

**POLITICS AND CONFLICTS IN EBIRALAND, NIGERIA: THE NEED FOR A
CENTRALISED LEADERSHIP SINCE 1917**

By: Suleiman Mohammed Audu

ABSTRACT

The Term Ebira is synonymous with behaviour and character. It may either be good or bad. The Latent and manifest meaning of Ebira is good behavior, according to Yaqub (1999), the Ebira person was known to be hospitable, loving, caring, responsible, lawful, resourceful etc. The decay in the people's social, political behaviour in recent time has put them at a crossroad, thus, demeaning its name Ebira (good character). The legacies of ideal virtues bequeathed to the people by their forefathers have been eroded by lack of dedication, commitment and centralized command structure which is the crux of the paper.

Keywords: Conflict, Ebira, Ethnic, Kogi, Leadership, Politics, tribal

INTRODUCTION

Conflict, according to Training Manual on Conflict (2003) is a state of affairs in which two or more irreconcilable views are posited as a problem. It might also be seen as a condition in which one identifiable group of human beings (tribal, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, traditional, or any other) is engaged in conscious opposition to one or more identifiable groups because according to Agamer (2004), these groups are pursuing incompatible goals.

In Ebiraland conflict has pervaded the society so much that there is complete absence of centralized command structure. Suleiman (2005) believed that the people of Ebiraland are today haunted by a paradox of their inability to harness the potentials and aggregate ideas for a stable growth. Rather

they resort to self immolation. If it is not one community versus another, it is one masquerade group versus another. Once it was two clans in the same local Government trotting each other into self-annihilation. In all of these, it was full scale war with horrendous features. The rattle of gun blitz on hard earned magnificent buildings of opponents, the cremation of previous lives who were shot dead, the weeping and gnashing of teeth and fleeing away of people from their homes have continued to be sight in each of these wars. The reason for these conflicts in this land could probably be that the people have lost its central command structure.

It is the interest of this paper to look at the concept of politics, conflict and leadership within the ambit of Ebiraland. The study will identify the various traditions of origin and migrations of the people with a view to establishing historical, political and socio- cultural linkages amongst the people. This will enable me identify the kind of leadership inherent in the area since 1917 with specific attention on the factors that have denuded centralized command structure in the area.

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

There are three terms that need clarification. They are politics, conflict, and leadership.

Politics

There are various perceptions to politics. Agamer (2004) opined that it could be regarded as the authoritative allocation of values and who gets what, when and how. This definition identified certain words for further emphasis. They are authority, allocation, values, governance, access, time and means. Politics have usually been equated with authority or power to act on behalf of individuals, groups or nations. Authority therefore is the right bestowed on individual or group to act, make choice or exercise government power to make decisions on behalf of others. It also involves influence of behaviour. Allocation involves sharing, distribution of goods, positions and services in society. Values refer to resources and opportunities.

It is a struggle between the two dominant classes in the society i.e. the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Politics is an act of making public choices and decisions on behalf of people through the medium of the state and its apparatus. So, we could say that politics is a process of acquiring, using and consolidating political power for either individual's self aggrandizement or the attainment of societal goods and objectives.

Conflict

According to World Bank Report (1989), Conflict is a basic contingency of social life whose potentials are felt everywhere. It is a violent expression of irreconcilability and incompatibility. The Training Manual on Conflict (2003) opined that Conflict exists in three components, they are: actions, incompatibility and actors. It is a very fluid and ambiguous concept usually with negative connotations. It is usually perceived as the opposite of cooperative harmony and peace. It is important to note that cooperation is not opposite of conflict, but a way of handling conflict. Some people perceive conflict as an undesirable and destructive process to be avoided, contained and eliminated. In any case, conflict is much more complex. It is a multi-dimensional and social phenomenon that is a common, natural and essential feature of human existence. When expressed and handled constructively it can act as a catalyst for personal, social and political change and transformation. When expressed destructively it can foster violence and damage that is familiar in wars.

Leadership

According to Okadigbo (1987), Leadership is a process in which an individual exerts influence on others in the pursuit of group behaviour. It is a process hinged on the capacity to allocate scarce resources which determines the locus of power. Leadership theories according to Seteolu (2004) “include trait, behavioural, attribution, charismatic, transformational and visionary”. Schwarzkopf, according to Seteolu (2004), on the other hand sees leadership as a potent combination of strategy and character. Describing the types of leadership as far as history of man is concerned, Yakub categorized leadership as weak, competent, foolish, stupid, corrupt and hedonistic, such that many be frolicking while “Rome is burning” (Yakub, 1999).

Leadership defines initiates and maintains social structure that is programmed through leadership. So, Leadership can have consequences for the lives and welfare of number of people and therefore those who are concerned with the practical consequences of human actions must be concerned with leadership. The drama of leadership according to Tamenban (1972) can be seen in its consequences and in the behaviour of some well-known leaders. History is dramatized and personalized through stories of leadership and the names of famous or infamous leaders elicit strong feelings.

TRADITIONS OF ORIGIN AND MIGRATION OF THE PEOPLE OF EBIRA

Who are the Ebira?

Ohiare (1985) linguistically defined Ebira as those who speak the language or dialect called Ebira or those who recognize themselves as one but have lost touch of the ability to speak the language as a result of some historical development.

Describing their location, Ozigi (2004) said that Ebira are predominantly in the Niger–Benue confluence area and scattered in locations as Okene, Okehi, Adavi and Ajaokuta. These are the Ebira Tao group of the central senatorial District of Kogi State.

There are also the Ebira kotos. They are found in Koton Karfe area of Kogi Local Government of Kogi State. There is the Ebira Mozum of Bassa Local Government area of Kogi State.

There are large Ebira settlement in other areas apart from Kogi State as found in Umaisha, Toto, Lafia District of Nassarawa State and Federal Capital Territory. There is also Ebira Agatu in Benue State, Ebira Etuno in Igarra area of Edo State.

The concern of this paper is the Ebira Tao group. Historically, the people belong to the Kwararafa or Apa group of the middle belt region. Among the other ethnic group in the Kwararafa region are the Jukun, the Igala, the Idoma, the Langtang, Kaje etc.

The tradition of origin of the Ebira Tao first started in the Gongola Basin and ended with their migration to the lower Benue valley.

The Ebira took their name from the lower Benue valley. They described themselves as people from Ebira. Tradition collected from among the Idoma say Ebira were already in the area of Abinse down to the area of modern Agatu district when Idoma ancestors met them. This was about the 15th and 16th centuries as claimed by Ohiare (1985). This indicated that the Ebira presence around the Benue valley was about the 14th Century.

It was from here that the wave of migration dispersed the Ebira and other associated groups to the confluence area. From here also the people migrated to Ebira opete and the Okehi hills.

Several reasons were given for this migration. They were succession disputes, outbreak of epidemics, and flight from punishment which the people considered as unjustified and oppressive.

There is yet another period of Ebira historical development. This began with their migration across the Niger at Itope to the right bank of the Niger around the present location of Ajoakuta. This place was known as Ebira opete.

The Ebira had to move further from the Igala territory for obvious reasons of succession. It was a common practice in the royal circle of Idah that the losing side in succession dispute was always obliged by tradition to move out of the capital enmasse to the inland and sometime beyond the boundaries of the Kingdom (in this case, the Ebira belonged to the losing side and so had to move).

According to Ozigi (2004) the dominant theme in the struggle of the Ebira opete settlers was to secure political independence of Attah in Idah. So, it was their desire to be rid of Idah's political influence. This forced the people to begin gradual westward. Some settled in Okehi and Upai hills and others in Egarra (Etuno) area. From Opete the Ebira moved gradually in families, lineages and clans to the hills of Okehi, Upai and Eikaoku, a compact area chosen for security purposes.

Political organization of the people in their new area reflected the settlement patterns based on family lineage and clan group conducted its affairs as a semi autonomous entity. In each clan group, lineages often acted independently. The leaders of these clan groups never failed to strengthen their political authority through religious sanctions ordained by the ancestors. Institutions of ancestral cults featured spirits like "Eku oba", "Eku echichi", akatapa', and "Eku irahu", that gave political potency to their religious sanctions.

By mid 19th century, the Ebira had settled permanently in their present locations and lived in the district founded by the ancestors. Various settlements were founded by the Ebira children like Okovi, Agada, Eika, Adavi, Ihima and Eganyi. These settlements were named after them.

The main clans and sub clans in Ebira settlements were as follows:

Okovi (Asuwe, Adobe, Ehebe, Omavi, Ure and Omoye as sub clans)

Agada (Akuta, Avi, Ogu, Esusu, and Ohimoroko as sub clans)

Eika (Ihiaga, Iyewe, Avasa, Eyire, Epoto, Anchi, Itheme, Agiri, Ubobo, Uhuodo and Ogu as sub clans)

Adavi (Aniku, Uhami, Uka, Upopo uvete as sub clans)

Ihima (Emani, Ure, Ohueta, Odumi, Ohionwa and oha as sub clans)

Eganyi (Eheda, Onoko, Esugu, Ogodo, Onogu, Ede and Ogu as sub clans)

These clans were very important in the socio–political life of the Ebira people. They were the basis of authority and social relations in Ebira traditional community.

By the mid 19th century, about the 1860's the Jihadists invaded the Ebira settlement and distorted their socio–political organization. The Jihadists, under the leadership of Madaba from Bida, first incursed into the Okene area by way of raiding. For the first time, the Ebira were faced with formidable and a united force under a purposeful and dynamic leadership that could challenge these Jihadists. These leadership traits were found in Ohindase Ukpai and he did put very strong resistance in this direction.

In the second incursion, which came about the 1870's, was a combined force of Bida, Ilorin and Ibadan under Nupe leadership. With a determined and united Ebira under the Leadership of Ohindase Avogude, the Ebira resisted once again. It is quite impressive to note that of these Jihadists' incursions in Ebira was successful. It is also noteworthy that these incursions had set the people on the way to central Leadership.

Under colonial rule, the people of Ebira lost their sovereign right. The existing structures were dismantled and replaced with new ones. There was imposition of colonial agents through whom the colonialist communicated with the people. There was the imposition of poll tax (Ekehi irehi or house money), there was forced labour to construct rail lines, road network, etc.

The people resisted patriotically colonial imposition in various ways. Ibrahim (1985) identified that there were military resistance against the colonialists in such places like Ikuehi, Kuroko and Okene. These various oppositions to colonial imposition led to the Oyibo Arimo crisis of 1924 and 1926. It was these series of crisis that culminated into the formation of Igbira Tribal Union (ITU) that constituted a major political force in the post independent era.

THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT IN EBIRALAND

When the British invaded and conquered Ebiraland at the beginning of the century. The people found a confederation of five-clan groups (they are Eika, Okehi, Adavi, Okengwe, and Ihima) each operating a devine form of government as established by Ododo of Okehi and Obaji of Eika (the two greatest heroes of Ebiraland).

Following a breakdown of traditional law and order as a result of wars, migration, famine etc the two heroes enthroned cult of eldership, resuscitated the masquerade cult and established iragba and the masquerade as the institution of government and instrument of discipline respectively. Ododo and Obaji also established a devine form of chieftaincy. The installation of the Chief priest was linked with the Iragba and the priest elect would pass through a ceremony of death and masquerades and was finally installed by the Ekuoba.

Each clan group in Ebiraland was politically autonomous with its clan's chief priest rotating among the clans in order of seniority. This was the situation until the invasion of the Ajinomoh³⁵ in the second half of the 19th century. As from 1900 the British took over Ebiraland, created Kabba Division and appointed Owudah Adidi as agent in 1902 Omadivi took refuge in the house of Owudah Adidi at Obangede. Omadivi was a widely traveled man. He appreciated the white man's power and motive for invading Ebiraland. He quickly allied with them. Omadivi had wielded much power around himself and events worked in his favour when in 1904 he was installed the chief of Ebiraland after the Major Marsh expedition which sacked Okene.

In 1917, Omadivi died as the District Head of Ebiraland and the stage was set for the struggle for his position. Among the contenders for this position were Ohindase Arudi Adano, Ibrahim Chogudo Onoruoiza and Ozigizigi of Obehira.

Ibrahim Onoruoiza won the contest at the youthful age of 17 amidst bitter opposition. The credentials that won him this position included high level of intelligence, brilliant and efficient performance as white man's tax assessment scribe and messenger. Ibrahim immediately commenced his activities to open up roads to Ajaokuta and Lokoja for trading activities. Fascinated by the work of Ibrahim, the British Resident officer, Mr Byng-Hall created Ebira Division with the Attah as the Sole Native Authority.

THE NEED FOR A CENTRALISED LEADERSHIP

The British introduced indirect rule policy. It was less expensive in terms of personnel and cost. The British were interested in legitimizing the position of the Attah Ibrahim and so created the enabling environment for him to rule. Islam was the religion of the people. Attempt was made by the Attah through the Resident Commissioner to create the Emirate of Ebira as it was the vogue in the Muslim states of the Northern Nigeria. The Lt. Governor turned down the request on the grounds that Attah was not a Hausa.

Spurred by the type of administration in the North, according to Sanni Avogude (2005) Attah Ibrahim appointed his brother Yakubu as Agent for Ihima. This event was to bring much more trouble. The Attah survived the crisis and got promoted to the status of second-class chief. All those that partook in the crisis were tried and jailed.

In an attempt at consolidating his reign, Attah Ibrahim struck at the Iregba the traditional authority of Ebira people. When his mother died in 1926, he ordered that Eku should “descend” for her. This violation of Eku Taboo led to the organization of Ote and Eku ceremony meant to punish recalcitrant offenders. Another violation of Eku taboo committed by Attah Ibrahim was the disrobing and burning of the Iregba costume (Umama) at Okengwe.

The Native Court Reforms carried out between 1939 and 1940 was meant to resolve major crisis particularly the Oivo Arimoh crisis. The idea was that courts in the various clans would be headed by traditional chiefs who would be political appointees of the Attah. In Eika the Attah appointed Umoru Ireyi and in Adavi, the Attah appointed the Asema of his own clan. These appointments created bitterness in the minds of the people (opponents) so much so that it was carried upto Igbira Tribal Union (ITU) between 1940 and 1954.

The most useful works of the Attah brought him problems. The construction of water works meant the use of forced labour, which the people hated. The construction of (Oganyan) cemetery which prevented the people from burying the dead in their homes was regarded as a complete break away from the people’s tradition. His political opponents led their people to protest against the Attah. Some even migrated out of Ebiraland only to return after the abdication of the Attah.

THE ABDICATION OF ATTAH IBRAHIM IN 1954

The Roman Catholic Missionaries in Ebiraland during this period were quite critical about the policies of the Attah, particularly his education policies. The Attah advocated very seriously the need for the young Ebira to acquire both western and Islamic education. He endeavored to send his children to as far as Ilorin, Sokoto, Kano and Borno to acquire Islamic education.

He appointed into the Native Authority services educated Muslims at the “disfavor” of their Christian counterpart. This did not go down well with these groups of Christian scholars. When the World War II broke out in 1939, they joined to fight on the side of the allied forces. By the time they returned, they became emboldened to challenge what they considered as the excesses of Attah Ibrahim. To them he was the Hitler incarnate in Ebiraland.

Fanned by bitterness of some individuals and groups like Pa Ichimiri, Ebira residents in and outside Ebiraland, the World War II veterans were determined to change the status quo vis-à-vis the emerging democracy and constitutional changes been embarked in Nigeria.

In addition to the above, there were neighbors like Lokoja, Ajaokuta and Ogori-Mangogo that had axes to grind with the Attah. Attah’s imposition of regents in these areas did not go down well with the people. For example the posting of his brother Wakilin Yakubu to Lokoja was to cause serious feud within the area. So also was the imposition of Oyibo in Ajaokuta. The combined forces of these people and his fall out with the colonial masters set the clock against him.

It is pertinent to note that Attah Ibrahim did not accept some of the details of the policies of the colonial masters. He openly spoke against the colonial masters kind of education-introduced to his people, which he considered as too limited and not capable of producing a “whole” individual. He also spoke in favor of early self government. The British saw him as too “Southern” and so clashed with Sharwood-Smith the Governor of Kaduna which consequently led to his downfall.

The faded relationship between the Attah Ibrahim and the colonial masters was further extended by the British by giving maximum support to an anti Attah political party, Igbira Tribal Union (ITU), which consequently swept the polls in the local election. Thenceforth, the Sole native Authority

changed to chief and council. Attah Ibrahim found himself out voted on many issues and was forced to abdicate the throne in 1954.

Between 1954 and 1956, it was a period of interregnum in the annals of Ebira. The central working committee of the ITU organized themselves in collaboration with the other anti Attah forces set the machinery in motion to install a new central leader in Ebiraland. Thus, in September 1956, Alhaji Sanni Omonori was installed the Ohinoyi of Ebiraland.

The installation of Sanni Omonovi as the ohinoyi of Ebiraland in 1956 and the New Ebira traditional Council was apparently concerned with the unity, welfare and progress of Ebiraland. To bring back Ebira intrinsic values and confer titles on deserving sons, the Ohinoyi and his council set aside a day called unity day where the world would be shown Ebira highly developed civilization with a calendar system.

The first day to be so announced in the calendar of Ebiraland is “Ekwechi” anniversary of the work and death of Ododo and Obaji, who reformed Ebira society. During this period it is expected that titles like “Ogareku”, “Ohiare”, Adubazi”, “Otanyete” etc that are connected with Ebira traditional symbols of authority are considered for conferment on these valued sons of Ebiraland.

It is imperative to note that the Ebira nation despite its attempt to centralize its leadership has a bigger problem. The white man that facilitated the central leadership in the area had gone. The ITU that was in the vanguard of the removal of the Attah and the installation of the Ohinoyi had withered away. The Ebira chiefdom has no established ruling house or dynasty as the case may be. So, the sustenance of central leadership still remains the bane of Ebiraland. The confusion that would ensue if the throne was thrown open to everyone could hardly be imagined.

The demise of Alhaji Sanni Omonori the ex-ohinoyi of Ebiraland in 1996 exposed the fragility inherent in a society that yearns for central leadership amidst unorganized selective process. This was the situation in Ebiraland in 1996. To avert possible conflict and degeneration of the system, King makers were “created” by Ebira local councils on the state government’s directive and a selection based on rotational principle was adopted, thus, the incumbent Ohinoyi, Alhaji Ado Ibrahim was enthroned in 1998 amidst controversy that has resorted to self immolation, thereby threatening the central leadership of the Ebira Tao. A reflection of this controversy has led to recent court declaration of the stool of the Ohinoyi throne vacant.

SOME FACTORS INHIBITING CENTRAL LEADERSHIP IN EBIRALAND SINCE 1917

Several factors have constituted serious obstacles to the centralized command structure in Ebiraland.

These factors are:

a. **Ebira Educated Elites**

These are group of Ebira that are exposed to any form of formal education (Islamic and western) whose population is growing and increasing daily. This group has constituted itself into local leaders of thought whose opinions on any matter can not be thrown aside. They aspire for political leadership. They survive on wages, salary, contract, rent, commission, interest and profit. They send their children to exclusive private schools in and outside Nigeria. They live in fenced houses. Their culture is built out of self-centeredness, individualism, exploitation and other value systems that are anti-social in Ebira value system. The only value they know is money. They constitute problems to the acceptability of central leadership in Ebira and through cut throat rivalry and harboring of thugs to destabilize the centrality and unity of EbiraLand.

b. **The Issue of Centralized Rulership**

While some people in Ebiraland today argued that Ebira has no such tradition of centralized institution others see the need for such office as it is the trend in Nigeria today and it also gives Ebira a symbol of unity and representation. The establishment of centralized rulership in the Attah between 1917 and 1954 advanced the cause of oneness in the area. The forty-year reign of the late Sani Omonori, the Ohinoyi of Ebiraland brought together the Ebira and resuscitated their unity. The coming to power of the present Ohinoyi of Ebiraland, Ado Ibrahim, raised the hope that the fight for cohesion and unity would be won. This was however truncated by the disrobing of the Daudus (Traditional title holders) installed by the erstwhile Ohinoyi Sani Omonori by the incumbent Ado Ibrahim. This raised another dust of disunity as those affected felt humiliated and determined to destabilize the centrality of leadership in the area.

c. **Mode of Succession**

The system of succession to the centralized authority of Ebiraland is not natural. It is a creation of the colonizers. For example Attah Ibrahim ascended the throne through the colonial arrangement. Sanni Omonori became the Ohiinoyi of Ebiraland courtesy of Igbira Tribal Union (ITU). The present incumbent is a product of the Kogi State Government

arrangement, which is based on rotational system. There are no acceptable kingmakers in Ebiraland. So, succession to the throne is always characterized by conflict and politicization.

d. **Religious Sentiments**

Islam and Christianity are two religions believed to be capable of unifying the people. Unfortunately, these two religions have made strict distinction between their adherents and their non-believers; thus, introducing sentiments, even in the appointment of the Leadership of Ebiraland. This is quite unhealthy particularly as the people yearn for an acceptable centralized leadership.

CONCLUSION

This paper established the cherished past of the Ebira as a people with specific emphasis on the conflict that characterized the people's political arrangements. It is imperative to note that the ideal values bequeathed as legacies by the progenitors of the Ebira have been jettisoned by the artificial creation of the Europeans thereby leaving the people with negative identities that have often culminated into incessant conflict amongst themselves.

To arrest this scenario, it is incumbent on the people of Ebira to look back to historical memories, identify with the Latent and manifest meaning of Ebira (good charity) so as to restore ideal virtues that will engender centralized command structure in the area.

REFERENCES

- Agamer, K. S. (2004). The Role of women in politics in Africa in Odion-Akhaine (Ed); Governance: Nigeria and the World, CENCOD, Lagos, Pp 271 - 279.
- Ibrahim, Y. A. (1985). Politics in Ebiraland: The center and the peripheries in E.P.A. Lecture Series, Kaduna, Pp 39 – 503.
- Ohiare, J. A. (1985). Ebira History: Nedd for proper Documentation in E.P.A Lecture series, Kaduna, PP 60-65.
- Okadigbo, C. (1987). Power and Leadership in Nigeria, Enugu, pp.1-10
- Ozigi, A. (2004). The life and Times of A visionary Traditional Ruler Alhaji Ibrahim Atta of Ebiraland 1884 – 1964, Franklin speaking Creation, Abuja, pp 1-5.
- Sanni Avogude (2005). 80+ years, Nagazi.
- Sateolu, D. (2004). The challenges of Leadership and Governance in Nigeria in Odion-Akhaine, S. (Ed), Governance: Nigeria and the world; CENCOD, Lagos, PP 71 – 76.
- Suleiman, J. (2005). Ebiras: A people at war with itself in National Image, August, P. 15.

- Tamenban, A. S. (1972). Leadership: Sociological Aspects in D.L. Sills (Ed); The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences; Macmillan, NewYork, PP. 101-107.
- Training manual on conflict management (2003). Produced by center for Peace initiative and Development; Jos, P 3-4.
- World Bank, Sub-saharan (1989). From crisis to sustainable growth: Oxford University press, oxford, P.1.
- Yakub, N. O. (1999). Political Leadership and progress in Ebiraland in Shuabu, M.J. (Ed): Ebira in the coming millennium; FCE printing press, Okene, P 50.