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THE ROLE OF *EYEI* IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN IBIBIO TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of man and society. Consequent upon that, when it occurs, there must be a mechanism to check or prevent it or resolve it. Among the Ibibiol of Akwa Ibom State, Eyei (young palm frond) has remained a valuable traditional instrument used in the resolution of conflict especially in civil matters such as land dispute, disagreement over building, farm and other properties. Eyei is considered to be an injunction signifying no trespassing whenever and wherever hoisted. It symbolizes peace whenever there is conflict, love, unity, non-aggression and mutual understanding. This paper seeks to examine the role of eyei in conflict resolution in Ibibio traditional society. This paper in its methodology used historical method comprising primary and secondary sources of data. The paper in its findings noted that eyei played the role of peaceful settlement of conflict, as a judicial instrument, it serves as a weapon for maintaining law and order and there by stopping violent conflict, bloodshed and breach of public peace, a symbol of peace and an instrument of secure property or objects in dispute by placing ban or injunction. Eyei is the only instrument in Ibibio traditional society effectively used in conflict resolution.

Key Words: Role, *Eyei*, Conflict Resolution, Ibibio Traditional Society.

Introduction

Conflict as the opposition of interest, contradiction of conditions, differences of views between individuals, groups, classes or communities, is a natural phenomenon. Wherever and whenever people come together in the family, village, or in a state, such situation arise, leading to struggles and contentions of various forms of intensity culminating in violent combat which could in extreme cases destroy the parties in conflict. Conflict is an inevitable social phenomenon in every human society and as a result when it occurs, there must be a mechanism inbuilt in the society to check or prevent it as well as to resolve it. Conflict, therefore, is potentially destructive, but only when it escalates beyond the control of the mechanisms normally operative within the natural or cultural system in which it occurs (Alagoa, 1994).

In Ibibio life and culture generally, *eyei* is a symbol of peace. If two communities or factions are at war, any emissary who comes in between with *eyei* to the fighting sides is to call a truce, and they must stop fighting at once. Similarly, if a portion of land is in dispute, the chiefs will put up *eyei* as an injunction that no claimant can enter the land until the case is properly disposed of (Etuk, 2002: 142). Right from the pre-colonial period in Ibibioland, Ibibio communities have designed some traditional institutions for the resolution of conflicts. In civil matters, for example, land disputes, considerable use was made of *eyei* (young palm frond). Whenever hoisted, it acted as a "No

Trespassing” notice. It was rarely disregarded by the contending parties. It was also used as symbol of peace. If two villages quarreled, another village well disposed towards them could arbitrate by first sending *eyei* to them to call for a ceasefire. After that, a day was fixed for the hearing of the case. In difficult cases, the arbitrating village invited other villages to come and assist them in deciding the case (Udo, 1983).

This paper therefore is an attempt to examine the role of *eyei* injunction in conflict resolution among Ibibio communities. Based on this assertion, the objectives of the paper include the following: First, to examine conflict in Ibibioland, a brief ethnography of Ibibioland: examine *eyei* injunction and conflict resolution. Secondly, it takes a look at modernization on the use of *eyei* injunction in conflict resolution and finally, the paper will suggest the way forward in the application of *eyei* injunction in conflict resolution in contemporary Ibibio land for sustainable conflict resolution and management especially where the Western Alternative resolution have failed to achieve the desired aim.

Geographical Location of Ibibio land

The Ibibio speaking people of Akwa Ibom State occupy an area at the extreme south-eastern corner of Nigeria. In the South-West, the Ibibio has common boundary with the Ijaw of the Rivers State, in the West and Northwest, their boundary with the Ekoi and in the East with various ethnic groups in Cameroon. The Bight of Bonny washes its Southern border (Jeffrey, 1955). The Ibibio lies to the South Eastern corner of Nigeria roughly between latitude 4°, 25° and 5°, 30° north and longitude 7°, 30° and 8°, 30° east. Physically, Ibibioland is remarkably flat or gently undulating with almost no point rising to 300 metres above sea level. The area is amply drained by the Qua Iboe and the Cross Rivers and their several tributaries and rivulets. In terms of vegetation, the area lies almost entirely in the thick rainforest belt. The coastal portion has an annual rainfall of about 140cm with the rain being heaviest between May and July. The dry season starts towards the end of November with the North-East Trade Winds bringing the harmattan down south and lasting till sometime in April (Ezumah, 2010). Demographically, the Ibibio has a population figure of over 1.5million people according to the 2006 Housing and Population Census (Akinyosoye, 2007). The Ibibio country, however, supports a vast growth of wild oil palm in the high rain forest zone and mangrove in the coastal swamps (Ekong, 1983).

Meaning of *Eyeyi* (Yong Palm Frond)

According to an intelligence report on Abak, Ediene, Ukpom and Midim, *Eyeyi* is a young palm frond which is put into the ground as a notice to prevent trespassers. In Ibibioland, in disputes over land, the matter was kept under control by the placing of *Eyeyi* on the land. This consisted of a fringe of grass which was generally accepted and recognized as an injunction and probably against fighting and entering into the land by either party until settlement of the dispute.

In civil matters especially land dispute, there is often wide application or use of *Eyeyi* which when hoisted, acted as “No Trespassing” notice. It was rarely disregarded by the contending parties in conflict because of the religious taboos it carries. *Eyeyi* is used at the traditional level for so many civil and criminal matters and has a lot to do with the traditional level for so many civil and criminal matters and has a lot to do with the traditional beliefs, culture, philosophy and social activities of the people. *Eyeyi* is obtained from a palm tree but it becomes potent as an instrument of conflict resolution after being ritualized thereby making it a sacred instrument.

Concept of Conflict in Ibibioland

Conflict as a phenomenon is an important part of human existence (Walter, 1992). It is a natural part of our daily lives (Dudley, 1992). Conflicts take place within a society make by the result of several factors. There is no agreement among scholars on the concept of conflict even though there

is no disagreement on its manifestations and impact on society. According to Johan Galtung, conflict is a condition in society. A system may be said to be in conflict if the system has two or more incompatible goals (Galtung, 1982). For L. A. Coser, conflict can be viewed as a process in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals (Coser, 1967). In his own contribution to the understanding of the nature and concept of conflict, Lockwood, emphasized that there are mechanisms in societies that make conflict inevitable and inexorable. For instance, power differential means that some of the groups would exploit, oppress and marginalize others and in the process constitute a built-in source of tension and conflict in the social system. Besides, the existence of scarce resources in societies would generate fights and conflict over the distribution of these resources. Additionally, because different interest groups in societies pursue different goals and often have to compete with each other is enough for conflicts to occur (Lockwood, 1956).

Conflicts arise from the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and or groups in defined social and physical environments. Conflict is a conscious act involving personal of group contact and communication. Conflict is a state of disagreement or fight. It is a situation in which you have two opposite feelings about something. Conflict as a social problem is characteristics of all human societies traditional and modern, but its forms and extent differ from one society to another. Similarly, its consequences and resolution methods differ from one community to the other. This is because wherever human beings are found living in a cultural setting, there is bound to be competition, agitation and rivalry. Despite the availability of means of reducing tension, every society include in Ibibioland experiences struggle or competition by groups attempting to defend or advance their group interests.

Conflict is always depicted as totally negative. This is not always the case. Depending on how it is handled, it can either be constructive (positive) or destructive (negative). It is as common to bring suggestions that conflict can be used constructively to explore different solutions to a problem and stimulate creativity by recognizing conflicts as a way of bringing emotive and non-arguments into the open while deconstructing long-standing tension. Conflict is naturally destructive when used mainly to inflict injuries on, neutralize or subvert the aspirations of opponents. Conflict is a fluid and infinitely elastic concept which can be twisted into different shapes and has become an issue over which scholars find themselves in sharp disagreement (Ademola, 2006).

In an interview with Mr. Ubong Anietie at Uyo, (2015), conflict in Ibibioland is conceptualized as a state of disagreement between two or more people. It is a dynamic phenomenon, which consists of five stages: initiation, escalating, controlled maintenance, abatement and termination/resolution. Ordinarily, conflict is viewed as something abnormal, dysfunctional and therefore detestable yet it cannot be avoided totally in human societies. The concept explains why conflict is rampant in society often based in economic, political, social, cultural and religious history of the society involved. For Ibibio people, conflict simply means a non-peaceful way of settling disagreements, disputes or differences between people, society and groups. This may come in a more subtle form like fighting which may degenerate to the use of weapons, torture and blackmail. The use of conflict to settle differences is bad and cannot lead to meaningful development. Rather, it has devastating effects on the society especially on the vulnerable members of Ikot Oku Ikonu village mainly women and children.

Commenting about conflict in Ibibioland in general, E. A. Ukpung explained that within the clan, there are tension, personal jealousies and individual self-assertions. Disputes take place in all manner of situations. It would appear in the light of the above observations, that conflict is endemic in society. This conflict starts right from the home or household and cuts across the social fibre. Within the household, there could be conflict even on a daily basis. This conflict must be resolved. Often voluntarily, if the family must have to survive. The exceptional circumstances, outsiders are invited to mediate in family conflicts. There is a good deal of conflict within the extended family, very often, the

conflict is a result of land dispute. Most members of the extended family occupy contiguous portions of land in several ekpne Ikot (selection of cultivable land within the village community). A very greedy and wicked member of the extended family may be dissatisfied with the land he has and decides to trespass on the land of his kinsman for no just cause. During each farming season, there is a good amount of land disputes, which may occasion physical assaults or fights. Frequently, there are inter-family, inter-village, inter-village group and inter-clan land disputes. These disputes, in the case of villages, village groups and clans, sometimes result in wholesale wars featuring the loss of lives, burning down of house, markets and even entire village (Ukpong, 2007).

Conflict Resolution

Resolution of conflict using peaceful, non-violent methods has been known in Ikot Oku Ikono village right from the pre-colonial period. Conflict resolution implies that it is expected that the deep rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved, and behaviour is no longer violent nor are attitudes hostile any longer, while the structure of the conflict has changed (Oliver *et al*, 2005). Conflict is resolved when the basic needs of parties have been met with necessary satisfiers and their fears have been allayed. Conflict resolution consists of a range of options employed for non-violent management of conflict.

In an interview with Barr. Mrs. Inemesit Ekannem at Uyo, (2015), traditions of Ikot Oku Ikono village showed that when a conflict erupts, there are usually methods and alternatives to its resolution. Conflicts can be resolved with the use of *eyei*, arbitration, litigation, direct negotiation and compromise. The resolution of conflict makes a society a better place to live in. conflict resolution is important for the survival of any society in as much as it seeks to facilitate positive change, provide opportunity to conflicting parties to interact and reduce the scope, intensity and effects of conflicts.

Eyei Injunction and Conflict Resolution

i. Eyei as an Injunction and Institution

In Ikot Oku Ikono of Ibibioland, the young palm frond popularly known as *eyei* have remained very unique communication medium among the people. As an injunction, if the *eyei* is tied to any object, it communicates “prohibition” in most cases. When tied across a road or a compound, it means that the road or compound as access road is prohibited (Akpan, 1994).

Eyei also served as an injunction when it is used on a disputed piece of land as an injunction until the right title owner to the property is determined. Furthermore, when *eyei* is tied in a special manner, it was used for sending special traditional message with injunction. It was used to place ban on objects and property. When tied across a road, it meant that non-qualified people should keep off (Anita, 2005). The above examples showed how *eyei* was used as an injunction in Ibibioland.

On the other hand, *eyei* is also used as an institution. In an interview with Barr. Mrs. Esther Uwem at Uyo, (2015), the *eyei* is a very important emblem of chieftaincy. Although it is also used by some societies to keep off non-members from where they meet, the chief uses it as a flag to truce to stop a fight or combat. *Eyei* as an institution is a chief’s weapon for maintaining law and order. Any interference, therefore, with the chief’s use of *eyei* in any of these respects, leaves the chief powerless in performing one of his traditional duties and also the duty imposed on him by the criminal code. Every effort should be made to strengthen the power of the chief’s *eyei*.

ii. The Principles for the use of Eyei Injunction and Enforcement of the Eyei Injunction and Punishments.

Eyei injunction as a traditional judicial instrument though not codified was embedded on certain legal principles, which are similar to that of contemporary judicial and international treaties. The principle of obedience was mostly applied by the people under study. For instance, no Ibibio person or community could disobey the injunction of *Eyei* irrespective of his/her social status. Not observing *eyei* injunction was highly prohibited in pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial periods. Unlike the modern injunction, *eyei* injunction were not written, not codified rather **they were** not communication channels and communicates prohibition in all cases. They were also practical declarations made by traditional institutions in Ibibioland. The Ibibio people believe in the potency of *eyei* injunction in conflict resolution. Thus, it is an Ibibio judicial and customary instrument for social control. This implies that everybody is expected to obey the injunction whenever and wherever *eyei* is hoisted (Bassey, 2011).

Generally, *eyei* injunction is enforced by the traditional rulers especially clan heads, village heads, family heads, paramount rulers, secret societies, ritual elders of the communities concerned. For example, during inter-village wars, other chiefs from neutral villages or village groups within the clan would send an emissary with *eyei* to call for a ceasefire. The envoy hands over a split *eyei* to each warring group (Akpan, 2006). On cessation of hostilities, the conflicting parties may meet at the boundary of their two villages or on a neutral group and settle their differences with the assistance of the clan chiefs. It becomes a very grave and offensive insult to disobey *eyei* injunction. Where a particular party in conflict refuses to obey the injunction, the chiefs will surely penalize the party in question in form of payment of stipulated fine, banishment or supernatural punishment in form of sickness, misfortunes and untimely death. Any person who breached the *eyei* injunction was usually visited with supernatural punishments. The gods of *eyei* injunction though invisible were thus part of the law enforcement agencies. Punishments that might be imposed on the offenders included infertility, madness and sickness of any kind. A party might resort to the use of witchcraft as means of enforcing the *eyei* injunction. Other traditional institutions that helped in the enforcement of *eyei* injunction are the age-grade, social clubs and sometimes native courts.

iii. Symbolism of *Eyei* Injunction

Eyei symbolizes peace. It was used as a symbol of peace. If two villages quarreled, another village well disposed towards them could arbitrate by first sending *eyei* to them to call for a ceasefire. After ceasefire, a day was fixed for the hearing of the case. It also symbolizes friendship and provided mutual understanding for amicable resolution of conflict.

Secondly, the *eyei* injunction as a language of communication its usage and meaning depends on how it is knotted. The *eyei* when tied and placed on the ground forming something like “Y” symbolizes summons. It shows that the receiver of the palm frond has committed a serious offence and is therefore summoned to appear before the chiefs. When *eyei* is pinned on the ground in a disputed land, it serves as an injunction symbolizing that people are prohibited from entering the land pending the resolution of the matter. *Eyei* can also communicate danger if the encircled area or object is made use of by unauthorized persons. If placed around a plot of land, it simply means that the occupants of the plot must quit immediately. It could also be used on a disputed house, property and inheritance rights. Furthermore, when *eyei* is tied round like a ball with stick piercing through it like a cross, it symbolizes paralysis for trespassers. When an *eyei* is pinned in the farm using a stick as a support and a knot, it symbolizes scrotal hernia for trespassers. *Eyei* when tied across a road or a compound symbolizes that the use of the said road or compound as access road is prohibited.

Furthermore, *eyei* injunction signified love, unity and peace, non-aggression and mutual understanding when a grandson held and shook it between two warring factions, it

meat cease fire for peaceful settlement of issues involved to begin. When *eyei* is carried in the mouth, it indicated that the carrier on special assignment must not talk to anybody except the person to whom the message was rightly sent. *Eyei* when woven in a special way called “*udak*” symbolizes leadership position and it was hung on a village or clan head elect who must accept the post of love or by force or face misfortunes. Also when woven together into special shape called *Adoong*, it provided coffin for fulfilled traditional rulers and members of *idiong*, *inam*, *ekong* and other secret societies (Antia, 2005).

iv. The Role of *Eyei* Injunction in the Resolution/Settlement of Conflicts in Ibibioland (Ikot Oku Ikono)

The resolution of conflict in Ibibioland using *eyei* injunction takes place within the cultural, traditional and customary practices of the people. The role of the *eyei* injunction in conflict resolution includes the following:

1. In an interview with Mrs. Grace Ekannem at Uyo, (2015), *eyei* injunction plays the role of amicable resolution of conflict especially a disputed piece of land as an injunction until the right ownership is determined. Traditional rulers use it as symbol of truce to stop inter and intra-family, village, clan and ethnic conflicts. It places moral restraint on parties to conflict and seeks to interact and resolve their differences.
2. *Eyei* as a judicial instrument serves as a weapon for maintaining law and order and thereby stopping violent conflicts as well as reducing bloodshed, a breach of public peace. *Eyei* is a symbol of peace. It is an instrument of peace because when there is conflict between two parties, another concerned or an ally intervened by sending *eyei* injunction as a clarion call for a ceasefire. *Eyei* injunction is rarely disobeyed because of its potency.
3. In an interview with Mr. Samuel Ekpo at Uyo, (2015), *eyei* injunction is a very useful means of ending deadly conflicts in Ibibioland village. As a judicial instrument, the village head or the clan head as the case may be, adjudicated over such land disputes and gave a ruling using *eyei* injunction. Using *eyei* injunction between warring parties have ended most of the deadly inter-villages, inter-clans and inter-ethnic wars or land disputes in Ibibioland. This was usually carried out at the disputing land by the chiefs and elders of the disputing parties who have agreed to make peace. For example, *eyei* injunction helped in the settlement of boundary disputes between Uyo – Obio and Ikot Ikono, Ikot Okubo and Afaha Ediene etc.
4. In an interview with Mr. Edet Okon at Ikot Oku Ikono, (2015), *eyei* injunction has remained the most reliable practical and judicial instrument of conflict resolution. There is the belief that the *eyei* leaf serves as a communication medium of “no trespass” or prohibition in most cases. Besides, it has some religious connotation. It is feared that tampering with *eyei* injunction could cause the victim to be visited with woes by the spirits of *eyei* or land deities. The common thing among the people was that they made sense to the use of *eyei* and they have faith in it as a reliable instrument of peace and amicable settlement of conflict. In respect of the above people are restrained from fighting each other over a property thereby forestalling peace.
5. It was used to place ban or restraint on objects or property in dispute. It gives the idea that people should keep off until an amicable resolution of such disputes is achieved.

v. Modernization on the use *Eyei* Injunction in Conflict Resolution

It is said that the only thing that is constant in life is change. Everything changes including the physical universe, biological universe, the social universe and variety of phenomena that make up these universes. These modifications in the structure of societies have been termed social change. It is also the modifications that occur within social institutions in social attitudes, beliefs, values and patterns of relationship and behaviour (Igbo, 2003). In view of this assertion, we can see modernization as an aspect of social change.

Modernization is the transformation of a society from simple, traditional and rural into a complex and modern society. It has a lot of influence on the *eyei* injunction as an instrument of conflict resolution. Ibibioland is not a static society but a dynamic society that is receptive to changes. Many of the changes that took place in Ibibioland were an outcome of social change. It led to both good and bad consequences. First, modernization brought a lot of improvements in Ibibioland socially, politically, economically, culturally and religiously. It also brought modern healthcare facilities such as hospitals, health centres, maternity homes, schools and colleges, good roads, telecommunication system, potable water and electricity etc. All these positive role of modernization notwithstanding, modernization has rejected the traditional way of life of Ibibioland people embedded in the use of *eyei* injunction for conflict resolution and described them as uncivilized way of dispensing justice and resolving conflicts. Modernization sees everything about traditional judicial instruments particularly *eyei* injunction as fetish, barbaric, savage, heathen, paganistic, native, idolatry, animistic and primitive. As a result people no longer have interest and belief in the potency of *eyei* injunction in conflict resolution due to the emergence of modern court of law, tribunal or commission of inquiry, boundary dispute commission and alternative dispute resolution methods based on western method of conflict resolution. It changed the structure of Ibibioland and people no longer frequently use *eyei* injunction as an instrument of conflict resolution it replaced the institution of *eyei* injunction with law courts, arbitration panel, law enforcement agencies and other institutions charged with the responsibility of ensuring that the goal, aim and objectives of conflict resolution was achieved through *eyei* injunction.

Secondly, in an interview with Chief Etuk Akpan at Uyo, (2015), modernization weakened the existence of the institution of *eyei* injunction. It destroyed all the institutions traditionally employed by the people to ensure that conflicts are resolved using non-violent method, persuasion and hoisting of *eyei*. The western legal and judicial system that followed modernization had replaced the use of *eyei* injunction for conflict resolution to some extent. It considered decision, rulings and judgments through *eyei* injunction as illegal and therefore of no effect. Also the existence of police and modern courts had undermined the power of *eyei* injunction in conflict resolution.

Modernization has undermined the beliefs in divinities and spirits, ancestors and mystical forces which most effectively control the administering or application of *eyei* injunction. Some people in Ibibioland become less interested in the rituals before the hoisting of the *eyei*. Modernization through education taught the people that everything about *eyei* injunction is devilish and therefore should be destroyed. Educated people and Christians even disobeyed the injunction of *eyei* by seeing it as a primitive judicial instrument of peace and conflict free society. Cultural indoctrination led to the destruction of the institution of *eyei* injunction through outright disobedience. Modernization at this point becomes a strong social force disrupting everything relating to the use of *eyei* injunction in conflict resolution. Western education has replaced *eyei* injunction with institution considered to be modern thereby isolating or totally neglecting the wide use of *eyei* injunction in conflict resolution in Ibibioland village.

In an interview with Johnson Ekannem at Uyo, (2015), the efficacy of *eyei* injunction in conflict resolution within Ikot Oku Ikono village was a manifestation of the use of traditional judicial system to solve problems that erupted in the society which would have been difficult if another method of conflict resolution was used. Conflict is potentially destructive, but only when it escalates beyond the control of the mechanisms normally operative in Ibibioland. It can also be said that the use of *eyei* injunction is an important traditional and judicial institution in Ibibioland where the instrument is highly respected and regarded as an effective tool in conflict resolution in as much as it is used as a flag of truce to stop a conflict, being used on a disputed piece of land or property as an injunction pending the determination of the rightful owner, maintenance of law and order peace and enforcement of customary rights and decisions. *Eyeyi* injunction ensured that “No trespassing order” is highly observed and in difficult or violent conflicts used to call for a ceasefire.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has demonstrated that the Ibibio particularly the Ikot Oku Ikono people made use of *eyei* injunction extensively in conflict resolution and has remained an age-long practice having withstood the influences of colonialism, Christianity, western education and modernization. It gave rise to the development of customary laws consisting of customary and usages accepted by the people as binding on them. The *eyei* injunction was efficacious than the modern instruments of conflict resolution because the inherent instant sanctions deterred the people from violating the order or law of *eyei* injunction. The people were afraid of being fined or banished, being afflicted with sickness or killed by the gods for breaking the injunction. The religious sanction that follows *eyei* injunction remained the vital power that made it to be a symbol of peace. In conclusion, one can say that conflict is an inevitable phenomenon but could be reduced to a tolerable degree through the use of *eyei* injunction.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made as part of the findings of this paper and they include the following: First, the use of *eyei* injunction as an instrument for conflict resolution in Ibibioland should be encouraged since it is a non-violent method of conflict resolution, cheap, less bureaucratic and faster in delivering justice. Secondly, efforts should be made to guide the proper use of *eyei* injunction in conflict resolution as desperate parties can manipulate the instrument for their own benefits to the detriment of the society. Thirdly, there should be strict adherence and application of *eyei* injunction in all civil and criminal matters in Ibibioland because it deterred the people extensively from going to war with each other during conflicts. Fourthly, efforts should be geared towards ensuring that this judicial instrument that is indigenous to the people should be made to exist side by side with modern judicial instruments and serve as a complementary tool. Finally, the author recommend that the findings of this paper should be published and made available to the general public, students and to the conflict managers as it offers a helping hand and knowledge in conflict resolution.

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