

Issues in State Creation and Inter-Group Relations in Delta State: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

The paper discusses the changing dynamics in inter-group relations in Delta state following its creation in 1991. It establishes that the process of state creation and the administrative reorganization that it necessitated has had adverse effects on inter-group relations in the state. The issues of conflict among the groups include competition over political positions in the state government, the choice of Asaba as the state capital and the location of local government headquarters. As a result, economic activities have been adversely affected with several lives and properties lost while there is a general state of insecurity in the state. The paper infers with the observation that while political and fiscal autonomy as has been suggested in related works is likely to enhance the chances for development and foster cooperation among groups, there is need for effective leadership devoid of corruption at all levels of governance. This is because the culture of brigandage perpetrated by past administrations in the state has largely accounted for inadequacies in social services, infrastructure and poor living standards. This, in turn, has led to general disaffection and the prevalence of intra and inter-group conflicts in the state.

Introduction

Interaction among the groups in Delta state dates back to the pre-colonial period. This is evident from their traditions of origin which are largely intertwined. Besides, the groups interacted through trade, intermarriage and in the use of common resources like land, waterways, roads and markets. At the same time accounts of violent conflicts among them is replete in their pre-colonial history. Relations

among the various groups continued to replicate earlier patterns with the incursion of European missionaries and traders from about the 16th century.¹

Just like the pre-colonial period, conflict and cooperation continued to characterise inter group relations in Nigeria following the establishment of British colonial rule. However, the administrative re-organisation which continually altered power relations among the various groups broadened the scope of inter group conflicts. This was the case among the Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo and some parts of the Igbo speaking group who inhabit the present day Delta state. As an example, with the Native Authority Ordinance of 1916, Urhobo, Itsekiri and some parts of western Ijaw were brought together under Warri Division. And in 1917, a paramount ruler was appointed over the division thereby subjugating other groups to his authority.² But the practice was not limited to the groups in Delta state. In the case of Wukari district, the placement of the Tiv under the authority of the traditional head of the Jukun the Aku, by the British resulted in conflicts between them during the colonial period and has lingered.³ The point being made is that while British rule did not introduce inter-group conflicts in Nigeria, centralizing the administration of politically autonomous groups, exacerbated inter-group rivalry and in some cases led to violence.

Apart from the creation of administrative units which had disruptive effects on inter-group relations in the early years of colonial rule, the division of the country into the eastern, western and northern regions in 1939 and the granting of fiscal autonomy to each of the regions from 1954 further fuelled inter-group conflicts in Nigeria.⁴ From this period onwards the quest for the domination of the country ensued among the Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba who comprise the major ethnic groups in the 3 regions. Similarly there were conflicts between majority and minority groups especially because the minorities feared that they were too numerically disadvantaged to avoid being exploited by the majority groups in the three regions.⁵

It was however the fear of domination expressed by minorities in each of the regions and their concerted agitation that warranted the setting up of the Willink Commission in 1957.⁶ The task of the Commission

was to examine the claims of minorities and work out satisfactory arrangements to allay their fears of domination. In particular, the commission recommended that the creation of another region should be shelved and it was after independence that the Mid-West region was created in 1963. The creation of the fourth region invigorated demand for more states and in 1967 the General Yakubu Gowon administration increased the number of states to twelve. The 1967 state creation exercise became expedient owing to several factors. A pressing issue was the need to ensure the continued existence of the Nigerian state as a political entity which was being threatened by Odumegwu Ojukwu's secession bids. There was also the need to balance the political influence between the northern and southern regions as southerners became increasingly apprehensive of northern domination given that regions territorial size and population.⁷

The demand for more states continued after the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) with requests from various groups articulated by ethnic associations and their representatives. This led to more exercises in 1976, 1987, 1991 and 1996.⁸ Despite the attainment of a 36-state structure which appeared to have addressed minority agitation substantially by constituting related groups of sizeable population into states, the demand for more states persisted. Some reasons for the persistence were that state did not bring about accelerated development as such and many groups who felt neglected continued to agitate for their own states in the hope that it will afford them greater opportunities for development. Besides, each exercise led to the emergence of majority groups and revived the fear of domination by minorities in newly created states.

However, allegations of marginalisation in Nigeria were expressed in different contexts that revealed that the demand for more states was driven more by "the discriminatory neglect in the allocation of resources and the distribution of amenities" than by ethnic differentiation.⁹ Thus, there were requests for more states in culturally homogenous and heterogeneous states alike. Agitation for states in former Bendel state was based on claims of ethnic differentiation and discriminatory allocation of resources by the Urhobo, Ijaw, the Mid-west Igbo and the Isoko against the Edo speaking groups who were the majority.¹⁰ On the contrary, the demand for the creation of Katsina,

Osun and Ekiti was not based on ethnic differentiation but on the lack of development in some parts of the various states. The result was that towns and villages became entangled in conflicts over the distribution and allocation of socio-political and economic resources of their states.¹¹ From the foregoing, it can be argued that state creation and the administrative adjustments it necessitated has had adverse effects on inter-group relations in Nigeria.

Definition of Terms and Theoretical Considerations

There is an abundance of literature on state creation in Nigeria and the authors explored various themes including local government, revenue allocation, national integration and asset sharing between the states. Notwithstanding the differences, the authors touched on the subject of inter-group relations in subtle ways. For instance, Ukoha Ukiwo examined the conflicts in Warri in time perspective showing that efforts to re-organise the ethnic groups into various administrative units whether under the colonial or post-colonial governments resulted in antagonistic relations and in some cases led to open violence.¹² Similarly, R.T. Akinyele in several publications showed that although the demand for the Mid-West region was mainly championed by minorities in the former western region, there were groups who also demanded for their separate regions. His analysis proved that inter-group conflicts in Delta states predates 1991 and has outlived it. The implication is that state creation has not ameliorated these tendencies significantly.¹³ A correlation is observable in Akinyele and Henry Alapiki's works on state creation. Alapiki asserted that state creation rather than promote national unity has had a disintegrative effect on Nigeria's political integration.¹⁴ Also, Rotimi Suberu has maintained that there is need for fiscal and political autonomy. He asserted that this will increase the chances for equitable representation and the utilization of each area's resources so as to reflect local preferences.¹⁵

However much as fiscal and political autonomy is likely to promote cooperative inter group relations its effectiveness can be limited in communities that are divided along ethnic lines. To demonstrate this, the interlocking settlement pattern in Delta state poses a great difficulty even for carving out local governments areas that coincide with ethnic boundaries. Practically all the local governments in Warri area comprise various proportions of the Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri

groups. Hence, disagreement over the ownership of territories and the ethnic representation of each group in local government(LG) administration are constant sources of inter-group conflicts in the state.¹⁶

It is important to shed some light on how ethnic differences affect conflict situations and hinder harmonious inter-group relations particularly with reference to Delta state. Conflict in the context of this paper means hostility, discord, disagreement between two or more parties which can be violent or non-violent while conflict resolution and management involve the non-violent efforts to prevent, transform and terminate conflicts among groups. Inter group relations in this paper, refers to interaction involving individuals and groups who define themselves and others based on a number of criteria. The criteria could include a combination of the following; territory, religion, language, culture and history of origin among others.¹⁷

It is generally the assumption that multi-ethnic communities are prone to conflicts because linguistic and cultural differences among groups can easily be employed in the context of conflict and cooperation. The view is supported by David Lake and Donald Rotchild who asserted that ethnic origin is one of the primary attributes of identity and contributes significantly to identity-based conflicts.¹⁸ However, Eghosa Osaghae cautioned that ethnic differences on their own do not create conflicts.¹⁹ Osaghae's assertion is strengthened in Paul D.Williams concept of *ethnicity plus*, in which he argued that ethnic differences more often than not complement or aggravate ethnic conflicts where other conditions exist.²⁰ Using what he referred to as the Institutional Approach, Andreas Wimmer explained one of the ways in which ethnic differences become instruments of conflicts in multi-cultural communities. He asserted that the legitimacy of rulers in modern nation states is mainly derived from their willingness to privilege their co-ethnics. Such discriminatory take many forms and includes offering material advantages such as government jobs and the sitting of social amenities in locations that favour members of their ethnic group in return for their support particularly into elective positions and for other personal and group interests.²¹ Although Wimmer focused more on the role of the elite in fuelling inter ethnic conflicts, his assertion explains in part the trend in Delta state.

Conflicts among the Ijaw, Igbo, Urhobo and Itsekiri in the state revolve around influential leaders, traditional rulers and political office holders who mobilize their ethnic constituencies to compete over the states resources.

Origin of Delta State

The origin of Delta state in 1991 is traceable to that of the Mid-West region which was carved out of the former Western region in 1963 and renamed Bendel state in 1967. Although the request for Delta state was included on

the list of states for consideration by the Irikefe panel in 1976, the request did not sail through until 1991 when it was created by the Ibrahim Gbadamosi Babangida administration. Delta state was among 9 other states that were created in the same year²² The state is one of the states in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. Like other states in the region, it has vast deposits of crude oil and other minerals including tar, limestone and kaolin. The state covers a land area of about 18,050 square kilometers. It is bounded in the East by Anambra State, the South East by Bayelsa State, the North and West by Edo State, and its southern stretch forms a part of the Bight of Benin.²³

Delta state was created against the background that each of the ethnic groups that presently constitute the state agitated for separate states. As an example, the demand for Anioma state dates back to the 1950's when representatives of the Aboh and Asaba division demanded the creation of the West Niger Province which had placed the Igbo speaking groups in Benin and Delta provinces. The contours of that province comprise the present local government areas of Ika, Oshimili Ndokwa and Aniocha areas.²⁴ Similarly the Ijaw desired to join their kiths and kin in Rivers State where there exists a larger population of Ijaw speakers or be constituted into Coast state which will include the Isoko and Itsekiri. There was also a collective demand for Delta state by the Urhobo.²⁵

To place the discourse in perspective requires an understanding of the history of the groups that comprise Delta state. The ethnic groups in Delta state include the Urhobo who are closely related to the Okpe and Isoko. Together they are the most populous among the groups in the

state. The state has the less populous Ijaw and Itsekiri groups who although are numerically inferior can be considered as significant minorities. The Itsekiri were prominent in the area from the era of European trade as they were mainly middle men between European traders and their neighbours in the hinterland. They continued to enjoy this prominence after the establishment of British colonial rule as they enjoyed privileged positions in relation to other groups in colonial administration. The Ijaw in Delta are few but are surrounded by a larger population of Ijaw in neighbouring states of Bayelsa, and Ondo. The Itsekiri and Ijaw homeland like those of the Urhobo, Isoko, Okpe and to a lesser degree the Igbo have vast reserves of crude oil. The Igbo on other hand are the second largest population after the Urhobo. However, two sub-groups are identifiable among them. These are the Aniocha and Ndokwa Igbo. ²⁶

The history of the ethnic groups in Delta state is largely intertwined. The ethnic groups though linguistically distinct share historical affinities to some reasonable extent which should serve as the basis for harmonious relations among them. There are sections of the Urhobo, Isoko and the Itsekiri who trace their origin to Benin kingdom. Similarly some of the Igbo such as Ubulu Ukwu, Agbor and Isele-Ukwu have traditions of origin that link them to the Bini. Apart from their historical ties the cultures and traditions of the various ethnic groups overlap in many areas owing partly to the long years of interaction, their contiguous settlements patterns, trade and inter-marriages.²⁷ Despite their relatedness and historical affinities, the groups historically desired to belong to separate states.

Nevertheless the creation of Delta state was greeted with much enthusiasm by the groups for various reasons. To begin with, the new state would afford the collection of minorities who were dominated in Bendel state more opportunities for representation in government and raise the prospects of accelerated development. Besides, the Urhobo's emergence as the majority group placed them in a privileged position in relation to less populous Igbo, Itsekiri and Ijaw. However, this fact did not lessen the outrage expressed by Urhobo over the choice of Asaba as the capital of the state. On the contrary, the choice of Asaba as the state capital was well-received by the Igbo speaking groups as they felt it would reverse the long years of neglect the area suffered

under the defunct Western and Midwest region as well as Bendel state.²⁸

The Creation of Delta State and Inter-Group Relations from 1991 to Present times

The creation of Delta state started on a shaky foundation as had been highlighted. However, there were immediate benefits which were likely to appeal to the people's sense of fairness and therefore the likelihood of peaceful coexistence inspite of their ethnic differences. Firstly, the creation of Delta state like all other states in Nigeria provided more opportunities for representation of the Ijaw, Urhobo, the Midwest Igbo group and Itsekiri at various levels of administration. Just like other states Delta state has 3 three senators representing Delta Central, Delta North and Delta south senatorial districts.²⁹ The three senatorial seats would have been meant for Bendel State alone had the groups remained there. The present Delta state could have been allocated only one seat and would have constituted only one senatorial district. The implication is that together, what constituted Bendel state in terms of population and diversity of ethnic groups now has 6 senatorial seats albeit distributed into Edo and Delta states. To this extent state creation has raised the prospects for inclusionary governance in Nigeria. This view was similarly expressed by Abdul Rauf who agreed that "many minority ethnic groups are now in a much better position to represent their interests within different state institutions, even if they continue to be constrained in so doing by the majoritarian tendencies of the political system".³⁰

In addition, the establishment of local government areas and wards has provided opportunities for greater representation of the communities that make up Delta state. The state was split into twelve (12) Local Government Areas in 1991 and this number increased progressively to twenty five (25) in 2001. The distribution of the groups into numerous local governments has meant more prospects for development and more opportunities for government presence in parts of the state.³¹

However, while in theory the division of states into local government areas should provide the platform for even development, the reverse has been the case in Delta state and several other states in Nigeria. Developmental efforts have been largely concentrated in the state capital and local government headquarters such as Asaba Warri, Ughelli and Agbor. The areas outside the precincts of these administrative headquarters have been largely neglected. As an example, Asaba has benefitted relatively from developmental efforts since the creation of the state. The town has experienced a modest transformation from a small town to a bubbling city with an increase in the number of schools, hotels, banks, housing estates and streets littered with eateries and supermarkets. There is also Asaba international airport and intra-state and inter-state bus services as well as the rehabilitation and dualisation of roads including Nnebisi road, the Presidential lodge road and the old Anwai road.³²

On the contrary, development has not spread to the surrounding towns such as Ibusa, Ilah, Okpanam Ubulu Ukwu, Ubulu Okiti among several others. Many of the towns and villages around Asaba have no supply of electricity and pipe borne water while social services in health and education are grossly inadequate. The inequalities in the distribution of resources between Asaba and its neighbours is reigniting latent grievances and paving the room for intra-group hostilities. For instance, Ibusa people are aggrieved over the appropriation of their land for the construction of the Asaba Airport. Although the affected indigenes of Ibusa received compensation for the land they are of the opinion that they were paid far below the value of the appropriated land.³³

The conflicts arising from land claims in the area predate the construction of the Asaba airport and in the past led to open violence and several court cases. Nonetheless there has been no significant incident of violence between the communities since 1991 when the state was created. The reverse has however been the case particularly in Warri South West Local Government with recurring violence among the Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo. The conflict in Warri attracted much attention because of the scale of violence that was witnessed and the disruption to economic and social activities in the area.

The violent phase of the Warri crisis can be traced to the misunderstanding arising from the location of the Warri South West local government headquarters. Initially, Ogbe Ijoh, an Ijaw community was announced as the head quarters in 1996. However, it was alleged that Ogidigben, an Itsekiri town was the headquarters in the official document that was later released. The initial confusion generated from the argument over what was announced and what was eventually implemented escalated to violent conflict in 1999 with Ijaw youths attacking Itsekiri mil b towns and villages in and around Warri. Armed confrontation between the groups resulted in the loss of several lives and destruction of property. Although a commission of enquiry was set up to investigate the crisis, the lack of cooperation from some of the aggrieved parties made it difficult to settle the dispute to the satisfaction of all parties. This led to a resurgence of the conflict in 2004 with reprisal attacks from the Itsekiri.³⁴

The scale of destruction in 2004 was higher than the 1999 incident. This forced the multinational oil companies to relocate their operations to Port Harcourt. The scale of violence in Warri forced people to move to parts in the state and in to other neighboring states.³⁵ Besides the conflict militarized the region, contributed to the emergence of militant groups and led to the proliferation of criminal activities with kidnapping emerging as the greatest threat to security in the state. In addition hostilities between the Itsekiri, the Ijaw and Urhobo intensified while violence continued to occur at the slightest provocation.

The conflicts among the 3 groups continually fed into claims of territory because of payment of royalties and land rents to traditional rulers and influential community leaders by multi-national oil companies operating in the state. To demonstrate this, claims over the ownership of the territory in which the Warri EPZ Gas Plant Project was to be constructed led to conflicts between the Ijaw and Itsekiri in 2014 with each group laying claims over the selected towns of Ogidigben and the surrounding villages.³⁶ The controversy over the gas project involved whole communities, traditional rulers and militant groups who represent distinct groups on opposite sides.³⁷

The conflict over the gas project became a significant factor in the 2015 presidential elections. A majority of the Itsekiri pledged their support for the All Progressive Congress (APC) with Mohammed Buhari as its presidential candidate. Itsekiri support for APC rather than the People's Democratic Party's (PDP) candidate, President Goodluck Jonathan an Ijaw, was based on the allegation that the minister for petroleum Mrs Deziani Allison Madueke also an Ijaw favoured her kinsmen in deliberations regarding the Gas Plant Project. The commissioning of the gas plant project was temporarily stalled as a result of the controversy between both groups.³⁸

Another source of friction among the ethnic groups in Delta State has been over the choice of Asaba as the capital of the state. It is a widely held opinion that the choice of Asaba was influenced by Maryam Babangida, wife of former president of Nigeria, Ibrahim Babangida. She was former Miss Okogwu and an indigene of Asaba.³⁹ The choice of Asaba as capital remains reference point in the relations between the Igbo speaking population who are indigenes of Asaba and their Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw neighbours in Delta state.

There are several reasons why Asaba as capital of Delta state has been a sore point in inter ethnic relations in Delta state. The non-Igbo speaking groups assert that two state capitals have been created out of the old Benin province alone to the detriment of the inhabitants of the former Delta province. Benin which is the capital of Edo state was in the former Benin Province and still maintains its position as the present capital of Edo state. The grievance is that two capitals have been created from the old Benin province and not from the former Delta province. Another grievance nursed by the non-Igbo indigenes of Delta state is that Asaba lies on the border between Delta state and Anambra state and is thus closer to the indigenes of that state and further away from the Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw. As a result of its proximity to the Igbo speaking states there is a large number of Igbo migrants competing with the indigenes of the state over its limited resources⁴⁰

The choice of Asaba as the capital of Delta state however appears to have justified the official explanation that guided the selection of state capitals as the need to open up neglected areas for development.

According to some Igbo leaders including Chief Nosike Ikpo, Asaba and its environs had been neglected over the years and fits the criteria for a state capital.⁴¹ Although, such a rule was not always applicable elsewhere as the location of some state capitals in Nigeria will reveal that their location reflected the political interests of the leadership of past administrations.

Although the problem associated with the choice of Asaba as state capital has not led to open violence, it continues to have dire consequences on inter-group relations in the state. The Asaba question was an important factor in the 2015 Presidential election campaigns. The extent of hostilities that was witnessed during the 2015 presidential election campaigns made Emmanuel Uduaghan the then governor of the state to admit that the greatest obstacle to development of the state was the lack of inter-ethnic harmony.⁴² Hostilities among the groups in Delta state escalated following the 2015 election campaigns and the eventual nomination of Dr. Ifeanyin Okowa, an Igbo, by the PDP as its governorship candidate at the party's primaries. This became a source of tension between the Igbo and the Urhobo and related groups. According to some respondents, the lack of support for an Igbo candidate was that the Igbo cannot have the capital and the governorship position at the same time.⁴³ To express their displeasure, the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) a prominent association of the Urhobo, who were in support of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) prior to the 2015 election threw their weight behind Great Ogboru, an Urhobo and a member of the Labour Party (LP). With the *Uvwiemuge Declaration* by the UPU, the union made it clear that if the PDP failed to concede its governorship position at its primary to an Urhobo, they will present an Urhobo candidate on the platform of any other major party and will massively vote for such a candidate."⁴⁴

The Ijaw were not left out from what Brandon kendhammer called 'ethnic outbidding'⁴⁵ Mr Kingsley Otuario, an Ijaw was nominated as candidate for deputy governor with the support of Government Ekpemupolo (Tom Polo) another Ijaw and a former militant leader of Movement for the Actualization of Niger Delta (MEND).⁴⁶ Just like other groups Anioma Congress made up of prominent sons of daughters of the Igbo in Delta state including the Asagba of Asaba,

Professor Chike Edozien also expressed a strong desire for an Anioma governorship candidate. They noted that "turn by turn approximates equity and the choice of a governor from Anioma is to reflect equity, justice and fair play and the principle of rotation"⁴⁷

The nature of inter group hostilities and conflicts enumerated reveals that ethnic identity remains a major feature in inter group relations in Delta state. Yet the cause of the conflicts were more about uh access to political power so as to gain economic advantage over others and to enjoy social relevance. It has been observed that ethnic groups feel a sense of group worth in relation to other group when their own member occupies a position of authority that is above that of a rival group. This in part explains why the request for more states continues to reflect the ethnic identity of the group in the prospective states. The list of requests from Delta state alone include, Urhobo state by the Urhobo, True Delta state by the Urhobo speakers and the Ijaw, Coast state by the Ijaw alone, Ado state by the Isoko and Ethiope. There is also a request for Toru-Ebe state that will comprise the Ijaw speaking group in Delta, Edo and Ondo states. The position of the Itsekiri has shifted between retaining the present structure of Delta state and outright demand for a Warri state. The demand for Warri State was supported by prominent Itsekiri members such as Joseph Ayonmike and the late Chief Hope Harriman and prospective state is expected to be coterminous with the Old Warri division and would comprise the three local governments of Warri South, Warri North and Warri South West.⁴⁸

The situation in Delta state is not a peculiar one in Nigeria as requests for new states was top on the agenda of the National Dialogue set up by the Goodluck Jonathan administration in 2014. The demand for new states has risen with requests from various ethnic groups spread across the country. According to a report contained in the final draft of the National Conference in 2014, the request for more states was first among the four issues that stood out in matters discussed by delegates.⁴⁹

Recommendations and Conclusion

The paper has illustrated that state creation and the administrative re-organisation that it necessitated has been detrimental to peaceful

coexistences among the groups in Delta state. The ‘Asaba question’ remains a thorny issue more so that the capital is located in the area where the indigenous population is not the major group. In addition the case of Warri South West Local government makes it necessary to introduce a policy of zoning of political offices despite the fact that there are fears that such a policy is likely to compromise merit and promote mediocrity. However, given the peculiarity of the settlement patterns of the groups and the history of rivalry, zoning is likely to guarantee every group a feeling of equity and fairness since each group will have the opportunity to produce the chairman of the LGA and other political offices for specific periods.

In addition, the quality of leadership of those who occupy political positions is important so as to ensure that the resources of the state translate to developmental efforts. Consequently, a re-orientation of the psyche of government officials particularly those in leadership positions is necessary to eliminate the perception that states and LG's are for their personal enrichment. Part of the reorientation programme for political office holders should include the need to identify the economic and investment potentials in the state other than crude oil for the purpose of enhancing the state’s economic viability. A change in the psyche of state government officials will ultimately reduce corruption and contribute to a self-sustaining state so that the gap between statutory allocation and internally generated revenue can be reduced. And to achieve the desired change, corrupt government official must be made to face the full wrath of the law. This is because development in Delta state has retrogressed over the years owing to massive corruption perpetrated by past administrations. The slow economic growth recorded in Delta state has endured in spite of various sources of revenue accruing to the state. There is the monthly 13 % derivation fund allocated to Delta state government and other oil producing states, the developmental efforts by interventionist agencies like the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Niger Delta Ministry. According to one report, Delta state receives an astonishing N1.7 billion per month in statutory revenues and a total of N7.8 billion per month including derivation and oil excess proceeds.⁵⁰

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