# CHIEFTAINCY AND CULT CLASHES IN IBAA OF IKWERRE, RIVERS STATE FROM 1976-2008

# AMADI, CHIDI Department of History and Diplomatic Studies Faculty of Humanities Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt

#### Abstract

The work examined chieftaincy crises and cult clashes in Ibaa of Rivers State from 1976-2008. There has been several conflicts arising from chieftaincy and cult related crises in most communities of Ikwerre. However, the Ibaa community of Ikwerre has gained no scholarly attention. It is on this premise that the study fills the gap in Ikwerre history. The work argued that chieftaincy crises in Ibaa led to the rise of armed cult groups such as the iceland, dewell and degbam in the community. Each of the cult groups lay their support to any contending chiefs of their choice in order to establish their supremacy. The study observed that in an attempt to proclaim a paramount ruler, there were battles of supremacy among the cult groups. Chieftaincy and cult crises led to killings, maiming and destruction of properties. Many Ibaa indigenes fled to other communities of Isiokpo, Rumuji, Emohua, Omagwa, Ndele and Port Harcourt as refugees. The study recommends that Ibaa community should create a permanent royal family whose duty should include effective governance, the provision of employment for the youths and the establishment of community police. This will help the youth to shun cultism while engaging themselves meaningfully.

Keywords: Cultism, Chieftaincy, Employment

#### Introduction

Chieftaincy disputes and cult related issues in contemporary Nigerian state remains a reoccurring phenomenon that hinders development in various communities in Nigeria. To this regard, Ibaa community has witnessed several cases of communal conflicts arising from chieftaincy struggles and cult related crises. In Ibaa, there never evolved a traditional ruler with the title of *nye-nwe-ali*. The governing body was the *oha*, a title conferred on the eldest free born in the villages that made up Ibaa. Efforts to have an *nye-nwe-ali* started in 1976 when the Rivers State Government requested for a person to be installed as the *nye-nwe-ali* Ibaa.

This request plunged the entire community into crises and led to the polarisation of the community into two warring camps, the *Osunu* and *Mgbuosimini/Mgbisinu*. The emergence of these warring factions have hindered development and have generated insecurity as a result of cultism. It is therefore in an attempt to addressing these issues that this study is carried out.

#### Sources and Method

In the reconstruction of African history, historians usually depend on a number of sources. Thus, the data used in the study include primary and secondary sources of information. Oral sources such as oral tradition and oral history involving face-to-face interviews were used. Interviews were conducted within the nineteen villages of Ibaa as Alagoa (1981:8) admits that no historical reconstruction in oral civilisation can be complete without authentic account of the past.

The secondary sources availed us the opportunity to obtain empirical data in books, journals and articles. Inter-disciplinary approach was adopted using knowledge from related disciplines in the Social Sciences, and Humanities to generate data. Comparisons, criticism, analysis and cross-examination were carried out using the historian craft of scrutiny before arriving at conclusions.

### **Literature Review**

In the review of this study, the work of Otite and Albert (1999) "Community Conflicts in Nigeria" in Albert (ed) *A History of Social Conflict Management in Nigeria* was reviewed. Refering to the outcome of Nigeria's political, religious, and ethnic and other forms of pluralism in relation to the scarce resources explained how users of scarce resources constantly encounter problems. This work really discussed communal conflicts but did not treat the chieftaincy and cult clashes in Ibaa even though it gave an insight to the study.

Also, Aduke (2012) "Kabba-Ijumu Conflict, 1920-1955" in 1.0 Albert (ed) A History of Social Conflict and Conflict Management in Nigeria explains that colonial rule prepared the way for the conflict between kabba and Ijumu and that colonial administrative arrangements affected the people thereby generating conflicts which took the form of protests and agitations as the Ijumu requested to be granted autonomy with a separate court, treasury, police, all of which are colonial creations. This work was purely on communities in Yorubland.

Olarinmonye (2012) "Youth and Conflict in Yorubaland, 1999-2003" in Albert (ed) A *History of Social Conflict and Conflict Management in Nigeria* provides an insight into youth participation in communal conflicts which he thinks is associated with youth mobilization in the act of violence. The author is of the view that in Africa, young people constitute the majority of the population and are at the centre of societal interactions and transformation and should be the "*Makers of society*" by acting in favourable manner that will engender development instead of destruction. Saro-Wiwa (1995) *A Month and A Day, A Detention Diary* posits that the "youths are people who are below the age of forty. Thus, the author defines youth as the period between childhood and adulthood which is between 18 and 40 years of age. Youths all over the world are a vital and important segment of the society in which they live. A disciplined, focused, and law-abiding youth force" can create a bright future for any nation. Conversely, a lawless and violent youth is a great threat to a nation peace and security.

Jaja (2009) "Inter-Communal Conflict in the South-Eastern Nigeria: A study of Aguleri-Umuleri Conflicts" in Ikejiani-Clark (ed) *Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria: A Reader* examines the peaceful and friendly relationship between the Aguleri and Umuleri before the coming of the Europeans. When the Europeans came, they presented items such as hot drinks, gun powder, Machets and so on to Umuleri people in exchange for their lands to the Royal Niger company and later on Aguleri did the same with the United African Company (UAC) and John Holt Company for commercial purposes. The European settled on this place which later became known as Otuocha, and the centre of trading and attraction.

In Alagoa and Okorobia (2011) Nembe Congress; A Study of the United Approach to Development in Nembe Se (eds) enumerates the causes of conflicts the Nembe experienced from the pre-colonial period such as the Nembe/Kalabari war of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Nembe-British war of 1895 and the war against negative cultural practices amongst others. He explained that the major cause of the Nembe and Kalabari war was apparently economic as it was fought to secure access to and control over the Engenni markets. The immediate cause of the war was the capture and eventual killing of some Kalabari men by Chief Bugo of Bassambiri. In retaliation, the Kula mercenaries beheaded a Nembe man called Oluku which led to an open war. Although, the study is on the Niger Delta, reference was not made on the various conflicts fostered in Ikwerre.

Alade (2012) "Youth Militancy as a Bargaining Tool for Challenging Structural Violence in the Niger Delta Region" in Albert, Eselebor, Dajibo (eds) *Peace, Security and Development in Nigeria* posits that the Niger Delta has become an agitated, restive and conflict ridden region as a result of the failure of the Nigerian state and the oil companies to provide adequate social amenities for the people. The violent confrontation by the youths was fuelled by the frustration of many years of neglects, poverty and unemployment. The author affirms that the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta has greatly disempowered those who rely on land and water resources for their livelihood as well as lack of basic infrastructures like motorable roads, hospitals, schools and portable water. Frustrated, the youths of the Niger Delta took up arms against petro-business and its political allies.

Considering the plight of women in problems arising from armed conflict, Babatunde (2012) "Oil Exploration, Armed Conflict and their Implication for Women's Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria's Niger Delta" in Albert, Eselebor and Danjibo (eds) *Peace, Security and Development in Nigeria* emphasizes the vulnerability of women and children as victims of violent conflicts in the world especially in the Niger Delta.

### Chieftaincy Struggle Between Chief J.J. Ohaka and Chief K.E. Nyenke in 1976

Ibaa also known as Uvuahu is made up of nineteen villages namely; Omuogbo, Omuadie, Ohionu Ogwuda, Ohionu Ugweuenyi, Omkpoba, Mgbere, Omuobizu-Elenwo, Omuobisu-Omuota, Mgbereokea, Omuchiolu, Ikpokwua, Omuikea, Mgbuogizi, Ogbelegba, Omuisioha, Omueze, Omuagala, Ohanyim and Omuoda. The community is further divided into three large blocs- *Osunu, Mgbuosimini* and *Mgbuisinu*. The *Osunu* groups comprise nine villages namely Omadie, Mgbereokea, Omuchiolu, Ikpokwa, Omuikea, Mgbuogizi, Ogbelegba, Omuoda and Omuisioha villages. Mgbuosimini has four villages which include Omkpoba, Mgbere, Omuobizu-Elenwo and Omuobizu-otaa while Mgbuisinu consists of six villages namely: Omuogbo, Ohionu Ogwuda, Omuagala, Ohanyim, Omueze and Ohionu-Ugwuenyi (Owhonda, 2016).

In 1976, the State Government requested for a representation in the form of *nye-nwe-ali* Ibaa from the people. This request plunged the entire community into confusion and led to the polarization of the community into two warring camps- *Osunu* group and *Mgbuosimini/Mgbuisinu* group. The chieftaincy stool of *Eze Uvuahu* became a bone of contention between Chief J.J Ohaka and Chief K.E. Nyenke.

The Osunu group contended that they are the first son of Ibaa and as such they have to produce the paramount ruler of Ibaa as the state government had requested. The group led by Oha Chianokwu Amadi maintained that *Kaluka* was the founder of Ibaa and had Osunu as his first son. On the grounds of this version, Osunu group submitted the name of Chief K.E. Nyenke to the state government for recognition as the paramount ruler since the Osunu groups are first born of Ibaa (Echeonwu, Owhonda and Ebere, 1997:88).

Meanwhile, the Mgbuisinu/Mgbueno group claimed that any person not from Omuogbo village in Ibaa and claiming hereditary title of *nye-nwe Isioha* as well as the elective title of *nye-nwe-ali* while the incumbent chief J.J. Ohaka was not dead or deposed should be taken as fake, impostor and the twister of the true traditional history of Ibaa and Obelle communities. Above all, Omuogbo claimed that they are the first son of Ibaa and therefore submitted that Chief J.J. Ohaka should continue to be recognized as the paramount ruler of Ibaa and should be known as the *nye-nwe-ali Uvuahu n'otu* 

The year 1976-82 were years that marked the climax of leadership crisis in Ibaa. After the recognition of Chief J.J. Ohaka by the government as the paramount ruler of Ibaa, the bitter dispute still continued. Chief J.J. Ohaka initially found it difficult to unite the various blocs of the community and the Osunu group led by K.E. Nyenke continued to have their own factional system of administration. However in 1983, through the process of dialogue and negotiation the dispute was finally resolved.

### **Resolution of the 1976 Chieftaincy Disputes**

Obile (2016) notes that there were early attempts towards reconciliation of the warring groups. Foremost was the valour displayed by the entire Ibaa women as they demonstrated with their already composed songs that really touched those spear-heading the tussle to discard whatever may be their pain and ultimately take the path of unity. There were also the efforts of some social clubs such as the Safari Social Clubs, Ibaa Students Association, Tufiakwa Traditional Dancing group and chief C.E. Okpara Peace Committee. These various groups continuously educated its members to preach the gospel of Peace and unity in the community.

The C.E. Okpara Peace Committee comprised ten members from the different warring camps and mostly educated people.

The committee, just like others committed itself to the restoration of peace and unity in Ibaa. Chief C.E. Okpara had in the past summoned all the youths who were up to the secondary school age and educated them on the need for peace, unity and progress in Ibaa. It's intention was to nip the ugly monster conflict, from the root. He encouraged them to go for higher education by distributing a guide to career choice and course requirements at the tertiary institution. His mind was to positively imbue on the students the quality of peaceful co-existence. Chief C.E. Okpara also summoned a meeting of *ele-oha-nu-ele-ada*, council of chiefs and even had private talks with some members of the community to see the need for oneness and accept the reconciliation process that was on going.

Chief S.O. Ovua achieved the final peaceful reconciliation through the Ikwerre conflict resolution methods. Owhondah (2016) affirms that Ovua was the catalyst of change, when all conserted efforts had failed in Ibaa. Immediately he returned from his studies in India, he embarked on the reconciliation of the various factions so that the erst while glory of Ibaa be returned to the people. People doubted his capabilities over reconciling and uniting the people together due to his youthful age. But to every one's dismay and at his expertise approach to the problem, he succeeded and peacefully resolved the conflicts. In order to effect the reconciliation, he made consultation with the different groups ranging from the *oha* members, the Ibaa council of chiefs, the *ele-ada*, the various age grades in the town and the entire people of Ibaa. It was stated that Chief S.O. Ovua upheld the "true" story based on his investigations from different persons and groups all over the community and beyond.

His investigation centered on the origin of Ibaa, the nature in which traditional etiquettes functioned in the community and the way the wishes of the people could serve. He did not carry out this function alone. He constituted a "peace committee" whose duty was to reconcile the warring villages of Omuogbo, Omuadie and Omuisioha. The peace committee empowered the Omuadie and Omuisioha villages to institute an oath on representatives of Omuogbo for a period of one year. The oath was administered on January 8 1983. The fourteen people that swore the oath survived which automatically gave the *ohaship* to Omuogbo.

He also re-united the Osunu villages where he hails from and where some members have shifted their tents to mgbuosimini/Mgbuisinu group. He was assited by Mr. Achie Wordu, Mr. Ebere Woku, Chief U.A. Elechi, Mr. G.S.T. Nwabueze and Chief B.O. Chidah and some gentlemen from various parts of Rivers State which include Mr. E.J.V. Woherem, Mr. J.J. Wai, Mr. F.A. Ordu, Mr. R.A. Tekenah, Mr. J.E. Tubonemi, chief A.B Elemah, Mr. A. Tobin, Mr. M. Wobo, Mr. Kenneth Okafor, Mr. Bekwelle Ogbondah and P.N. Ebere who served as the secretary to the committee (Echeonwu, Owhondah and Ebere 1997:95).

The efforts of the committee coupled with the people's co-operation led them to collectively arrive at the following resolutions which include that *Isi-ali* head ship of Ibaa should be given to Omuogbo since they have also sworn to an oath and survived. It was also resolved that chief J.J. Ohaka should continue to be the *Eze Uvuahu* otherwise known as *nye-nwe-ali* Ibaa. It was agreed that it should be rotating amongst the three blocs - *Osunu, Mgbuosimini* and *Mgbuisinu* and since he is from Mgbuosimini, on his death another person should be

chosen from *Osunu* after which the position should go to Mgbuisinu. It therefore implies that *Eze Uvuahu* is not hereditary but to be rotated. It was also resolved that the entire community should give the required respect as custom demands for the *Eze Uvuahu* stool. They also noted that all traditions and rituals that were neglected in the past should be re-introduced to enhance the efficacy of the chieftaincy institution such as *isi-ukpe, ali, ono, eri-ekpere* and *nkwa*.

### **Chieftaincy Disputes in 2006**

On the death of the paramount ruler of Ibaa and Obelle Chief J.J. Ohaka, another wave of conflict swept through Ibaa over who should ascend the throne. Orji (2014) posits that after the traditional funeral rites of the late *nye-nwe-ali* Ibaa and Obelle communities in 2006, a 20 man screening committee was set up to screen the contestants to the throne. The Osunu group had the turn to produce the paramount ruler which was earlier agreed upon in 1978.

Many people became interested and that led to the confusion. Some of the contestants include Chief S.O. Ovua, Chief K.E. Nyenke, Chief Princewill Nwakama, Chief S.E. Amadi, late Prof. F. Okala and others. However, out of the number that applied only three persons remained after the screening. Later on, the three remaining candidates also disagreed with the crowning committee and decided to do it their own way. Chief Nyenke had claimed that he has been the chief of Osunu for a long time and now that there is a vacancy in Ibaa traditional stool then he should be the right person. His position as the *Eze Osunu* and his claims to ascending the throne is not automatic but by the popular will of the people.

Each of them started soliciting for supports from other villages. The cult groups which had been in existence before now attached themselves to these personalities and used the opportunity to assert their negative relevance in the community. The *degbam, dewell* and *iceland* cultist groups fought for supremacy among themselves and the most powerful who eventually wins should install whoever they are supporting as the *Eze Uvuahu* or *Nye-nwe-ali* paramount ruler of Ibaa.

The Ibaa chieftaincy crisis got escalated as each cult group went after the members of the other groups including innocent members of the community. Maiming, killing and destruction of property became the order of the day. Where there is a member from another group which needs to be killed by a rival cult group and eventually escaped, the family members were all killed. It was alleged that the *dewell* killed some *degbam* and *iceland* members on why they should support a particular candidate.

The *iceland* group now staged a reprisal attack on the *degbam* members and succeeded in chasing them away from the community and became the lord in Ibaa and Obelle. The *degbam* group consolidated, planned and executed a reprisal attack by storming into Ibaa and Obelle at night and killed some people identified as Nbor, Ndubueze and Elechi. It was also alleged that another cult group killed Mr. Oram Okachi, Chief Joker Boroh and a member of the vigilante group Mr. Nduku Dokugbor and the chairman Maxwell Orji (Obile, 2016).

Before the arrival of the Joint Task Force (JTF) the cult groups embarked on the destruction of lives and property, looting, raping of the young girls and even married women became the order of the day. Chief Joker Boroh was forcefully adopted from his house by 1: am and was discovered dead in a well with his hands and legs tied with rope on March 18 2008. This incidence made the members of the community ran away to become refugees in other communities of Isiokpo, Rumuiji, Ndele, Igwuruta and Port Harcourt. The cult boys also embarked on beating and harassing not only the old people but also the younger people. Tension only reduced when the JTF arrived and started doing their professional duty. The Ogbakor Ikwerre intervention at using the traditional means by pouring Juju round the

community to kill anyone who would cause mayhem in the town, also helped in reducing the conflicts.

Meanwhile, during the crisis, Chief S.O. Ovua started acting as the paramount ruler of Ibaa and Obelle. Owhondah (2016) admits that the matter has been dragged to the court as Ibaa does not have a paramount ruler but the people still recognizes S.O Ovua as the paramount ruler till now. This is because Chief S.O. Ovua has the peoples mandate as a result of his style of approach to life, objectivity and understanding. He was admired by the people through his community development work. He built a bridge and constructed the Rumuiji-Ibaa road. He was also instrumental to the completion of the electricity project in Ibaa.

Aside this, he was also instrumental to the settlement of the headship *oha* dispute between Omuadie and Omuogbo and also helped in the settlement of who becomes the recognized traditional ruler in the person of J.J. Ohaka. His good works made the majority of the *Osunu* to choose and endorse him as the candidate to occupy the chieftaincy traditional stool in Ibaa and Obele.

The other contestant rejected all the pleas by the people of Ibaa to allow Chief S.O. Ovua rule the people and decided to seek for justice in the law court. However, it should be noted that in Ikwerre, the office of the paramount ruler is very lucrative due to the financial benefits attached and moreso, being the custodian of the lands *nye-nwe-ali*, he determines the community land that should be allocated to members of the community. The Uvuahu stool recognized by the government also attracts some huge benefits. This must be some of the reasons for the bitter contentions and disagreements on who occupies the stool.

### Effects of the Conflicts on Ibaa

### Loss of Lives and Property

The chieftaincy and cult clashes in Ibaa led to the death of many people and destruction of numerous properties. Many lives were lost. The total number of deaths recorded has not been ascertained. Some people identified as Nbor, Ndubueze, Elechi, Mr. Oram Okachi, Timmy Chimara, Mr. Ayor were killed. One of the chiefs in Ibaa, Chief Joker Boroh was killed. Also, a member of the vigilante group Mr. Nduku Dokugbor and the vigilante chairman, Maxwell Orji were killed (Obile, 2016). Chief Joker Boroh was taken from his house by 1:00am and was later discovered dead inside a well near the Ibaa evil forest in March 18, 2014 (Orji, 2016). In Obelle, *Oha* Alexandah Egeonu was beheaded in front of his house. Chinedu Uchendu was killed on his duty post in Shell Flow Station in Obelle. Uchenna and Nyemar also lost their lives during the crisis. Properties worth millions of naira were destroyed including some buildings belonging to Chief Joker Boro and Timmy Chimara.

#### Loss of Functional Community Leadership

Due to the crises, Ibaa has been operating without a substantive traditional ruler. Chief S.O. Ovua has been acting as the paramount ruler of Ibaa and Obelle and peace has not yet returned in the community as the matter is still in court. The crisis disrupted community peace as the people cannot speak with one voice. The youths on their own part refused to listen to parental advice and usually involved themselves in armed gang groups.

### Proliferation of Fire Arms, Light Weapons and Armed Groups

The conflicts created security problems in Ibaa and left the cult groups with a lot of arms. Due to the violence, many factions supporting the contending chiefs emerged and linked themselves to the cult groups. These factions also provided the nucleus around which communal armies were built as they provided arms for their members to enable them fight their opponents and link their loyalty to a bigger cult from neighbouring communities. The cult boys have not denounced or resigned from being the members of cult groups and armed gangs. The situation put the community at risk for future conflict occurrence due to the presence of arms and dangerous gang groups thereby generating a group of blood thirsty young men.

# **Disruption of Economic Activities**

The violence associated with the crisis in Ibaa affected production, marketing and investment in agriculture, the basic economic activity of the Ikwerre people. As a result of the crisis, fishermen found it difficult to go for fishing. Most fishermen and farmers were forced to abandon their fishing gears and their farms for the fear of being attacked or killed. The transportation networks were also disarticulated during the years of conflicts as they were not able to transport their crops to the market when eventually they succeeded in getting them out of the farm. Many business men and women that operate shops, schools and farms ran away. Such activities as looting, robbery and kidnapping associated with violence scared away market women who visits the community for the purchase of food stuffs which are usually sold in the state and the neighbouring states. Chieftaincy and cult clashes impacted negatively on Ibaa community as it disorganised the unity and coherence found among the citizens of Ibaa in the past.

# Conclusion

Ibaa has experienced violent conflicts caused by chieftaincy struggles and cultism. The chieftaincy struggle between Chief J.J. Ohaka and Chief K.E. Nyenke generated a lot of issues within the community. Finally, it was agreed that Chief J.J. Ohaka should be the *nye-nwe-ali* Ibaa. After his death, the struggle for who represents the community came to be between Chief S.O. Ovua and K.E. Nyenke from the *Osunu* group. These struggles intensified cult activities in Ibaa and generated hardship and insecurity on the people. The consequences of conflict in Ibaa include destruction of property, maiming and killing of innocent people including women and children, disruption of economic activities and high rate of crimes.

# Recommendations

- 1. The creation of a permanent royal family who will carry out good governance. This will help to minimize the struggle for the chieftaincy stool on the death of the ruling paramount ruler as it will not give room for rotational contestations among the villages.
- 2. Employment for the youths of Ibaa will reduce cultism as it is always said that an idle mind is the devil's workshop. When the youth are fully engaged then, cultism will have no place again.
- 3. Community policing should be put in place by community leaders to checkmate the activities of the cult boys. The youths who will constitute the members of community police know the cult boys more than any security agencies. Therefore, they can hardly find a hide out after committing an offence. All these will help to chart the path of peace in Ibaa.

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Name	Sex	Age	Status	Occupation	Place of	Date of
					Interview	Interview
Obile Kingsley	М	58	C.D.C Member	Business	Ibaa	25/02/2016
Owhonda	М	50	C.D.C Member	Lecturing	Ibaa	08/03/2016
Samuel						
Orji Mabel	F	45	Secretary,	Petty Trader	Ibaa	18/08/2016
			Nwereonma			
			Women Meeting			
Ezekwu Stanley	М	50	C.D.C Member,	Business	Ibaa	14/05/2016
			Mgbere village			
Amadi Kinika	М	58	C.D.C. Member	Petty Trader	Ibaa	17/06/2016
			Mgbere village			
Nyenke	F	56	Woman Leader	Civil Servant	Ibaa	10/07/2016
Patience						
Eferegbo	F	54	Secretary,	Farmer	Ibaa	10/07/2016
Cordelia			Women Meeting			
Nwokanma	М	62	Priest of the Land	Farmer	Ibaa	20/05/2016
Ofege						
Azubuike						

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