

Nigeria: Managing Intra-ethnic Conflicts in Ebiraland, Kogi State

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Abstract: It is incontrovertible that mono-causal analysis of conflict is no longer tenable, as conflict is caused by a confluence of factors. Over the years, intra-ethnic conflict in Ebiraland has attracted scholarly works. However, amid the myriad of variables accentuating conflict in Ebiraland, clan politics seems to be dominant but the intensity of the conflict has reduced since Governor Yahaya Bello's administration in Kogi state in 2015. Hence the relative peace in an area hitherto embroiled with hostilities. Anchored on conflict management theory, with reliance on primary and secondary data sources, the study attempts to answer the following questions: What was the state of the conflict in Ebiraland before the Yahaya Bello's regime? What conflict resolution mechanisms did the Governor deploy to achieve the relative peace in that part of the state? What

measures should be in place towards sustaining the prevailing peaceful atmosphere in the area even at the expiration of the tenure of the current administration? These, among other issues, constitute the theme of this study.

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Introduction

The Ebira Tao, who constitute the focus of this study, are people of Okene, Okehi, Adavi and Ajaokuta Local Government Areas of Kogi State with a total population of 844,774 people. They are collectively called Ebira Tao. The word *Ebira* refers to the people themselves, their language and

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geographical location. The Ebira Tao occupy the hilly stretch of land Southwest of the Niger-Benue confluence area and share boundaries with the Bassange, Bassa Kwomo and Igala; to the North and East is the Nassarawa Emirate, to the West are various Nupe speaking groups of 170 Kakanda, Eggan, Kupa and Nupe of Bida Emirate and the South-West are the Bini, the Yoruba speaking people of Akoko, Owe and Ijumu (Joshua, 2018, Adinoyi-Ojo, 1996).

Over the years, there appear to be a burgeoning literature on the phenomenon of intra-ethnic conflict in Ebiraland. Scholars, like Joshua (2013, 2018), highlighted clan politics, masquerade festivals, political affiliation of clan and clan leaders, clan headship succession among others as the causes of conflict in Ebiraland. Audu (2010) sees elite competition for political power in the region, the issues of centralized leadership among others as some of the factors raising the dust of disunity, thereby, degenerating into conflict in Ebiraland. Tenuche (2009) explicates that the struggle for chieftaincy titles and local power structure and the mobilization of sub-ethnic identities are the major cause of violent conflict in Ebiraland.

There is, however, a missing link- a concentration on the phenomenon of intra-ethnic conflict in Ebiraland till recent times, without a focus on the resolution mechanisms put in place by the present administration in Kogi state to restore peace to an area hitherto embroiled with hostilities, hence the need for this study to fill the lacuna in the literature.

Literature review

The word conflict is traceable to a Latin word “*conflictus*” meaning “struck together”. Conflict means clash, contention, confrontation, a battle or struggle, controversy or quarrel (Nwolise, 1997). Conflict, as an element of social interaction, has evoked a lot of arguments. Suffice to say that there are as many definitions of conflict as there are scholars. Coser (1956) defines conflict as a struggle over values and claims over status, power and resources, in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals. To Donohue and Kolt (1992), conflict has to do with the expression of differences by interdependent people in the course of achieving their needs and goals. To Deutsch (1973), conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur: an action that is incompatible with another action prevents, obstructs, interferes, injures or in some ways makes the latter less likely to be effective. Bernard (1953, cited in Joshua, 2013) has contended that conflict arises as a result of incompatible or mutually exclusive goals or aims or values espoused by human beings. It is a scenario in which what two parties in conflict are fighting for cannot be made available to the two of them at the same time, hence their goal(s) are incompatible and the resultant effect of this development is conflict.

Audu (2021) explicates this further by asserting that conflict is inherent in all forms of social interaction. In every conflict there are parties to the conflict and there is also

a conflict realm- that is the social environment where the conflict takes place which is defined by context and process. He gave an instance that the realm of a conflict between two siblings over a disputed property of their deceased father is the family. But when such conflict escalates in a manner that threatened the properties and life of other person in the community, the realm has snowballed into community realm.

Though there exist avalanche of perspectives of the concept, but an examination of the various definitions and views shows that conflict is a fact of life. It is indeed an integral aspect of social existence brought about by contradictions arising from difference in ideas, perceptions, goals and competition for acquisition of scarce resources. This lends credence to the statement credited to the Marxists in extant literature that to understand society is to understand social conflict. Thus, an ideal society is not noted for absence of conflict but rather its ability to manage conflicting interests constructively so that it will not snowball to violence that will threaten the continued existence of such a society.

Conflict resolution is a more comprehensive term, which implies that the deep rooted sources of conflict are addressed and transformed. This implies that behaviour is no longer violent: attitudes are no longer hostiles and the structure of the conflict has been changed (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2011). Apart from the concepts of conflict and conflict resolution, other concepts that are relevant to this study include: conflict management, conflict transformation and conflict suppression.

Conflict management is a process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through some measures by working with the parties in conflict. This concept is synonymous to conflict regulation. The term conflict management predisposes that, conflict is inevitable and is not all conflict that can be resolved, therefore, the need to manage and regulate it (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2011).

Conflict transformation goes beyond conflict resolution. This is because it aims at building longer and lasting relationships through a process that change the attitudes, perceptions of parties to a conflict, improve communication between them, and address the conditions that created the conflict. It also seeks to understand cultural patterns and values of parties to a conflict so as to transform the negative aspects of the conflict into positive ones to maximize opportunities (Lederach, 1995; Jeong, 2000).

Conflict suppression happens when powerful parties or stronger interveners who have the ability to manage or transform the conflict situation fail to take necessary measures that would have resulted in the management or resolving the conflict, rather, rely on the use of force or power to push away the issues under the carpet or impose a solution that is neither sustainable nor satisfactory to the parties in conflict. This is usually the case in unequal relationships. Governments and repressive regimes are usually guilty of this situation. Sometimes, the state uses its coercive apparatus to suppress conflicts, but this cannot be sustained (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2011).

Intra-ethnic conflict is a conflict that occurs within an ethnic group. It can also be called an intra-group conflict. Warren and Troy (2015), Joshua (2013), and Tenuche (2009) have argued that intra-ethnic conflict or intra-group violence remains understudied. In addition, some scholars that have worked on intra-ethnic conflict in Ebiraland as mentioned in the introductory part like Joshua (2018; 2013); Audu (2010), Joshua and Oni (2010), Tenuche (2009) only focus on the causes of conflict in Ebiraland. Some of the causes of conflict in the region as highlighted by the authors included masquerade festivals in which some masquerades performing often used the opportunities to castigate people from other clans, thereby, resulting in inter-clan conflict. Struggle for the traditional stool of Ebiraland was another issue discussed by the authors that triggers conflict in Ebiraland.

Thus, Audu (2010) opines that Ebiraland is ridden with phenomenon of violent conflict. The people have taken to nerve explosion and self-immolation borrowing a leaf from if it is not a violent contest between political parties; it is one Epira community versus another (Audu, 2010). At other time, it could be one masquerade group versus another or one clan against another. At a time, it was Idozumi versus Idoji in Okene, at other time it was two clan groups in Adavi that engaged in war of attrition. Again, in the Adavi area, it was Adavi versus Ihima and two clan groups in Ogaminana tore each other apart. Today, it is Ogu and Omoye clan groups mauling each other to bits. The violent conflicts are often occasioned with the use of guns and other dangerous weapon, leading to razing down of magnificence building of opponents, cremation of lives and fleeing of people who also become refugees in neighboring towns and villages.

However, above the aforementioned, politics is the major cause of conflict in Ebiraland. Politicians used masquerade cultural festivals for campaigns, unleashing terror and witch-hunting political opponents. They also play one clan against another for their selfish political interests (Joshua, 2013, 2018). However, there seems not to be recent studies interrogating the relative peace that have pervaded an area embroiled with hostilities before recent times, hence the need for this study.

There are different approaches to the peaceful resolution and transformation of conflict situation. There are also different methods of settling conflicts, and different stakeholders and participants in the conflict management spectrum. The next section captures as theoretical exposition probes into that.

Theoretical Exposition

This study adopts a Multi-Track Approach to Peace as a framework for analyzing the transformation of the conflict situation in Ebiraland. Louise Diamond and John McDonald (1996) introduce Multi-Track Diplomacy as a system approach to peace. To them, there exist at least nine tracks of conceptual and practical framework that assist and work in peace building sector. This approach emphasizes the fact that, there are

different stakeholders and parties that should be, and are usually involved as far as management and transformation of conflict is concerned. It is believed that, unlike the traditional Africa belief that, state through the machinery of government is charged with the responsibilities of bringing peace, which has made many African communities to have waited in vain for their governments to give them peace, it has been discovered that, sometimes, government is part of the problem rather than the solution. Hence, the need to identify, enlist and ginger other actors to play their roles in peace building becomes pertinent.

Diamond and McDonald (1996) gave a concise summary of the nine tracks of peace building activities as follows:

- a. Government: government is involved in peace-making via the formal processes, using its various institutions, as in official diplomacy, policy making, management of crisis and maintenance of law and order.
- b. Non-governmental/professional or peace-making through conflict resolution: in this case, conflict is managed by professionals, or non-governmental organizations. They are often involved in analysis, prevention, management and resolution.
- c. Business or peace-making through commerce: the business sector can serve as a catalyst to peace by helping to build friendship, understanding, opens informal channels of communication, provides economic and commercial opportunities, which prevent conflict.
- d. Private citizens, peace-making through personal involvement: individual citizens can be involved in peace-making through citizen diplomacy.
- e. Research, Training, and Education, or peace-making through learning: it includes think tank and special research centers (e.g center for conflict and studies, emphasis ours), training programs in conflict and peace and specialized skills of negotiation, mediation and general conflict transformation.
- f. Activism or peace-making through advocacy: this include campaigns against proliferation of small arms and light weapons, protest against policies of government that threatened peace, protest for social and economic justice, campaigns for human rights protection among others.
- g. Religion or peace-making through faith action: this track deals with appealing to the spiritual and religious peace beliefs of the affected communities. It emphasizes, non-violence, humanism, brotherliness as promoted by dominant religions.
- h. Funding or peace-making through provision of resources: many foundations exist, especially in the developing countries. They help to provide resources to government and private groups engaging in peace building activities.
- i. Communications and the media, or peace-making through information: the media and all the channels for dissemination of information encapsulate what constitute the critical mass of public opinion and the voice of the people. It could come in print, electronic, video, film and so on. The media can promote peace if it chooses

to and can as well promote violence if it selects to do so through reportage and many other means.

The section on the analysis of strategies for peace in Ebiraland will beam a searchlight on how some of these tracks were employed in transforming the conflict in the area under study. The next section looks at materials and method and a historical excursion into the origin of the Epira Tao.

Materials and Methods

Because of paucity of data on contemporary history, politics and violent conflict in Ebiraland, efforts to engage in a systematic study run into difficulty. The study, therefore, relied essentially on few available works, complemented largely with in-depth interviews carried out with some knowledgeable individuals, opinion leaders, clan spokesmen among others, on conflict, violence and its management/resolution in Ebiraland. (The interviews were conducted in 2021). This was the method used by the few studies on intra-ethnic studies already mentioned in the literature. In all, ten respondents of Epira extraction from the four Local Government Areas in Ebiraland were interviewed. Our respondents crave our indulgence to be anonymous because of the sensitive nature of the study and we promised not to reveal their identities, hence we could not reflect it in the reference section.

History of Epira Tao

Attempts have been made by various scholars to trace the origin of Epira Tao. However, there seems to be different versions of the origin of the people. It is therefore, not a surprise that Sani (1993) contends that, attempts to trace the actual origin of Epiras have not been easy. For instance, Sani (1999) claims that the Epiras migrated along with their Junkun brothers from Egypt and Sudan regions, before settling down in their present place of abode, others traced their origin to Yemen in the Middle East. Hussaini (2009) in his own account traced their origin to Gongola Valley down the middle and the lower Benue river region in the old Kwararafa Kingdom. They moved from that place, traversing different areas before settling down in their present place of abode. Audu (2010) posits that, the idea that Epira was part of the confederacy of Kwararafa confederacy lacks concrete evidence and difficult to prove. Looking at the various claims of the origin and migration of Epira people, there is clear indication that most of these stories are shrouded in myths which tend to obscure the historical process. Little wonder that Ohiare, as far back as 1988, submits that in-depth research indicates that the Epira have been part and parcel of what is now generally known as central Nigeria since 4000 BC. The next section focuses on the situation in Ebiraland before Yahaya Bello's administration.

Conflict in Ebiraland before the Yahaya Bello's Administration: An Overview

Although the Ebiras can be said to be a monolithic entity, in the sense that, they speak the same language, have the same culture and have been living together as a group for a long time, however, there is division along clan and religious lines. Conflict seldom erupts along religious line, however, division along clan lines and masquerade cultural festivals seem to be easily susceptible to manipulation by the political elite, resulting in conflict.

Historically, Ebiraland is almost synonymous with conflict. Historically, Ebiraland had had its fair share of conflict. Previous studies earlier stated like Joshua's (2013), Audu's (2010) and Tenuche's (2009) highlighted some of the issues that often-triggered conflict in the region. The present study also validates some of these factors as highlighted below.

Intra-Elite Struggle for Power

Most of our respondents corroborated the fact that elite contestation for political power is one key issue responsible for conflict in the region. Politicians fan the embers of disunity among clans by playing one clan against another because of their political ambition. One medium they perpetrated this, are the Masquerades, used to insult and malign the reputation of opponents.

Similarly, the youths, many of whom are unemployed were used as cannon fodder by these politicians to unleash violence on their rivals.

External Factors

Kogi state is divided into three Senatorial Districts. The Igala in the East, The Okun-Yoruba in the West and the Ebiras in the Central (Omede, 2020). Some of our respondents argued that most of the conflicts in Kogi central were orchestrated by "outsiders" for purely political gain. To this group, they saw the major players in the Ebira conflict as "cronies" of political patrons in other parts of the state, especially Kogi east, from where the leadership of the state had always emerge before the Yahaya Bello's administration. The "conspiracy theory", to these respondents, is that, keeping Ebira people permanently divided, did not only jeopardize the need for a formidable force against their political opponents from other tribes, but also ensure the dominance of the governorship seat, by candidates from Kogi east. To achieve this, according to our respondents, "these external actors employed some thugs among Ebiras, equipped them and used them to cause mayhem in Ebiraland". As one put it "they turned Kogi Central to a battle ground through divide and rule tactics". They made their supporters in Ebiraland rich with state funds, as a means of compensating them for being used". This scenario resulted in frequent crises in Ebiraland, especially at the approach of every election, leading

to the death of many Ebiras, as loss of properties of indigenes, and the attendant bad blood, between the different clans.

The Emergence of Yahaya Bello as Kogi sate Governor

The Kogi state gubernatorial election that paved the way for the emergence of Yahaya Bello as the Governor of Kogi state took place on November 21st, 2015. Prominent candidates that vied for the Governorship position under the platform of All Progressive Congress (APC) included Prince Abubakar Audu and Alhaji Yahaya Adoza Bello, while Idris Wada was the key contestant under the People Democratic Party (PDP). Prince Abubakar Audu won the APC primaries and became the flag bearer for the party. Yahaya Bello was next to him at the primaries. The election was declared inconclusive by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as a result of cancellation of the elections in some areas. The returning officer Emmanuel Kucha had claimed that, while Abubakar Audu of the APC scored 240,867, Idris Wada of the PDP scored 199,514 votes. The returning officer stated that the margin of votes between Audu and Wada was 41,353. The implication of this is that the election was inconclusive based on the fact that the total number of registered voters in 91 polling units in 18 local government areas, where election was cancelled was 49,953. Thus, the figure is higher than the 41,353 votes with which Mr. Audu was ahead of Mr Wada of the PDP. Based on the above, the returning officer in compliance with Section 26 and 53 of the Electoral Act argued that, until supplementary election is held in the areas where elections were cancelled before the true winner of the election could be declared (Premium Times, 2019; Halidu, Bdaru, & Gambo, 2016).

It was in the midst of this political brouhaha that the candidate with the highest number of votes- Prince Abubakar Audu of the APC died. This development plunged the country into a serious constitutional crisis. Some legal experts and social commentators argued that the deputy governorship candidate of the APC Mr. James Abiodun Faleke should be elevated to occupy the position of the deceased candidate, while others opined that the second runner up in the APC's primaries in person of Alhaji Yahaya Bello should be given the flag. Others called for countermanded so that fresh election could be held since APC was not the only party in the election. The PDP called on INEC to declare its candidate winner in the absence of Prince Abubakar Audu. James Abiodun Faleke could not be declared as winner as the election was inconclusive. Had it been that Prince Abubakar Audu had been declared winner before he died, it would have been possible for Faleke to emerge as the governor. At long run, Alhaji Yahaya Bello was declared the Governor of Kogi State (Halidu *et al.*, 2016).

Some of our respondents said the emergence of Alhaji Yahaya Bello as the Governor of Kogi State was a divine arrangement orchestrated to fulfill the yearnings of the Ebiras, who has been aspiring to occupy the topmost position in the state. The major task before him among others after his electoral victory was how to restore peace to Ebiraland.

Discussion

Strategies for peace in Ebiraland and matters arising

Some of our respondents assert that, peace process in Ebiraland predates the administration of Governor Yahaya Bello. However, for analytical purposes, Multi-Track Approach to Peace will be adopted in analyzing strategies for peace in Ebiraland. It is necessary to state from the outset that it is not all the tracks in the Multi-Track Approach to Peace that are relevant in our analysis, as such, only those tracks that are necessary in our analysis will be adopted.

a. **The Government** under the administration of His Excellency Alhaji Yahaya Bello has adopted some strategies in resolving conflict in Ebiraland. The researchers observed through interviews conducted that, while some Epira respondents are pro-Alhaji Yahaya Bello, some are anti-Alhaji Yahaya Bello, or better still, they appear to be objective in their analysis of the situation without sympathy for the Governor, even though he is from their tribe. Some of our respondents said the governor adopted carrot and stick game. When Alhaji Yahaya Bello got to office, he told all political thugs to submit their weapons and embrace peace. Some of them that did, were rewarded with jobs some with political appointments. He deployed soldiers and policemen to the region. Those thugs that were recalcitrant were promptly picked up and were severely dealt with. Masquerade festivals that used to precipitate violence were also brought under control. For any masquerade to perform, it must have a guarantor who will sign an undertaken that they will not cause violence or aid violence and if violence is recorded during their performance, they will face the full wrath of the law. Use of foul language by a masquerade against another clan that normally causes violence was prohibited. Those masquerades that conducted their activities peacefully were given financial rewards.

Another measure that the Governor took to foster peace was that he brought equity and fair play to the front burner of governance. He made sure that important posts in the various offices in the state are shared equitably in such a manner that no parts of the state will complain of being marginalized. For instance, one of our respondents who wanted to be treated anonymous stated that such measure has been implemented in the state ministries. He went further to state that if an Okun man (somebody from the Kogi West) is appointed as a commissioner for a ministry, another qualified person within the ministry from another Senatorial District like Kogi East could be appointed as a Permanent Secretary, and somebody from Kogi Central could be appointed as the Director of Finance and Administration. Some believe the aforementioned steps taken by the governor engender peace in the region.

b. **Non-governmental/professional or peace-making through conflict resolution** — some of our respondents pointed attention to the impact of Epira Youth Congress (EYC) in bringing peace to Ebiraland. The association is made up of intellectuals of

Ebira extraction. This particular association does organize programs, sensitizing people on the need to maintain peace in their domains. The Care-Taker Chairmen of the various Local Government Areas also organize vigilante groups in their various domains. They were empowered to punish erring youths. If they get to know about unruly behavior of any youth in any quarter, they get such youth arrested and hand him/her over to appropriate authorities.

- c. **Business or peace-making through commerce** — efforts made in this direction towards peace in Ebiraland according to some of our respondents include the state government giving jobs to some repentant thugs, some youths were also employed in some Local Government Areas and state ministries. Few were also empowered through skill acquisition and some were provided with tricycles to eke a living. All these were done to engage the youths so that they will no longer be available for use as instruments to wreck violence.
- d. **Private citizens, peace-making through personal involvement** — quite a number of our respondents also narrated the enviable role played by Alhaji Yahaya Karku the Chairman of Okene Local Government Area in bringing peace to the troubled region, even before the emergence of Alhaji Yahaya Bello as the governor of the state. He introduced disarmament programs, appealed to the political thugs to surrender their weapons. Some did and were given money to start businesses ranging from 50,000 to 500,000, put some of the repentant political thugs on his pay role. Some did not surrender all their weapons and some did not surrender at all. He equally invited policemen who raided the hideouts of political thugs and recovered some guns. Even though there was reduction in violence at that time, some political thugs that did not surrender their weapons, or surrendered some continued to wreak havoc before the governor came to complement his efforts.
- e. **Activism or peace-making through advocacy** — some of our respondents mentioned the advocacy for peace by well-meaning Ebiras. The Governor and the Ohinoyi of Ebiraland, invited clan leaders to a congress at Okene aimed at dialoguing on the restoration of peace to Ebiraland. At the meeting, people were made to understand that what they have been advocating for which was power shift to the Kogi Central is already achieved. Their son is now the Governor of the state, so there was no need to fight again, or do they want to fight their son? That irrespective of your clan, Ebira is one family and there shouldn't be division through clan differences. It was equally reiterated at the meeting that the properties that were destroyed belongs to their fellow Ebiras. That if there is no peace, the leaders too will find it difficult to lead. The Governor made them to understand the negative implications of violence and that government could enforce peace forcefully if the people failed to embrace peace. They should not even allow differences in political party affiliation to cause violence in Ebiraland. The clan leaders were to do same in their respective domains, so that there will be peace in the nooks and crannies of Ebiraland.

- f. **Religion or peace-making through faith action** — this track deals with appealing to the spiritual and religious peace beliefs of the affected communities. It emphasizes, non-violence, humanism, brotherliness as promoted by dominant religions as stated before. In the case of Ebiraland, the various religious bodies also played some roles in ensuring peace in the troubled region. For instance, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) organized some programs, calling the attention of the people to the fact that, Ebira is known for peace and that violence is alien to Ebira culture. One of such programs was tagged “divine peace” which was held at the Gospel Assembly Church in Okene on the 19th October, 2019, purposely for the re-election of Governor Yahaya Bello and for peace in Ebiraland. The Pastors in the various churches in Ebiraland also emphasize the need for peace in Ebiraland in their preaching. The Muslim faithful were not left out. They also reiterated the need for peace in Ebiraland in their preaching in their various mosques. The adherents of traditional religion were not left out. They also perform some rituals for peace to return to Ebiraland.
- g. **Funding or peace-making through provision of resources** — our respondents also said the Governor to ensure peace in Ebiraland, bought cars for some traditional rulers as part of their compensation for promoting peace in their localities. This gesture will enable them to move round their localities easily to maintain peace. It will also serve as a morale booster for them to put in more efforts in promoting and sustaining peace in their domains.
- h. **Communications and the media, or peace-making through information** — some of our respondents during interview sessions highlighted the crucial role played by the media in ensuring peace in Ebiraland. Notable among such media houses include Jatto FM, Tao FM, Radio Kogi and Otite most of them based in Ebiraland. Prominent among them according to one of our respondents are the Jatto FM and Tao FM. The two radio stations have contributed immensely to ensuring peace in Ebiraland through their various peace related programs. They have a session through which people from various communities in Ebiraland can air their views as regards happenings in their areas, and such will be brought to the attention of the authorities concern before such degenerate into uncontrollable conflagration. The radio stations also sensitize people on the need for peace, especially when election is approaching that politics is not a do or die affairs, that democracy is not for violence and that there cannot be development in the midst of acrimony.

Results

Unresolved issues

From the above, it is clear that peace effort in Ebiraland is all encompassing, given the role of the different stakeholders. But it is not yet *uhuru* given the avalanche of unresolved issues in the area that could jeopardize the fragile peace. One of such issues is

the battle for the Chief Imam of Ebiraland. The Chief Imam of Ebiraland Musa Galadima died in 2019. Before his death, even though he was very old and was not physically fit to lead prayer, instead of handing over to his deputy, he preferred to be supported on both sides in order to lead the congregation in prayers. The reason for this is not far-fetched according to some of our respondents. Principally, the Chief Imam and his deputy belonged to two opposing clans, with enmity entrenched on both sides. In addition, even, though they both belong to the Muslim faith, they belong to different sects. So, the hostility between them was both clannish and sectarian, making it more volatile. Before the demise of the Chief Imam, the Ohinoyi of Ebiraland wrote to the Chief Imam that he was stepping him down as the Chief Imam on grounds of ill-health and his inability to perform his religious obligations as he should. It was the timely intervention of the Governor that saved the situation from degenerating into uncontrollable violence. The Governor sent heavy security men to the area and the Mosque was shut to prevent violence that would have been perpetrated by the two groups. The Governor warned that everybody should maintain status quo, knowing full well the tense nature of religion can lead to clan issues. When the Chief Imam died, the Ohinoyi wanted to install the Deputy Chief Imam (who belong to his group Tijamiyya) as the new Chief Imam, but the other group (Izala led by the son of the late Chief Imam) called for fresh election to fill the position. Alhaji Abere from the Tijamiyya groups was eventually appointed as the Acting Chief Imam of Ebiraland. While the camp of the Acting Chief Imam addresses the Acting Chief Imam as the substantive Chief Imam, the opposing camp addresses him as Acting Chief pending the time a substantive Chief Imam will be elected or selected by whatever means. Some of our respondents saw this development as a time bomb that will erupt one day if not totally resolved.

Another crisis was the aftermath of the 2019 Senatorial election in Kogi Central. The election pitched Barrister Natasha Apoti of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) against Mallam Yakubu Hussaini of APC. The election witnessed large-scale violence, loss of lives and properties, with the supporters of SDP largely at the receiving end. The bitterness this generated across the zone still lingers and constitutes a major threat to the peace building initiative in Ebiraland.

Another sour point in the peace initiative was the fall-out of the administrative reform embarked on by the Governor on assumption of office in 2016, notably the screening exercise in the civil service that led to some job losses. The exercise was done in a transparent manner. Many who lost their means of livelihood among the Ebiras through the screening exercise remained aggrieved. In “ethicizing” this reform, some of the Governor’s kinsmen were bewildered that their tragedy could be orchestrated by one of their own. The concern raised by one of our respondents was the possibility of the Governor’s successor from another ethnic group reinstating other sacked workers from his group and leaving out the Ebiras on the grounds that the Ebiras were sacked

by their “own son”. That to him, if it happened, was another recipe for clan conflict and violence in the area?

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this article, we argue that attempt at bringing peace to Ebiraland was not the singular effort of the Governor as there were other stakeholders in the peace process even before the Governor came on board. Currently, there seems to be relative peace in Ebiraland, except some hanging issues are addressed. Sustaining the peace, especially after the expiration of the tenure of the present Governor may be difficult. Hence, the need to do the following:

The lingering issue over the appointment of the Chief Imam of Ebiraland should be permanently resolved. The administration of Yahaya Bello, in liaison with the relevant Islamic organization responsible, should set the machinery in motion towards achieving this.

The Governor should reconcile with all the aggrieved clans and individuals with a view to winning the confidence of the people. One sure way of achieving this is ensuring that campaign promises are fulfilled, particularly in areas of job opportunities for the youths with a view to positively engaging them for productive purposes.

Some of the mechanisms established for peace maintenance such as the meeting of the Ohinoyi with clan leaders, and the clan leaders driving peace in their respective domain irrespective of clan and political party affiliations should be maintained.

The efforts of the various media houses that have contributed to peace in Ebiraland should be sustained.

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