

## **History, Land and Conflict in Nigeria: The Aguleri-Umuleri Experience, 1933-1999.**

**Nwachukwu J. Obiakor**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper studies the place of history, and land in the outbreak of conflicts in Nigeria, with focus on the Aguleri-Umuleri communities' experience. Both communities were engulfed in intractable conflicts over the ownership of Otuocha land. Aside the contest over land, both communities have been engaged in the reconstruction of their history with each claiming to be the direct descendant of Eri, who both refer to as their progenitor. Studies exist on the Aguleri-Umuleri conflicts, but these works focused only on the contest over Otuocha land as the sole cause of the conflict, neglecting the aspect on the perceived distortion of history, which appear to be the underlying factor. This paper addresses this imbalance. The paper adopts the multi-disciplinary approach, as well as the thematic method of presentation. The paper basically draws from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are derived from oral interviews, while the secondary sources are mainly obtained from books and journal articles. The conflict led to loss of lives and property, destruction of the economic base of the belligerent communities, high crime wave, and historical revisionism of the area. Though the conflict may seem to have ceased, the issues at stake remain unresolved. This paper among other things recommends a revision of the Eri mythology to establish the true nature of the relationship between the two communities.*

## **Introduction**

The history of Nigeria is replete with cases of conflicts. These include inter-ethnic, inter-communal, inter-religious and inter-personal, among other forms of conflicts. Conflict is a part of human interactions in every society, because individuals and groups, in a bid to satisfy their selfish interests or even protect their possessions, often engage in conflict with one another. The root cause of group/individual conflicts in every society is the struggle for scarce resources. In other words, conflict is an inevitable product of cohabitation or co-existence of individuals or groups in pursuit of limited values. Various factors make conflict inevitable and inexorable; among which are 'power differentials' (Lockwood, 1966: 134-146), which provide some groups or individuals with the opportunity of exploiting the others; distribution of scarce resources and the pursuit of different goals and interests.

Land as a major factor of production has been at the centre of most conflicts in Nigeria. Aguleri and Umuleri are two sister communities co-habiting within themselves, in the eastern bank of the Omambala River, in Anambra East L.G.A of Anambra State, without a clear delineation of boundary; fighting over rightful ownership of Otuocho land. Although it appears that both communities share the same descent, but the indigene-settler' syndrome tend to distort the fraternal relationship. This led to the distortion in the reconstruction of their history, as Umuleri community changed their name to Umueri, to substantiate their claim of being the direct descent of Eri, their acclaimed progenitor.

Aguleri and Umueri communities have been engulfed in conflicts which took the form of legal tussles, and physical conflicts over Otuocho land since 1933. Even though the conflict of 1933, and other succeeding conflicts, witnessed the use of crude weapons like sticks, cutlasses, and cudgels, with

minimal casualty, it contributed in widening the gap between these sister communities. Pockets of conflicts were intermittently recorded until 1999, when the situation degenerated into a full blown war. Sophisticated weapons were arbitrarily used in these wars, which led to the death of many people, as well as the destruction of property worth hundreds of millions of naira.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The outbreak of Conflict in human societies is as old as society itself. This has often resulted in the loss of both human lives, and material resources and as well, created acrimonious relationships among the groups involved. The growth and development processes of the affected communities or groups have also been impeded by conflicts. Conflict is influenced by a number of causative factors which draw inspiration from certain theories of conflict. This is applicable to all forms of conflict in Nigeria, which include communal, political, religious and economic conflicts.

In explaining the Aguleri and Umuleri communal conflicts, the Economic, as well as the Human Needs Theory of conflict is considered as the most suitable theory that could be utilized in explaining the nature and causes of the conflicts. Economic theory posits that there is a tendency to ascribe economic reasons to the existence and endurance of conflict (Falati, 2006:49). This is based on the premise that conflict tend to occur when people fight over material resources. Economic theorists specify resources as the bedrock of conflict and the struggle to exploit these economic resources could result in conflict between the opposing forces. On the other hand, the Human Needs theory as propounded by Abraham Maslow implies that every human being wants the basic needs of life, which include; physical, material, and psychological, social, and spiritual needs that ought to be

assessed for optimal utility. The denial or frustration of the above needs of men could result in conflict (Ezirim, 2010:20). Human needs for survival, protection, creativity, and identity are shared by all people, are irrepressible and have components that are not easy to give up (Falati: 22). These components among others include need for recognition, identity, security and autonomy. These needs are irrepressible in human societies and thus could lead to conflict if threatened. When people are denied access to some political, economic and or social privileges on the basis of 'non-indigeneship' and 'settlership' conflict is bound to breakout (Enuka, 2007:60).

In other words, the threat of eviction from or trespass in a land where a group of people have settled and regarded as their place of abode will certainly result in conflict. The Aguleri community fighting to reclaim their ancestral land located at Otuocha, and the Umuleri community fighting to possess their place of settlement for over two centuries can both be captured theoretically by the Economic, and Maslow's Human Needs theories of conflict.

### **Inadequate Knowledge of History and Land as Major Causes of the Aguleri-Umuleri Conflicts**

The place of land in pre-colonial African societies cannot be overemphasized, especially those inhabiting the equatorial rain forests. Aside from its economic importance, land also served various purposes, like payment of dowries, reparation for murder, and other serious crimes. Land were also used as collateral and as a medium of exchange. Land, thus, became the symbol of wealth and social standing in the pre-colonial Nigeria societies. Consequently, the quest for acquisition of land led to occasional outbreak of conflicts. Also, the acquisition of land by European trading companies, colonial government, and missionaries, for the establishment

of churches, schools, administrative infrastructure, and residential quarters brewed inter-communal conflicts in most Igbo communities. These lands located mostly in border areas were either granted or seized. In some cases, neighboring communities became divided along the conflicting European interests. The Awka-Amawbia, Aguleri-Umueri conflicts, among others, are cases where the role of Europeans in creating and intensifying land disputes is glaring. This represents cases of grant and counter-grant, sale and counter-sale to Europeans, of land that had commonly been used (Ekeh 2011:2).

The question, “who owns the land?” is associated with most inter/intra community conflicts in several African communities. At the centre of the conflict between Aguleri and Umueri was Otuocha, a river beach on the eastern part of the Omambala (Anambra) River, which is a tributary of the River Niger. The land stretches about 92 metres inland; and bounded on the north east by *Emu* stream, a tributary of Omambala River; on the south east and south west, by Akor River, another tributary of Omambala River (Chinwuba, 1981:1). Otuocha became a popular port of call for European missionaries and people from the Igbo hinterland in the nineteenth century. It is on record that Aguleri community, through Eze Idigo I, the reigning king of Aguleri, and some elders granted a portion of land at Otuocha in Aguleri Igbo (Gloria Ibo, as is referred to, contained in various colonial documents), to the Royal Niger company on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September, 1891. Consequently, Umuleri chiefs led by the Umuchezi River discovering the gains of lease of lands to Europeans sold a portion of the Otuocha land also to the Royal Niger Company on 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1898. Lease were entered into between the two communities, and different European groups, over portion of Otuocha land, and these beneficiaries include the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in

1920 for the purpose of erecting a church building, John Holt Group in 1916, and *Compagne Francaise de l'Afrique Occidentale* (CFAO) in 1931.<sup>5</sup>

It appears that the material gains that accrued to both communities, from the lease of lands, aggravated the tension over land ownership. Accordingly, the activities of the Europeans severed the relationship between Aguleri and Umuleri communities. This view was corroborated by Justice W. H. Hurley, the Judge in one of the matters between the two communities over Otuocha land. In his judgement he stated that:

Umuleri people only instituted the 1933 action on the grounds that they wanted rents, which Aguleri people were getting. Perhaps they (Umuleri) had not realized the value of lease to commercial firms before their own grants to Royal Niger Company in 1898.

The contention between Aguleri and Umuleri over the exclusive ownership of Otuocha, were both communities inhabit, took them through series of litigations and fratricidal bloodletting. It does appear that these conflicts dates back to the beginning of both community's history as it centred on the question, on which of the communities settled first and had prior claim of Otuocha.

Eri factor in the historical origin of Aguleri and Umuleri communities is another central factor in the conflicts between the duo. This, paradoxically, formed a divisive factor rather than a unifying factor. It is an established fact that the two communities are in conflict over who among them is the rightful and direct descendant of Eri. This is because the direct descendants should be in a rightful position to lay claim to the ownership of the land in contest. Although, neither of the two communities ever denied each other of the claim of Eri

ancestry, what is in contest is which of the two communities is primo genial in the Eri heritage. The Umuleri community claim the headship of the Eri clan, and this explains the reason behind their changing their name in the recent past from Umuleri to ‘Umueri’, meaning the children of Eri. According to an account of Eri genealogy, as advanced by Umuleri people, Eri was a warrior, hunter, and polygamist, who married many wives, among whom was Iguedo. The union between Iguedo and Eri gave birth to Ogbunike, Awkuzu, Umuleri and Nando, (Interview with Ike Manafa). This, the Aguleri people strongly oppose. Another view, as advanced by Aguleri people, has it that Umuleri are descendants of Ulu Eri, the first fruit of an affair between Iguedo, the pretty daughter of Agulu, the first son of Eri, and Okebo, a trader from Arochukwu, (Interview with Ike Manafa). Consequently, Umuleri people appear, from this account, to be the children of Ulu Eri (*Umu ulu Eri*), and their claim to the direct descent of Eri raises a big question, and thus call for further study to ascertain the authenticity of the claims.

The name Aguleri (Agulu Eri) which seem to have been derived from the name of the first son of Eri, “the evidence of Eri’s grave at Okpu Ivite Aguleri, the annual memorial feast of Eri (*Oriri obibia Eri*)” and the existence of *OBU GAD* (The palace of Gad, the father of Eri), seem to authenticate the claim by Aguleri community of being the direct descendant of Eri. There is also a tradition which subsist till date, where an Eze Nri (the Traditional Ruler of Nri, a community in the present Anaocha Local Government Area of Anambra State, which occupy a place of prominence in Igboland), before coronation and installation, is required to perform some rites, after which he receives the staff of office from Eze Aguleri (Interview with Eze Chukwuemeka Eri). This tradition seem to give credence to Aguleri claim of Eri patriarchy.

## **Nature and Course of the Conflicts**

The conflict that engulfed Aguleri and Umuleri communities over the ownership and control of Otuocha is multifaceted. This is because the sister communities exploited various means, which included litigations, wars and every other means deployed to claim the exclusive ownership and control of Otuocha. The commoditization of land with the advent of colonial rule encouraged competition over the control of lease to Europeans in Otuocha. This competition always brewed animosity which led to the escalation of the conflicts by the newer generations, who do not even know the genesis of the conflicts, but engage in them just because their ancestors did. This situation made the conflicts almost insoluble. The struggle over the ownership of Otuocha land took the Aguleri and Umuleri communities through litigations in courts of competent jurisdiction, both within and outside the shores of Nigeria. Court actions were instituted by the two communities in the Native Courts, West African Court of Appeal (WACA), and the Privy Council in London. After Nigeria's Independence in 1960, the cases were also adjudicated on at the Onitsha and Otuocha High Courts respectively, the Federal Court of Appeal, and terminated at the Supreme Court of Nigeria in 1984.

The first court action instituted over the Otuocha land was in 1920 at the instance of the Umuleri community. According to Eze R.A. Idigo, "the court action was sequel to the expulsion of the people of Umuleri by the Aguleri people from Omambala beach in 1920". The dispute over Otuocha arose again in 1932. This was because the Anam people drove the Umuleri people away from their lands (Interview Ejinna Iveacho). The litigations instituted by the two communities were entertained and Rulings/Judgements entered in favour and against both at one time or another. These court judgements in no mean way increased the tempo of the

conflict, because these communities based on these judgments, continued to lay claim to the ownership of Otuocha land.

The legal tussle over Otuocha land reached its peak in 1982. The Umuleri community, not satisfied with the ruling of the Court of Appeal in Enugu, filed an appeal at the Supreme Court in Lagos. The five man panel, headed by Justice Ayo Irikefe, allowed the appeal of the appellants (Umuleri) by restoring the judgment of the Onitsha High Court. The High Court affirmed that Otuocha was an unoccupied piece of land that laid fallow, and that the Umuleri were the first to settle there in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The court still failed to grant the right of exclusive ownership to Umuleri. The Supreme Court faulted the judgment of Justice Belgore on the grounds that it never found any proof of effective ownership on which it relied upon to adjudicate the matter in favour of Aguleri, except their recent settlement which was a recent development (Chinwuba:32).

The claim of exclusive ownership, and struggle for outright possession of the Otuocha land by the people of Aguleri and Umuleri communities also took a devastating dimension of physical warfare. The year 1933 marked the beginning of a new era in the claims and counter claims over Otuocha. This was because the two communities went to war for the first time in contest for Otuocha and Aguako lands. Although the 1933 conflict lasted for only one day, yet it made a mark in Aguleri-Umuleri relationship. This marked the genesis of strained relations between the two sister communities. The immediate cause of the war was the trespass into Otuocha land by some Umuleri indigenes to erect trading stalls without proper approval from their Aguleri landlords<sup>30</sup>. The rent accruable to the indigenous people from lease of lands by European traders led to the emergence of ownership crisis which was non-existent before the European

incursion into the *Omambala* River beach. The development brewed animosity and hatred between the two communities. In a bid to establish their right of exclusive ownership, the Umuleri community instituted a court action against the Aguleri community in the colonial court (Interview with Ike Manafa). The 1933 conflict was prosecuted with crude weapons which included machetes, clubs and cudgels among others. Few people sustained injuries and no death was recorded. This could be attributed to the fact that colonial security agents intervened on time to put the conflict to a stop (Chinwuba: 32).

The attempt by the Anambra County Council to change the name of the disputed land from Otuocha to Otuocha-Aguleri incited another legal tussle which culminated in a war in 1964. The decision of the Privy Council London on the Otuocha land matter gave the Aguleri community the impression that they had won the case and that the disputed territory belonged to them. It was alleged that one Chief Hon. Paul Ndigwe, a member of the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly, and Chief Barr. R.A Chinwuba, the secretary of Aguleri Youths Association (AYA) influenced the Minister for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs of the former Eastern region, Chief John U. Nwodo to obtain the Official Gazette (ENLG.138 of 1964) containing the change from Otuocha to Otuocha-Aguleri (Chinwuba, 1981). The Umuleri community, embittered by the publication, challenged the action of the honourable minister at the Onitsha High Court in suit No.0/2/65. Civil war broke out, but Umuleri got reprieve when the Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu's government withdrew the said publication. While the Gazette was in force, both communities were battle ready so much that the slightest provocation was enough for the communities to explode. It was only the appearance of *Ada* masquerade of Umuleri on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December, 1964 that triggered off the war of 1964

(Interview with Austin Okeke aka “Igwe”). The Aguleri people alleged that the masquerade was on rampage and destroyed the property of Aguleri people. In order to control the ‘excesses’ of the said masquerade that appears annually, conflict ensued between the two already tensed communities. The conflict was fought with improved weaponry from what obtained in the 1933 war. Dane guns, flint-lock guns, cap guns, bows and arrows, machets and cudgels were used in the war that lasted for few days. This led to loss of lives and property.

This development further worsened the relationship between Aguleri and Umuleri communities. It is pertinent to state that ego and pride had in no mean way influenced the outbreak of war in Otuocha, although the main cause of the conflict in the Otuocha area was the tussle for ownership and control of Otuocha, but hatred, jealousy and suspicion which characterize the Aguleri-Umuleri relations had its own role in the conflicts. The 1984 Supreme Court judgment would have ordinarily buried the Aguleri and Umuleri conflicts over Otuocha. This was not to be, as the two communities resorted once again to war over the land. The immediate cause of September, 1995 conflict was the allegations and counter-allegations of trespass at the Agu Akor land. It was alleged that Chief Basil Orakwue of Ogbu, Umuleri sited his block industry at the Umuanezunu-Aguleri family land at Agu-Akor. The said land is exactly within the *Owakalia Eze Obili*, the Agu Akor Royal groove and beach, where the family (Umuanezunu) worship the ruling spirit of luck (Interview with Ike Manafa). This matter was still being investigated by the police when another Umuleri man, Ogbuevi Dan Ekwevi, also known as ‘*Okwu Oto Ekene Eze*’ began to build his Petrol Station at another portion of the Agu Akor. On questioning by the Aguleri people, he claimed to have bought the said portion of land from one Ikeli, who migrated from Aguleri and settled

in Umuleri, where he was practicing his profession. The said Ikeli claimed to have also bought the land from an undisclosed family in Aguleri. The Aguleri community thus issued a 'stop work' order. This order was not obeyed, and on enquiry by one Chief Hon. Taiko Nwata, a prominent Aguleri man to ascertain why the workers at the site flouted the community 'stop work' order, he was beaten up and murdered. This attracted the attention of people at Ama Umuala, Eziagulu Aguleri, who raised alarm and alerted the police.

This development drew the ire of the already provoked Aguleri youths, who without waiting for the report of the police investigation, took up arms against their Umuleri counterparts. The war of September, 1995 was an entirely different scenario from what obtained in the history of inter-communal wars in the neighbourhood. Sophisticated weapons were deployed to the battle field. The questions here were, when were these weapons procured? For what purpose? who procured them? The answers to these questions would go a long way in providing the real reasons for the undeserving war. The crises lasted from 30<sup>th</sup> September through 6<sup>th</sup> October, 1995 and was halted through the intervention of the then Military Administrator of Anambra State, Colonel Mike Attah; and the Assistant Inspector General of Police (AIG) Benin zone, Alhaji Kumasi (Newswatch, 1999:16). A Three-Man Commission of Inquiry was constituted to probe the causes of the war on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of October 1995 by the Military Administrator of the State. Members of the commission were Hon. Justice Moses O. Nweje (Rtd), Chairman, Chief B.C. Odenigbo, and Mr. S.S.C Oguagha as members. The Commission of Inquiry completed its assignment and submitted its report to the Government. The Government in turn, released the findings of the Commission in February, 1997. The recommendations of the commission inter alia included;

- i. that government should endeavour to reduce to the barest minimum, the area of contact and friction, between Aguleri and Umuleri; and
- ii. in addition to the urbanization of Otuocha already effected by the designation of the urban areas order-1995, the boundary between Aguleri should be demarcated with large "streaming" beacons.

In an apparent retaliation for the 1995 war allegedly provoked by Aguleri, the government's lackadaisical attitude and the ever-growing animosity between the two belligerent communities went into the 1999 war which seem to be the 'War of Wars', The government's lackadaisical attitude hinged on her abandoning the implementation of the white paper of the Justice Nweje Judicial Commission of Inquiry. This situation failed to address the issues raised, thereby opening up more avenues for attacks on both sides. The belligerents were freely grooming youths for war without any hindrance from the government.

The death of Chief Hon. Mike E. Edozie, the then Chairman of Anambra East Local Government Area during the 1995 war was the major incident that triggered off the 1999 war of wars. Chief Edozie, who incidentally had fraternal relations with the belligerents, in the sense that his paternal and maternal homes were Aguleri and Umuleri respectively, was accused by the Umuleri of taking sides with his paternal home, Aguleri, in the conflict. The plans by Aguleri community, to give their son, Chief Edozie, a befitting burial in recognition of his role in the affairs of Aguleri community allegedly infuriated the Umuleri community. There was also anger on the part of Umuleri on

why Agueri would want to celebrate the former chairman who was indicted in the report of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry and, who was supposed to be neutral in the matter owing to his official position and family background. There were rumours, threats and counter-threats which created a tense and crisis prone environment in the Otuocha area. The failure of the government of Wing Commander Emmanuel Ukaegbu to give prompt attention to security threats, security breaches, that emanated from the Otuocha area, and the implementation of the white paper of the judicial commission set up by his predecessor, Colonel Mike Attah escalated the conflict. The belligerents at this time were busy raising army and procuring arms and ammunition in preparation for a looming war. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of April 1999, during the burial ceremony of Chief Mike Edozie, some armed youths allegedly swooped on the mourners at the venue of the funeral ceremony<sup>50</sup>. Pandemonium ensued as the youths allegedly dispersed mourners, shot at the crowd and killed many people, which included Emmanuel Isidienu and Ejike Mokwe, who were among the leaders of the Aguleri youths. War broke out immediately.

The magnitude of the war between Aguleri and Umuleri in 1999 has never been witnessed within the South Eastern region in the post-civil war Nigeria (Ekeh, 2011). The 1999 war was a violent departure from what obtained in the previous conflicts fought by the belligerents. In the past conflicts, fighting was sporadic and short-lived and with few or no deaths or destruction of property. They were characterized by threats and counter-threats of exterminating one another. The 1999 war provided the opportunity for them to test their strength as well as execute their threats of exterminating each other. It does appear, Umuleri community, apprehensive of the rumour going round decided to be on the offensive by striking first, and Aguleri claiming that "this was

an unprovoked attack on them by Umuleri", deployed every weapon in their arsenal to prosecute the war.

## **Conclusion**

Cases of inter-communal conflicts have become prevalent in Nigeria. This is a common place in the relations between communities. Land is the major causative factor for the persistent cases of communal conflicts. The 'indigene-settler' syndrome is another issue that promotes inter-communal conflicts in Nigeria. Although this is land-oriented, it accounts for over a third of the inter-communal conflicts that have erupted in Nigeria since the colonial times. Prior to the incursion of the European explorers, missionaries and finally colonists, inter-communal cum group relations was cordial, save minor misunderstandings characteristic of every human relations. These misunderstandings were amicably resolved by the parties involved. Since the incursion of the Europeans on Africa soil and the consequent redrawing of boundaries for their administrative convenience, communities have been left in conflict over the ownership of one land or the other. This dangerous phenomenon has impeded the socio-politico-economic development of most communities. These conflicts have created increased animosity, sense of fear and insecurity among the people that once shared fraternal relations. This has posed a great threat to the security and development of the concerned communities, states and the country at large.

This work studied the case of inter-communal conflict with respect to the Aguleri-Umuleri communal conflicts. This conflict over the ownership of Otuocha, a land at the bank of the Omambala River, has raged since 1933 and terminated with a full fledged war, reminiscent of conventional warfare in 1999. Aguleri and Umuleri communities are two sister communities that trace their historical descent to a patriarch,

Eri. Although there are various accounts of the Eri mythology as postulated by both communities, which they laid claim to Eri direct descent, none of them have denied the other, the Eri descent. This goes to authenticate their historical affinity. Despite their close historical ties, the people of Aguleri and Umuleri communities have been at each other's throat for decades. Prior to the outbreak of the conflict, the people lived side-by-side, farmed, fished and commonly used the land in question. However, the coming of European traders and missionaries, with the consequent commoditization of land, intensified and widened the avenue for interaction and also, created the ground for persistent frictions between the two communities. The lease and counter-lease of land at Otuocha, by European trading companies like the United Africa Company (UAC), later Royal Niger Company (RNC); John Holt Plc, among others, exposed the economic values of land to both communities, hence the claim and counter-claim, over Otuocha land.

The conflict between Aguleri and Umuleri communities over the ownership of Otuocha has continued to rear its ugly head from generation to generation, but every generation manages the conflict as it affects them. This study recommends that a thorough study be carried out to ascertain the direct descendant, or even review the Eri mythology. This will sustain the perceived peace and reconciliation in the Otu Ocha area.

**Nwachukwu J. Obiakor**

Department of History and International Studies  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

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