and Okrika are close door neighbours so they are bound to have many things like social, cultural, economic and religious interest together. They were not completely disentangled. Eleme and Okrika had been in the same administrative division right from the colonial period. Obuoforibo (2012, p 412) stated that:

> The vassalage of Eleme to Okrika suzerainty was magnificent political monument, which remained undisturbed until changes of status quo of the two clans, namely, the placement of Eleme in Opobo Division (and later in Ogoni Division). This was in 1927 when there was administrative restructuring in the Eastern Provinces of Nigeria, Okrika continued to be in the Degema Division of the Owerri Province. The consequence was the new Division to which Eleme had been attached extended their taxation drive to Okrika inhabiting the mainland (Okochiri/Okobechie) in 1937.

It is pertinent to note that, Degema District was created out of Bonny District in January, 1895. The two clans were both in Degema and Ahoada Districts from 1898 - 1936. Eleme had its native court but the activities of Chief Daniel Oju Kalio of Okrika who, according to Ngofa (2006, p 117), would just travel to any town in Eleme and constitute an illegal court where he tried cases and imposed fines or terms of imprisonment. An unlucky person will be first taken to Okrika for recording then sent to Degema where he served his

sentence. These political ties continued up to 1979 when Okrika, Oyigbo, Tai and Eleme Local Government Area was created by the Federal Military Government of General Olusegun Obasanjo and Mr. George Sekibo of Okrika was the Chairman. In 1987, however, following local government reforms of that era, Okrika was 'untied' from Oyigbo/Tai/Eleme and became a separate local government area with headquarters at Okrika mainland with Architect George T. Sekibo as the first Chairman and ruled from May 1987 - July 1989 (Ogan, 2008, p.2005). And Eleme in 1996 became a local government of its own. Throughout the period both neighbours related peacefully. There was mutual friendship between them and political ideas were exchanged as they met in the court or the local government area premises.

The colonial era witnessed the establishment of churches, and the Christian religion was introduced to the people of Eleme and Okrika. Chief Atorudibo Fubarada brought Christianity to Okrika from Bonny in 1878(Kalio, 2005, p.1). In Eleme it was introduced in 1910 by Mr. Hezekiah George Pepple from Bonny who arrived Alode early in 1910 with the establishment of Saint Stephen Anglican Church, Alode. It was closely followed by the establishment of Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Nchia in 1911. Others are:

Akpajo - St. Luke Anglican Church 1912
Ekporo - St. Patrick Anglican Church 1913
Eteo - St. Thomas Anglican Church 1914
Ebubu - St. Bartholomew Anglican Church 1914
Onne - St Paul Anglican Church 1915

In Okrika the St. Peter's Cathedral Okrika was established in 1880; in 1904 St. Martins Church was established at Ogu and in 1883, St Gabriel's Church was founded by Chief Joseph Tomomitemeka Koko. The establishment of churches were followed by the building of schools, the first school in Okrika, the St. Peter's School, was established by the early missionaries in 1907. In 1909, the colonial administration established the Government School, Okrika and both schools were later merged to form Okrika School in 1934. In 1941, a new school was opened at Ogbogbo in memory of Chief Atorudibo, founder of Christianity in Okrika. But, this school was also later merged with Okrika School. Okrika Grammar School, the first post primary school to be built by the Anglican Mission was established in 1940. Most prominent Okrika and Eleme indigenes had their early education at this school. It is worthy to point out at this juncture that Hon. Johnson Igwe, a resource, attended Okrika Grammar School in the 50s and later taught in the school in the 80s. The St. Stephens School, Alode was the first school and the second was Holy Trinity School, Nchia in 1912. After few years of existence, precisely in 1953, the Holy Trinity School absorbed the St. Stephen's School. Reason for the absorption was not ascertain at the time

of this research, but may not be far from poor attendance, low patronage, poor infrastructure and lack of teachers. The Holy Trinity School later became the hub of education in Eleme. People from far and near attended the school. Another resource, Vincent Chuku, from Elelenwo attended Holy Trinity Eleme; he as well as Mr. Akalubo from Okrika can speak Eleme fluently.

At the moment there are so many government primary and secondary schools in both clans. The establishment of churches and schools, no doubt, fostered intergroup relations between Eleme and the Okrika people. Most of the Okrika people attended Ascension High School Eleme. During the post-colonial era, the Okrika General Hospital was the only health-care centre in that territory; and the people of Eleme accessed medical services from this hospital and also worked there as nurses, labourers, drivers and cleaners.

Eleme-Okrika relations during the Post-colonial era

The Okrika people, according to Akalubo (2021), have a very rich culture ranging from their masquerade displays *Owu* and *Odum* festival to their unique marriage system and *Nkpete* dance. The Okrika people had early contacts with foreigners thereby benefitting immensely by being enlightened. The people of Eleme due to their long relationship with the Okrika people have similar culture. For instance the Eleme people also call *Owu*, and the accompanying drum beats sound alike. Culturally, during Eleme rest periods i.e. when farming operations had been concluded for the year, they engaged some Okrika men to teach them 'Owu' and Nkpete dance. The Eleme people in turn taught Okrika the art of building thatch or mud houses and how to mend them. Their colourful attires are also similar to one another. During Rivers State Cultural Festivals (RIVFEST) the Eleme and Okrika cultural troupes compete favourably.

The good relationship that existed between Eleme and Okrika has extended till date. Nevertheless, there have been pockets of conflicts which they always resolved. The trade relationship that existed between them still continues. The Eleme traders go to Okrika to buy fish while they come to the Echieta market to buy yam, processed cassava and vegetables.

Impact of Conflicts/Wars on Okrika and Eleme

Obuoforibo (2012, p 411) posited that:

> What has often soured the peaceful co-existence among nations is common claims to land ownership. An erroneous premise often assumed is the opinion

> to deprive a community entirely known to be landlocked of their natural rights over some fringes of offshore land, and on the other hand, a riverine community, for example islanders, being deprived of their historic claims over some land adjacent to them.

Could the above be the reason for the incessant war between Okrika and Eleme? The foregoing could be natural. If humanity were to be devoid of greed and avarice, but rather take to the course of love and unity which our creator wished man to live in, then there could hardly be unpleasant consequences. Issue of racism and to be more definite, ethnicity, has also affected intergroup relations. This is more especially when a group of people look down on the other as inferiors. As Michael (2019, p.9) put it:

> In the context of inter-group relations in Nigeria, it is very glaring that most violent conflicts in course of inter-group relations is due to continuous struggle for economic control and political dominance for a greater share of meager and limited resources.

The relationship between Eleme and Okrika during the past one hundred years has been very turbulent as Ngofa (2004, p.242) noted. Land is the main issue why the two neighbours have always been at logger-heads. In time, many settlements were dotted along the creek by Okrika people, not only for fishing and trading but also to learn the Eleme methods of growing farm crops as already pointed out. Eleme, a peaceful and generous people, did not object to the establishment of these settlements because of the cordial relationship that has existed between them in the past. These settlements were also separated by large expanses of forest that Eleme people cleared and farmed on a rotational period lasting up to ten years in many cases. These long breaks facilitated the development of the settlements without interruption from the Eleme people. It continued for years and the Okrika people gained ground on these parcel of lands. The social relationship which cut across ethnic boundaries may be co-operation initially but may degenerate into conflict later. Such social relationship as the encyclopedia of the social sciences (Sills, 1968) put it:

> A struggle over values or claim to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values, but to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals.

Minor skirmishes had taken place between the two communities as far back as the 13th century, believed to be the settlement period for the Okrika Island (Awoala,1982 p.127). The Okrika people have been having raids on the Eleme people occasionally even under the nose of the consular administration with all the laws and restrictions. In fact this was

partially why, in the second half of the 19th century, the consular government could not help under the headship of Consul Johnston fine Okrika the sum of 150 puncheons of palm oil for raiding the Eleme people. Ibuotoribo (2012, p.248) asserted that the cold-blooded massacre of Eteos and consequent spilling of innocent blood on Ogu land is a significant note in Okrika folklore. This massacre took place in 1887. The news of the pogrom caused a great concern in the British consulate at Calabar. As Ibuoforibo puts it:

> The District Consul, Sir Harry Johnson, mustered his troops to bombard Okrika. But the decision was dropped, and instead of that, Okrika was fined 150 puncheons of palm oil.

After the Eteo tragedy, the British Government made diplomatic moves to establish friendship with Okrika. Consul Hewett had succeeded Johnston, and it was the determined policy of the former to extend the boundaries of the protectorate. This did not absolutely stop the terrorist tendencies between the two communities because apart from other considerations, the act of raiding other communities and the attendant implications were executed with unbridled pride and immunity up till the second half of the 19th century. This was perhaps why the human remains of those killed by Okrika people during an attack on the Mboli in 1888, were displayed and which of course, attracted the sight of the investigating Consul (Anene, 1966 p.99).

As earlier noted, the main bone of contention between the Eleme and Okrika people has always been land issue due to population explosion. The Okrika people have always encroached on Eleme land for farming or building. Ngofa, (2006, p 244) stated that "the area where the Okrika Grammar School now stands was Alesa farmland called 'Ego.' Some hunters reported to Chief Eyi Ngulube that they found a part of 'Ego' bush cleared and cropped. Chief Ngulube sent emissaries to Chief Igbanichuka of Okrika who replied that it was one of his slaves, George, who brought cassava from the Portuguese and was planting them there entirely on his own. The bush, he said, belong to Alesa and he himself had never been there to clear any portion. George continued to farm on that portion of land despite the warnings from Chief Igbanichuka.This angered Chief Ngulube who sent hunters to comb the farm and bring whosoever they saw there alive or dead. The instruction was carried out and they found three persons working in the farm and shot one of them dead. His head was taken home to Chief Ngulube of Alesa. The Alesa people not being satisfied summoned a selected group of warriors, charged them to execute more attack. In 1890 as early as 7.00am the next market day, *Mma*,the Alesa warriors swooped onOkrika peoplewho were already buying and selling in full market session. Ngofa (2006, p245) stated thus:

> …Massacaring all Okrika males and females that were in the market. This incident happened in 1890 and Okrika claimed that 105 persons, mostly women were slaughtered in the attack.

This corroborates the position of Ibuoforibo (2012, p 412):

> The cause of the 1879 war was the unprovoked massacre of Okrika by the Elemes at the Omono market to the tune of 105 people. Okrika eventually replied by declaration of war, Chief Inyanaboitamuno George, Okrika's foremost generalissimo, led the community and out-generated the Elemes. The war ended in a crippling defeat of Eleme with a resultant diktat.

It will be recalled that Chief George was former slave to Chief Igbanichuka who later turned into a slave merchant during the slave trade era. He was the architect of Eleme/Okrika war in 1890 in which 160 lives were lost. That was how the Omono market was seized and controlled by the Okrika people at that period. The war was so devastating that properties and lives were lost. Many women were captured alive. Chief Atorudibo's wife was one of them. Ogan (2008, p66) opined that:

> Ibilakabofori (Ibilaka for short), wife of Chief Atorudibo was at the Eleme market on that day, but she came back to Okrika alive, and the Chief believed that his wife's miraculous escape was the result of their faith in God as Christians, He, accordingly, cast into the sea all the fetish idols, particularly, Odobiri, a god for good fortune, which hitherto he had worshipped.

It will be recalled that it was Chief Atorudibo Fubarada who brought Christianity to Okrika in 1878. He is right to say that it was God who miraculously escaped his wife from the attack. The outcome of the provocative activities was the declaration of war on Eleme by Okrika. The primacy of conflict is violent coercion. Ibuoforibo (2012, p.243) noted that:

> It was a bloody combat in which many Eleme people were killed, and many of their women were carried \into captivity as indemnity. Okpara-Ehi, The King of Eleme was among the captures. In the ensuing peace treaty, Okrika humiliated Eleme by a diktat. Eleme was forced to pay a tribute of 400 yams, and a cow per annum to Okrika.

This is the result for a reprisal attack on Alesa. In the late 1977, there was also a war of attrition between Ekporo in Eleme and Ogu in Okrika. Many human lives and properties were lost. The Rivers State government under Dr. Peter Odili also inaugurated the 1999

Justice Charles Granville Commission of Inquiry into Eleme, Ogu and Okrika communal conflicts. For the first time, the recurring conflict between Eleme and Okrika which arose from the protracted land dispute has assumed a dimension where Ogu is identified separately from Okrika as if the community is isolated and has never been involved in such conflicts. As earlier stated the fact is that the incident of 1887 in which 160 persons from Eleme were massacred took place in Ogu.

This has been the situation till date. The present day clashes between the two communities are spurred by the provisions of the relevant sections of the judgement; more especially, when the question of the compensation and other material benefits accruable to the rightful owners of such land from the establishment of any major government projects is appreciated. A similar case of significance was the conflict initiated by two other smaller villages under the two major communities of Okrika and Eleme. This time, Okrika was represented by Ogu while Eleme by Onne. Ogu and Onne are neighbours. Their crisis had always centred on the rightful ownership of the area near Ikpokiri which is the present day site of the Federal Ocean Terminal and the neighbourhood.

In 1974, the Federal Government acquired about 370 acres of land to build a reputable Sea Port and Naval Base. These projects, apart from the huge amount of financial benefits they would render to the owners of the land in respect of compensation, would equally offer job opportunities to the people, and an incontestable possibility of urbanizing the area. In 1979, when construction work commenced, the federal government named the site 'Onne Port' - that is after Onne Town (William, 2021). The Ogu Community on hearing that became furious and quickly filed in an injunction, restraining the then Minister of Transport from performing the foundation laying ceremony and in a positive reaction, the federal minister of transport in a letter No. T.3559/S8/CI/75 of 20th January 1981 changed the name of the port from 'Onne Port' to 'Ogu Port.' And following a counter reaction by the Onne people, the minister in a letter dated 5th February 1981 changed the name of the port again from 'Ogu Port' to "Federal Ocean Terminal." This is to demonstrate the federal government's neutrality in the local politics of the two communities. This has been the name till date.

The disturbances between Eleme and Okrika in recent times have taken another dimension in terms of the ammunitions in use. They have graduated from using locally made guns to sophisticated weapons. It was at this stage that the Ekporo Community of Eleme was completely destroyed by Ogu. And from the Onne axis of Eleme, there were also disturbances between them and the Ele people of Okrika. The attention of the government was called to the scene and the law enforcement agents were deployed at strategic places

to quell the unrest (William, 2020). The intervention by government actually checked the scale of hostilities between the two communities. At present, the Onne community has cause to smile as both the port and the Naval Base are generally referred to as "Federal Ocean Terminal Onne" and Naval College Onura Onne respectively. The federal government by doing that shows that they were apolitical in the matter. After these conflicts there has been peace between the two communities and indeed Eleme generally, they are beginning to understand that clashes do no good. As observed by Obuoforibo (2012, p 416):

> Okrika and Eleme have existed for many centuries. In the days of antiquity, people lived in peace. They co-existed and recognised the fact that human beings live inter-dependently. The two communities themselves could restore such should they remember the past golden age in Okrika/Eleme relations when there were no wars between the two clans.

Conclusion

It is a fact that every community develops series of cultural patterns that is peculiar to them. These patterns depict the people's way of life – as in their belief and what they are all about. These patterns are not static but change with time due to extensive borrowing and inter-group relations with neighboring communities. The growing influence of western cultures has led to changes in many aspects of their socio-cultural life. Younger generations who were born from 1980s do not have opportunity to witness the original tradition due to modern gadgets like handsets and the social media. They have gone ahead with the worrisome adoption of western culture and education which had greatly hindered a lot of our young ones from being involved in the cultural life. They also lack family value. Today, it came with the liberty of choice and rationalism.

Land which was the main bone of contention between the Okrika and Eleme people did not prevent co-existence that resulted in inter-ethnic marriages and exchange of socio-cultural values. The factors that promoted the peaceful and confrontational relations between Okrika and Eleme include trade, politics, religion, marriages and cultural ties. The relationship between them has continued to present with both groups benefiting from each other.

References

Primary Sources (Oral Interview)

S/N	Date	Name of Informant	Place of Interview	Age	Occupation	Sex
1	06/03/21	Akelubo Tamino O. L.	Okrika	53		M
2	06/03/21	Opuda Jonah	Okrika	68	Self-employed	M
3	22/08/21	Amiesimake Omoni	Port Harcourt	53	Elite/civil servant	M
4	22/08/21	Jamebo Inigbe	Port Harcourt	67	Business man	M
5	08/09/21	Nengi Abam	Okrika	68	Self-employed	F
6	08/09/21	Ibulabo Wakeme	Okrika	68	Fisherman	M
7	13/10/21 08/09/22	Hon. Johnson Igwe	Eleme	86	Ex-commissioner	M
8	05/06/21 03/10/22	William Onukwen	Eleme	62	Rtd civil servant	m

Secondary Sources

Abam, A. S. (2005). Kingship in Okrika since the 17th century. The tradition of succession and its implication for peace. Samag Stationery Limited.

Alagoa, E. J. & Tamuno, T. N. (1980). The land and people of Rivers State (Eds) Port Harcourt, Rivers Side Communication.

Anene, C. J. & Brown, G. (Eds) (1966). Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Ibadan university Press.

Awoala, E. B. A. P. (1982). Culture of a people, Port Harcourt: Bwright Integrated Publisher Limited.

Giobo, P. A. (2008). Intergroup relations in the Niger Delta: A case study of Okrika and her neighbours in Derefaka, A. A. and Okorobia, A. M. (Eds) Onyema Research Publications.

Mackenzie, J. G. (1932). Intelligence report on Eleme Clan CSE/1/85/4888, Enugu archives.

Michael, T. B. (2016). Odual and her neighbours. A study of intergroup relations in the Niger Delta from precolonial times to 2010. A PhD thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Michael, T. B. (2019). Contemporary issues in intergroup relations in Nigeria. Emmanuel Ventures.

Ngofa, O. O. (1994). Eleme tradition, Port Harcourt Rescue Publications.

Ngofa, O. O. (2006). The complete history of Eleme, Ibadan Freedom Press.

Ogan, C. (2008). Unity of a people: The search for peace in Okrika, Port Harcourt. Rivers State Outreach Publications.

Porter, J. C. (1933). Intelligence Report on Okrika Clan to the British Foreign Officer.

Sherif, M. & Sherif, C. (1966). Social psychology Oklahoma University of Oklahoma United States.

Talbot, P. A. (1932). The people of the southern Nigeria, Oxford University Press.