Amazons of War and Peace: Local Women Organisations and Communal Conflicts in South-eastern Nigeria

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Abstract
This study investigates the role of women civil society organizations in communal conflicts in South-eastern Nigeria. Until recently the literature on the nexus of gender, civil society, peace and conflict research in Nigeria suggests that civil society studies have been largely gender blind. This is because the literature sometimes ignores the specificities of women group involvement in socio-economic and political processes. There is therefore the need to focus on the various links between gender, conflict and peace particularly in an increasingly violent and conflict-infested global political system. More specifically, the incorporation of cultural mechanisms of conflict resolution into mainstream peace process by women following the failure of conventional conflict management mechanism needs to be explored. From research findings conducted through a synergy of observation method, in-depth and key-informant interviews, this study shows that women civil society organizations played vital roles in sustaining Aguleri and Umuleri conflict, and relied on traditional instrument of conflict resolution to manage the conflict.

Keywords: Umuleri, Agulari, conflict, gender, civil society organization

Introduction
This study focuses on the protracted conflict between Aguleri and Umuleri communities in South-eastern Nigeria as an entry point to interrogating the role of women in generating and mitigating conflicts in Africa. The increasing involvement of women in Africa’s wars and bloody conflicts have meant that concerted research efforts should be directed at examining the connection between gender and conflict and peace relations (Aning, 1998; Turshen and Twagiramariya, 1998). However, the issue is most often addressed in broad academic frameworks such as gender studies or peace and conflict studies. There is therefore the need to focus more specifically on the various links between gender, conflict and peace.
What roles do women play in generating, sustaining and mitigating conflicts? In what ways do the activities of women civil society organizations engender conflict or promote peaceful relations? How have women appropriated cultural instruments in responding to conflict situation and peace initiative? These questions that probe deeper into the interface of gender, conflict and conflict resolution require further research scrutiny. The reason being that until recently ‘civil society studies have been largely gender blind because they have ignored the specificities of women groups engagements, responses and roles in the numerous socio-economic, political, environmental and resources crises in Africa’ (Ikelegbe, 2005: 244). Yet in countries such as Burundi, Cameroun, Namibia and Tanzania studies have presented women as fuelling and resolving conflicts (UNESCO, 2003).

What is more, conditions that promote the proliferation and protraction of conflicts were heightened in Nigeria and particularly South-eastern Nigeria, by the adoption and implementation of neo-Liberal policies of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). As the state under SAP abdicates its role in providing social goods, civil society organizations such as women organizations are propped up and repositioned to assume the abandoned duties of the state (Honey and Okafor, 1998). Several development programmes of previous and present governments in Nigeria such as the Directorate of Foods, Roads and Infrastructure (DFFRI), Better Life Programme, Family Support Programme, etc have encouraged the formation of community and ethnic-based women associations. Ethnic and communal clashes are heightened as these organizations take on one another in their struggles for the few development projects from government.

Furthermore, attempts to resolve these conflicts relying on western conflict management instruments have yielded discouraging results. Hence the incorporation of cultural mechanisms of conflict resolution into the mainstream peace process ‘not only helps to contextualize conflict management but also facilitates the participation of local peoples - particularly women - who are usually left out of search-for-peace processes and ensure the sustenance of endangered indigenous formations’ (Osaghae, 2002: 202). In essence, this study is an attempt to locate women civil society organizations in that intricate process of generating conflict, resolving it and sustaining peace. The first part of the paper explores the constitution and evolution of women civil society in South-eastern Nigeria. The second part provides background details to the conflicts. The third part examines the role of women organizations in the conflicts. The fourth part draws conclusion from the issues raised in the paper.

**Constitution and Evolution of Women Civil Society**

For this study, women civil society organization is defined as non-state and self-governing community organizations, drawing membership from women of
a particular community and involved in the process of development and governance of the community.

The Igbo lived in patrilocal, segmented and semi-autonomous villages. And Igbo leaders were men and women who combined wealth and wisdom. The villages varied in sizes and intermittently came together for limited ritual and jural purposes. They were composed of lineages or wards which traced their origin usually to a common male ancestor or female ancestors in the case of matrilineal villages. There was no state which, in the words of Weber, held the monopoly of the legitimate use and application of force to extract obedience and compliance. Political power was, therefore, diffuse. As a result, there were no individuals, institutions or agencies vested with power and authority to make promulgations or legislations that must be obeyed (Ekejiuba, 1971). Nevertheless, some form of democracy was applied in collectively reaching a decision on matters affecting the village and its members. Disputes between individuals or villages were resolved through group discussions until mutual agreement was reached between the parties to the conflict. Women were not involved in the judicial process (Mba, 1982).

Village assembly, a gathering of all adults in the village, was the core of Igbo political institution. Matters pertaining to the welfare of individuals and the village in general, which required collective action, were discussed in the village assembly. Developmental issues such as ‘How can we make our market ‘bigger’ than the other villages’ markets?’ (Allen, 1972: 167) and conflicts which threatened the unity of the entire village were discussed. Proceedings reached at the village assemblies were conducted in a democratic manner. Every man or woman had almost equal opportunity to contribute to the discussions and decision-making process. In any case, men were more likely to speak than women who often spoke only on matters directly concerning them. Elders, titleholders and ritual heads were more likely to exercise considerable influence in the discussions than others. A combination of age and wisdom conferred respect but age alone carried little influence.

For men and women, status was largely achieved not ascribed. A woman’s status was determined more by her own achievements than the achievements of her husband. Women came second in power hierarchy in society. Men were able to achieve primacy because, being members of the patrilineage, men acquired wealth which granted them priority and advantage. Separate from the village assembly, women had their own gatherings and organizations. Women belonged to age-sets, married women associations and daughters associations (Denzer & Mbanefoh, 1998) organized along kinship and communal lines. Ekeh (1992: 192) has argued that kinship organizations acquired prominence because ‘it was within kinship organizations that individuals more fully realized their private and political needs, turning kinship into public institutions in pre-colonial Africa’. There were basically two types of women associations: the association of wives of the village and women title societies (Mba, 1982) and yet a third: Umuada. Umuada consists of women from different families and kin-groups of a village or community who have been scattered because of
their marriages, but form a group in their natal village on the basis of their common origin, history and birth place (Ibewuie, 2006). Through these organizations women played prominent roles in the socio-cultural and political lives of their communities.

Because residence was essentially patrilocal, women population often comprised wives, mothers and divorced or widowed daughters of the village who have returned from their husbands’ homes to settle with their natal families. They attended meetings in their natal villages and helped to resolve conflicts among their brothers. The village-wide gatherings of all adult women residing in a village - mitiri or mikiri (meeting) - which articulated women’s interests was a major political instrument of women (Allen, 1972). Unlike the village assembly, mitiri provided women with greater opportunity to focus on their interests as wives, mothers, traders and farmers. Disputes between women which did not involve men were settled in the gatherings. The gathering also intervened in marital disputes and could mobilize women against an erring husband. The meeting helped women to develop and sharpen their political skills. Decisions reached were taken seriously and vigorously implemented.

Every woman, irrespective of her age, was allowed opportunity to contribute to any issue being discussed, although women of wealth, wisdom and rhetorical skills took leading roles. Elderly women commanded respect and exercised moral authority (Mba, 1982). Decisions were informally communicated to husbands and children through their wives and mothers. When the need arose spokeswomen were appointed to convey the resolutions of women to the men (Allen, 1972: 169). The spokeswoman was only a representative of the women chosen by consensus and not their leader (Mba, 1982). If their decisions and persuasions were neglected or men failed to abide by them, women took actions to ensure compliance. They achieved this through the process of ridiculing men or ‘sitting on a man’ by ‘sitting outside a man’s compound, singing abusive songs and refusing to leave until he agreed to their demand’ (Mba, 1982: 29; Allen, 1972). Under extreme situations, women embarked on strikes and boycotts to enforce their decisions.

These forms of political arrangement continued until they were distorted by colonial administrative reforms and practices. Colonial government introduced in South-eastern Nigeria ideas of native administration borrowed from colonial experiences in Northern Nigeria. In 1900, Southern Nigeria was made a Protectorate. Following the successful conquest of Igboland, the area was demarcated into Native Court Areas. Several unrelated villages came under the jurisdiction of the native courts. And the cherished autonomy of the villages indiscriminately lumped together were violated. But there were more native courts than the British District Officers to take charge of the courts. Warrant Chiefs were created to assist in these courts. The Warrant Chiefs were also members of the Native Authorities and ensured that the orders of the District Officers were executed in their territories of jurisdiction. Despite the
pre-eminent position they occupied in the colonial hierarchy of administration, in many places the chiefs were opportunistic and corrupt and unscrupulous men who offered themselves as collaborators to the British conquerors. Nevertheless, in some cases they were clan and lineage heads or wealthy persons who were already local leaders - like Chief Idigo of Aguleri – in their villages.

In the economic sphere, colonialism stimulated the participation of women in trade and commerce resulting to the emergence of wealthy and prominent women traders (Mba, 1982). At the same time, colonial administrative and economic reforms such as emphasis on cash crop production offered men greater incentives to venture into large-scale distributive and retail trade. Women became economically vulnerable and dependent on men just as women organisations became less influential in local government and politics. In several ways, colonial administrative innovations discounted the republican spirit of indigenous Igbo political institution and the centrality of women organizations in the socio-political development of Igbo villages. By appointing an individual to represent a village and empowering him to give orders which must be obeyed by everyone else, the democratic ideals of village assembly in Igbo politics and administration was violated.

Coming from a Victorian society with a political culture which strongly espoused the notion that women were better left in the private realm than prompted to the public sphere, colonial officials remained blind to the possibilities that women organizations played active role in local politics and therefore should be encouraged alongside men organizations in the new system of local administration. Consequently, the traditional balance of power was disrupted to favour men. Although instigated by attempts of the British to tax women, the Aba Women Riots of 1929 represent violent expression of opposition to the marginalization of women in the new colonial dispensation (Allen, 1972; Isichei, 1976). According to Amadiume (1995: 50), the causes of the riots ‘included economic disadvantages that women felt under the new system, marginalization of their social organizations, the banning of their religion and the new economic and political advantages that their men were gaining under the new system.’

Based on the findings of the inquiry into the riots (Isichei, 1976), colonial authorities introduced some reforms in the native administration. The changes held out optimism and enthusiasm that faded away too soon. Very little consideration was granted to women organization as the reforms eliminated the possibility of group solidarity. By declaring illegal the use of force or ‘self-help’ by individuals or groups to protect their interests, women were robbed of their most potent weapon of organizing mass action against the men as was the case in the pre-colonial days. The British, in 1901, declared all jural institutions except native courts illegal. Mitiri soon lost its vitality (Allen, 1972).

Demands by political officers and commissioners that women organizations should be encouraged alongside those of the men based on the ‘remarkable character of organization and leadership which some of the
women displayed’ were ignored by the authorities (Allen, 1972: 176). Having lost their political relevance to the new colonial administrative laws, women organizations were reduced to women Christian organizations formed by churches established by European missionaries and market women organizations functioning as pressure groups for narrow economic interests.

However, in response to the need for sustainable development and involvement of women in the development process, governments in the post-colonial era have promoted self-help community development as a development strategy. This strategy has reinvigorated women civil society organizations at the community level. In recent times, development programmes like DFFRI, Better Life, Family Support Programmes, etc have encouraged the formation of women cooperatives and development associations. In addition, women have responded in associational forms to exploitation and oppression of women. Women civil society groups have proliferated not only to contend with these challenges but also to improve and advance the cause of women. The study focuses on local women groups in Aguleri and Umuleri communities.

**Methodology**

The study depended largely on qualitative research instruments. In this connection, elderly women, leaders of women organizations and women activists who are knowledgeable in the history of the conflicts were identified and interviewed. Most of the interviewees and informants were eyewitnesses and participants in the conflicts or individuals who represented their communities and associations in the several meetings, consultations and activities held to work out modalities for bringing the conflicts to a peaceful end.

The non-participant observation technique was adopted in recording patterns of inter-communal interactions involving women of both communities. Preference was given to the non-participant observation technique because it offered the researcher an on-the-spot opportunity to observe the activities of women, paying attention to potential ingredients for conflict implosion and peaceful co-existence. Visits were paid to places which served as frequent meeting points for the women. The bank of River Anambra which served as a major source of water supply to the communities was visited. Also visited were Otuocha market and Motor Park where women interacted while buying, selling and transporting goods and services especially on market days.

The National Archives Enugu holds documents on the conflict. The documents were consulted to provide historical insights into the conflict. In addition to these primary sources of information, there are published and unpublished works, newspaper and newsmagazine reports on the communities. Some data and information for the study were gleaned from these works.
Background to the Conflicts
Aguleri and Umuleri are two neighbouring communities located on the banks of River Anambra in the Anambra East Local government of Anambra State, South-eastern Nigeria. Both communities trace their origin to a common lineage headed by Eri (Afigbo, 1981).

In the nineteenth century, slavery was abolished and legitimate commerce introduced. European merchant companies - French Campagne Française de L'Afrique Occidentale, British John Holt and Royal Niger Company - moved into Otuocha, a portion of land lying on the banks of River Anambra and owned by Aguleri and Umuleri. European companies were interested in the palm produce trade booming in the area. To propagate Christianity, European missionaries of the Roman Catholic Church began to make inroads into Otuocha. By 1900 colonial rule had been established in Southern Nigeria; Aguleri and Umuleri were subjected to effective colonial rule. The thriving commerce and political tranquility lured Yoruba, Hausa and Nupe migrants from Western and Northern Nigeria and migrants from local communities in the Anambra River basin to the sprawling settlement of Otuocha.

Over time each of these groups began to unveil their insatiable lust for Otuocha land. European merchant companies required land to establish trading posts; the Catholic missionaries needed land to build churches and schools to Christianize and provide western education to the local population; local migrants sought land to create residential settlements while British colonial administration appropriated ownership rights of all land as a way of establishing its sovereignty over the colony. The modes in which these desires were expressed ignored indigenous regulations guiding land relations. Contested ownership rights, land commercialization and grabbling defined incipient land relations. In the same way, the response of Aguleri and Umuleri to the growing demand for land was rather reckless and haphazard.

Each community embarked on indiscriminate lease and sometimes outright sale of land in a way that cultivated disaffection, disharmony and incremental bloody conflicts between the two communities (Idigo, 1990; Albert, 1993). In 1855, elders of Eziagulu, a quarter in Aguleri, entered into a treaty ceding a portion of land to the Royal Niger Company. Missionaries of the Roman Catholic Mission, in 1904, also secured a land deal by which land was granted to them by Eziagulu. In 1898, elders of Umuchezi, a quarter in Umuleri, sold a portion of Otuocha land to the Royal Niger Company. Apart from the Europeans, Aguleri and Umuleri, at different times, sold out portions of land to migrant Igbo, Nupe and Hausa settler communities.

In 1900, British colonial administration revoked the powers and authority of the Royal Niger Company. The Niger Lands Transfer Ordinance of 1916 was made to facilitate the transfer of land titles of the Royal Niger Company to the colonial government. Section 2 of the Ordinance transferred the land sold to the Royal Niger Company by Umuleri in 1898 to the Governor of Nigeria. Yet Umuleri interpreted the Ordinance as reverting ownership of the land to
them. On its part, Aguleri saw the Ordinance as providing them a good opportunity to achieve a dream they have nursed for long. That dream was to reassert their ownership of the land. Claiming to be the lawful owners, they argued that the land deal between Umuchezi, Umuleri and the Royal Niger Company in 1898 was a fraud against them because the transaction was conducted and the deal sealed without their knowledge and consent. The struggle between Aguleri and Umuleri over ownership and control of Otuocha land, including a part of it referred to as Agu-Akor land, remains the remote and major cause of the conflicts.

The struggle has been characterized by innumerable spasmodic clashes between the two communities. It appears the 1995 and 1999 clashes were the bloodiest. The immediate cause of the 1995 confrontation has been attributed to the efforts of Dan Ekwevi of Umuleri to build a fuel-dispensing station on Aguleri land. To Aguleri, Ekwevi’s action was a violation of the territorial integrity of Aguleri. The 1999 violent encounter started when Umuleri disrupted the funeral ceremony of Mike Edozie of Aguleri who, according to Umuleri, was the architect of the 1995 mayhem (Onwuzuruihe, 2011). The study, therefore, focuses on the 1995 and 1999 clashes. As noted earlier, the two conflicts are intertwined - the roots of the 1999 clashes are located in that of 1995 - and experienced the highest level of women participation and victimization ever noticed in the entire history of the conflicts (Fagbemi and Nwankwo, 2002: 63).

The Findings: The Role of Women Civil Society Organizations
The following active women civil society organizations were identified in the two communities. They include the association of all married women in Umuleri otherwise known as Umuleri Women Association or Oluokala; Aguleri Women Development Association, comprising all adult women in Aguleri; Anglican Women Organisations in Aguleri and Umuleri, with membership drawn from adherents of the Anglican Church; Catholic Women Organisations in Aguleri and Umuleri, consisting of members of the Catholic denomination and Umuada Association of Aguleri and Umuleri - whose membership is drawn from daughters of the community. While serving as the parent organization, each of these organizations has branches in many urban towns where their members reside except for the Christian organizations and the Umuada associations which do not often operate such branches in the cities.

Both the home and abroad branches of the organizations are administered through elected officials who occupy various administrative positions in the organizations. The organizations also have constitutions that spell out the duties, rights and privileges of the officials as well as rules and regulations guiding actions and conducts of their members. As part of their contributions in sustaining peace, each of the organizations has clauses in its constitution that
reprimand or set out punishment for women whose conduct or comments are adjudged to be capable of instigating disaffection between Aguleri and Umuleri. Barring emergency meetings, all other meetings of mikiri (see Allen, 1972) of the organizations are mostly held in fixed venues and days of the month. However, members of both the parent and abroad branches always hold joint meetings in August of every year – in what has become popular among women communal organizations in South-eastern Nigeria as August meeting - to deliberate on issues affecting them and their communities.

What roles then did the women organizations play in the conflicts? Civil disturbances like ethnic and communal clashes greatly affect women. The confusion and anarchy usually enthroned during and immediately after periods of violent crisis disrupt sources of livelihood and overall socio-economic activities of women. More importantly, their husbands, sons and brothers, who mainly constitute the militant and combative arm of the population, are often injured or killed while some women themselves suffer diverse forms of abuses including rape. The burden of women during the 1999 clash was complicated by the existence of close marriage relationships between indigenes of Aguleri and Umuleri. The two communities have a long-standing tradition of marrying from among themselves. Most mothers and wives in Aguleri are indigenes of Umuleri and vice versa.

At the height of the crises, these categories of women were accused by their husbands’ kinsmen of divulging vital security information to their parents, brothers and relatives in either Aguleri or Umuleri. Consequently, they were viewed and treated as saboteurs. To discourage their alleged sabotaging activities and regain the confidence of their husbands’ kinsmen, the women were compelled to take traditional oath of secrecy irrespective of their religious persuasion. The President of Aguleri Women Development Association shed more light: ‘it was trying moment for us from Umuleri but married in Aguleri. We were put under a lot of pressure to take ritual oaths by our husbands. It was a horrible experience but some of the women took it even against their will’ (interviewed on Friday, 05/01/07). There were also allegations of abduction of the women. The aim of the abduction was to break their marriages, for the women, according to Fagbemi & Nwankwo (2002: 63), were ‘subjected to ritual oaths meant to bind them from returning to their marriages.’ Apart from these ill-treatments, there were threats to the lives of many women still living with their spouses in such marriages. Under the circumstance and the active participation of women in the socio-economic live of their communities, women and women organizations of the two communities could not be left out in the war.

Like their male counterparts, women through their organizations made financial and material contributions towards promoting the war. The Oluokala in Umuleri and Aguleri Women Development Association donated and contributed money to buy foodstuff for the combatants of their respective communities. The women were responsible for preparing and distributing food and water to the combatants. Although these activities may be conceived as
reducing the effects of war, they actually fuelled the war by strengthening the combatants and their resolve to keep fighting. As the war progressed, few young and courageous women were used to ferry arms into the community, and in Aguleri, they voluntarily participated actively in the war by joining the fighting force of Aguleri. An Aguleri woman said: ‘you know there are some young women who feel they can do what men do. They fought alongside with the men’ (interviewed on Thursday, 04/01/07).

Another way women contributed to the conflicts is by recounting and narrating harrowing experiences of previous bloody confrontations to their children. In this regard, one Umuleri interviewee observed: ‘look at that house (pointing to the vandalized and burnt part of the family house). I have just renovated the other part. It was burnt during the crisis. My children will be told what happened to it. At this age is it possible for me to build another house? (interviewed on Saturday, 30/12/06). According to Lindgren (2005: 165) ‘when people narrate experiences in the present, they do not only recall information, they engage in meaning-making practice where individual experiences are connected to larger political and economic processes’. Telling and retelling emotionally charged experiences of war and violence help in depositing such narratives in the individual’s social memory. But individuals share their memories with others which overtime become standardized collective memory of a group. As usual, collective memories and history are often regarded as tokens of communal and ethnic identity. In times of tension and crisis, collective memories and history provide platforms for mobilization and justification for engaging in violent actions and war.

It is in this context that we can understand and explain the last two 1995 and 1999 conflicts. In other words, the conflicts have transformed from a resource to animosity conflict. Animosity conflict is one in which bitter memories of loss, hurt, humiliations of previous conflicts acquire pre-eminence and become significant in renewing and intensifying future conflicts (Ibeanu, 2003: 193). Referred to as ‘new conflicts’ by Kaldor (1999: 123), animosity conflict ‘tend to be nostalgic representations of the past… throwbacks to the past, ancient hatreds that predate the colonial’ or immediate post-colonial period in which the parties ‘make use of powerful narratives that build on memory and tradition’ to mobilize for war.

In spite of all these, women were also involved in managing the conflicts. Members of the Anglican and the Catholic Women Organizations frequently declared separate days of fasting and prayers targeted at ending the war. Members of the organizations were expected to fast and pray on specified days and times and also assembled together for joint prayers. However, the prayers were rarely held in church premises. This is because Our Lady of Victory Catholic Church and Saint Gabriel Anglican Church in Otuocha which would have offered befitting venues for the prayers were razed down at the beginning of the crisis (ASG, 1997). At other times the organizations set aside their
religious differences and held joint prayer sessions. Christian women who were displaced by the war and sought refuge in other places organized fasting and praying sessions.

Apart from the Christian Women Organisations, Umuleri and Aguleri Women Development Associations too identified with the practice of fasting and praying in their desperate search for an end to the war. As the tempo of the war subsided and many families who had fled their communities began to return, the frequency of the prayers were intensified. Church services were partially restored and several of these organizations began to book for special mass and church services in which prayers were offered for peace in Aguleri and Umuleri. The women claimed they had to resort to fasting and prayers because of their strong believe in the efficacy of prayers and their helplessness and inability to influence decisions in a male dominated community where women and their views on matters affecting the generality of the community members do not count.

More than any other women organization, *Umuada* Association commands respect and influence in the affairs of the community of birth or origin of its members. Its opinion or position on any matter becomes a reference point and held in high esteem in the community. No community in Igboland exists without such an association which brings together all daughters – married or single adult women - born into a community; Aguleri and Umuleri are no exceptions. They control activities affecting their natal homes and ensure the well-being of their members. *Umuada* functions as political pressure groups in their natal villages. So influential is the *Umuada* that quarrels and disputes between individuals, husbands and wives, families and clans and villages are referred to *Umuada* for settlement. In the event of disagreement erupting over very important issues affecting members of the community or misunderstanding between wives of the community and their husbands, *Umuada* could be invited to resolve the matter. They frequently intervene at any point when the constitution, culture and tradition of their natal villages are violated and mete out strong sanctions to the offenders. Their decisions on any issue are always seen as final and often accepted by the affected parties (Ibewuike, 2006).

Beyond prayers and fasting, *Umuada* Associations of Aguleri and Umuleri held several meetings and consultations aimed at convincing the men to stop the war. Some of the peace moves helped in preparing the ground for ceasefire and peace negotiations between Aguleri and Umuleri. Other women organizations could not contemplate such actions because of the very low level of influence and control they exercise over the men. Unfortunately, women are neither consulted nor represented in the on-going peace negotiations and boundary demarcations between the two communities.

It is important at this juncture to note the highly commendable role played by the Umuleri *Umuada* Association in returning peace to post-conflict Umuleri community. One major consequence of the Aguleri and Umuleri war of 1995 was the state of insecurity and fear it promoted in the region. Urchins, hoodlums and robbers, some of who are not indigenes of Aguleri and Umuleri
communities or even Anambra State, were hired as mercenaries in the war. Even after they were paid off for participating in the war, they remained in Umuleri. Working in collaboration with criminal-minded jobless school leavers and dropouts in Umuleri, they formed criminal and robbery gangs equipped with remnants of arms and ammunition they retained after the 1995 war. Between 1996 and 1998, the criminal gangs grew in strength and organized successful armed robbery operations in Umuleri. Seemingly impressed by their exploits, more jobless youths of Umuleri origin joined the gangs. One of these gangs led by Obanyeli Ikeli of Umuleri mobilized the youths of Umuleri that attacked Aguleri sympathizers who had congregated for the funeral ceremony of Chief Mike Edozie in Aguleri in April 1999. This sparked off the 1999 war.

After the 1999 war, Umuleri became a safe haven for the gangs. They became so lawless and powerful that they assassinated or threatened to assassinate everyone in Umuleri that openly opposed their activities. Such persons had their properties vandalized or burnt or their close relatives were attacked and sometimes killed by the gangs, where they could not be reached. For instance, Chief Anikpeh Nwalioba, father of the President, Umuleri General Assembly, Chief Gabriel Anikpeh was killed by the criminals. Similarly, Chief Onyeabosi Ifediora, elder brother of Mr. Simon Ifediora, Chairman Umuleri General Assembly, Lagos branch, was also assassinated. In fact, so desperate were the gangs that they forced their victims to swear to an oath preventing them (victims) from divulging information about the hideouts and activities of the gangs.

_Umuada_ Association of Umuleri took the challenge of reconciling the gangs with the community. They held several peace talks with Umuleri leaders, elders and executives of Umuleri General Assembly on the one hand and representatives of the gangs on the other hand. The parties finally agreed to the _Umuada_ peace proposal which included _iko mmee_ (blood covenant) sacrifice for all those killed, oath of allegiance to the peace proposal and reconstituting the gangs to provide vigilant services to the community. _Umuada_ met all the conditions including payment of ‘mobilization fee’ of seventy to eighty thousand naira to the gangs before they could subscribe to the peace proposal. Although gradually fading away, oath taking (_igbandu or ighu iyi_) and _iko mmee_ are important phenomena in Igbo cosmology and are commonly practiced in Igbo communities (Ekejiuba, 1971; Onwuzuruijbo, 2011). Among Igbo communities of Anambra River basin, these practices have remained prevalent and persistent. As noted by a woman leader in Aguleri: ‘iko mmee is an age old practice among our people. Our people do not joke with it. It involves offering appeasement sacrifices to the gods whenever they are defiled. Wars which lead to shedding of human blood defile the earth goddess, _ala_. Since ancient times it has been used to extract reverence for _ala_ and _ighu iyi_ has been used to ensure that people respect covenants and agreements they contract’ (interviewed on 30/12/07).
Oath taking or *igbandu* could be administered to individuals, clans or villages and involves swearing in the name of some powerful deities to embark on an agreed line of action or never to divulge secret information. *Igbandu* is accomplished through several ways: by drawing blood from the veins of the concerned persons or representatives of the interested parties, mixing the blood in a container and eating parts of kola nuts dipped into the blood (Ekejiuba, 1971; Afigbo, 1981) or having all the involved persons to sip from the same gouge of palm wine. *Iko mmee* takes the form of a sacrifice performed to appease *ala* (earth goddess) whenever it is desecrated. *Ala* abhors shedding of blood especially among kinsmen or kinswomen. Of all acts, murder is considered the most sacrilegious by *ala*. Murder can only be pardoned through *iko mmee* rites. So any action which promotes bloodshed is deemed as desecrating *ala*. Until the prescribed sacrifices are made, tradition demands that the affected persons or communities desist from dining and drinking, befriending and inter-marrying or any other forms of interaction (see Onwuzuruigbo, 2011).

**Conclusion**

Although in a few instances women contributed in sustaining and facilitating the conflicts, women’s roles were mostly mediatory. Women are usually perceived as more peaceful and pacific than men. Even where they have been known to have actively participated in promoting violent crises, women are still seen as symbols of patience, tenderness and meekness. Socialization contributes immensely in reinforcing these stereotypes as women are socialized to be wives, caregivers and mothers capable of mediating conflicts in their families and communities. Apart from mediating in the conflicts, women undertook reconnaissance activities with a view to determining the chances for peace and facilitating communication and peace negotiations between the feuding communities.

Women are interested in conflict prevention and peace-building because conflicts engender gender-specific consequences for women. Though all segments of the society suffer the pains and adverse consequences of war, existing inequalities between men and women expose women to greater sufferings during and after violent crises or war. It is women and their children who are subjected to gender-based crimes and other violations of their fundamental human rights (Fagbemi & Nwankwo, 2002; UNESCO, 2003). No wonder, women account for the greatest number of refugees and displaced persons after every violent conflict. Yet women are marginalized in formal decision-making; they are neither consulted nor their interests considered in taking decisions to go to war or to avoid it. Anyhow, they hardly avoid being active participants, either as promoters of war or peace facilitators, during and after crises periods.
NOTES

i For instance, in 1986, Imo State, one of the states in South-eastern Nigeria published a ‘Blueprint for Rural Development’ in the State. According to the document, town unions and local civil society groups are to ‘disseminate information about government policies, mould public opinion, raise funds, expand and extend the utilities, undertake and encourage group farming activities and help in the maintenance of law and order.’ The women groups are to diffuse innovation and implement programmes. See Nwosu, C. 1997. Proliferation of Kinship Institutions and the Emergence of Conflict in Governance role in Igboland: A Case Study of Ubomiri Autonomous Community in Dele Olowu and John Erero (eds.) Indigenous Governance in Nigeria. OAU Ille-Ife: Department of Public Administration pp. 42-70.

ii The law setting up DFFRI stipulated that

1. The Directorate shall … encourage communities to form their own village, community or town improvement or development unions or association under their own democratically elected leaders to serve as an apex organization for mobilizing their communities for the successful participatory implementation of all rural development programmes as initiated by the Directorate, each tier of government or by the communities themselves.


References


**Archival Documents**


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