



Youth and Violence in Ebiraland

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SULEIMAN, Sunday.
Department of Political Science,
Ahmadu Bella University, Zaria, Nigeria

Abstract

Ebiraland, in Kogi Central Senatorial District of Kogi State has been seen as hotspot because of the protracted political violence which has claimed over 1000 lives and property worth several millions of Naira destroyed between 29th May, 1999 and March, 2008. At a point in 2008, some concerned citizens had called on the President, Umar Musa Yar'adua to declare the 'State of Emergency' in the area. People who had peacefully lived together for several decades, share similar religious and cultural values, and have inter-married, suddenly became enemies. Neighboring communities and towns have openly declared war against each other. Cousins and other close relations who belong to opposing political parties and clans have killed themselves in brutal ways. Youths in the area have been variously identified as playing a central role in the violence. This paper attempts to critically assess the roles been played by youths, as they are seen as easy and cheap vessels that can readily be manipulated by the self-centred politicians.

Keywords: Violence, Political Violence, Youths

Introduction

Youths are an increasingly compelling subject for study in Africa and in Nigeria in particular, entering into political space in highly complex ways, youths as victims of circumstances and the manipulation of older people in power; they are mostly seen as unruly, destructive and dangerous forces that require containment. Traversing these notions, youths enter political space as saboteurs; their potential for political sabotage comes from their complex subjugation to contests, and to their own power for action, responses, and subversion in context of political definition.

The political/communal violence that often times engulf Ebiraland is on the surface viewed as clan related conflict. Deeper understandings suggest that, beyond clan's struggle for supremacy and recognition, the activities of the politicians play a very crucial role in starting and spreading the violence across the land. In this violence, youth are believed to be a potent tool been used by politician and other principal actors whenever there is an outbreak of violence.

Corresponding Author:

Suleiman, Sunday. Department of Political Science, Ahmadu Bella University, Zaria, Nigeria.
Email: suleimansunday@gmail.com

Conceptual Consideration

(a) Violence

Scholars do not agree on exactly what constitutes violence, noting that it permeates daily life in many parts of the modern world. William (1991) looks at violence as a keyword. He identifies seven senses of violence; aggressive behaviours, vehement conduct, infringement on property or dignity, the use of physical force, and threat, or dramatic portrayal of any of the above. Riches (1986) argues that what is generally called violence can be political or symbolic, visible or invisible (as in witchcraft), physical or emotional, and can stem from precedence to the first in each of these dichotomies, restricting the use of the term violence to practical, physical, visible, and personal physical forces that people use to achieve goals. In this instrumental view, interactions in which physical hurt is either absent or not readily apparent, even if it may have been intended or implicit, is not violence.

(b) Political Violence

Political violence encompasses over state sponsored or tolerated violence (William,1991), but may also include action taken or not by the state or its agents with the express intent of realising certain, ethnic, and political goals in the realm of public affairs, especially affairs of the state or even of social life in general. These may or may not be direct violence. In so far as to create, justify, excuse, explain, or enforce hierarchies of difference and relations of frequently, are act of state, even though states themselves may not appear on the surface be primary agents. They may be politicians who have direct access to the machinery of government or politicians who are bent on capturing state power.

(c) Youth

It is a common place of much research on youth cultures and identities that the youth category lacks clear definition and in some situations may be based on one's social circumstances rather than chronological age or cultural position. In a given culture, preadolescent individuals may count as youth, while in their 30s or 40s may be included in this category. And youth as a cultural stage often marks the beginning of a long term, even lifelong, engagement in practices, whether its practitioners continue to be included in the youth category or not.

(d) Youth and Violence

Having discussed, the concepts of youth and violence, there is also a need to establish whether there is a correlation between youth and violence. Scholars seem to have unanimously agreed that there is a strong causal links between youth and violence. Sykes (1999) reports that youth, particularly those in the developing countries, are unable to secure steady work, engage in acts of violence and excessive consumption: she argues that these are acts that produce alienation and consequently strip the young men (youth) of identity.

Vigil (1988) takes a rather mild or positive view, by suggesting that despite their violent activities, gang provides a sense of self-identity and serve as a passage to adulthood. There is a problem with this description: most gangs formed by youth are associated with violence, which most societies do not sanction. This surrogate and illegitimate identity is held to be an inadequate replacement for legitimate cultural institutions such as the family or the school.

These differing perspectives on youth violence are especially clear in research on youth. West (1999) identifies two major stands in this scholarship. The first, is a Western Psychological approach that asserts that exposure to violence leads to youth's loss of innocence; proponents argue that such young people go on to perpetuate violence throughout their lives, either as victims of violence or it perpetrators. (Boothby , 2000).

The second approach centres on cultural agency and understands youth as able to adapt effectively to violent situations in culturally specific ways. (Peters & Richards 1998, West 1999). Even when these two perspectives are combined, the romantic belief in a "lost generation" as the ultimate victims of violence gives way to an analysis that recognizes both young people's agency in conflict period, and its very real constraints (Assal & Ferrel 1992). Thus as producers and recipients of violence alike, youth maintain their agency as cultural and political actors in any society.

The Political History of Ebiraland

The dominant ethnic group that inhabits the area formerly known as Igbira Division in the then Kabba Province is Ebira. The people speak the Ebira language, distinct, but not unrelated to other languages in Nigeria. The whole area is characterized by hills, a continuation of the Kururuku highland. Most of the rocks are so eroded that they now form a lot of landscapes.

The Ebiras had in the past lived together in clans and sub-clans. One can easily guess the clan origin of individuals from the type of salutations and taboos prevalent in any particular locality. Some of the totemic values and symbols the clan identified which include: eagle, lion, crocodile, leopard and so on. The reason for this type of adherence to these values and symbols was to promote social and political bonds among the members and also to motivate a sense of security.

There is a scanty work on the socio-political history of Ebiraland. A date between 14th and 15th centuries is been suggested for the foundation of the three states that formed Kwarafa confederacy, namely Jukuns, Ebira and Idomas (Hamman, 1963). But this date might not be realistic for the Ebira presence in this area. This is because the Ebira tradition concerning this period says they were part of the movement that led to the establishment of the Idoma Chiefdom. Tentatively, the date between 12th and 14th centuries has been suggested. This period is best described as Ebira pre-history as they had not yet become a distinct group from the rest of Apa kingdom either in name or language. The issues surroundings the migration patterns of the Ebiras have been adequately treated by the aspects in Ebira history (Yakubu; 1968, Ohiare: 1988 and Ahmadu: 2004)

In their present location in Kogi state central, Ebira has five districts namely; Okengwen, Adavi, Eika, Eganyi; and Ihima named after the five sons of Ebira. Each of these districts has a strong and dynamic clannish structure as well as highly respected cultural values and beliefs. Some of the clans are historically related, as such share the same totemic values. Also, notable cultural festivals like Ekuechi and Ehane are widely observed by all the Districts and clans across the land, clan faithful and politicians regardless their religious affiliations oftentimes, through their support to their respective clans. This is to ensure the survival and the political relevance of the clans. This singular support has been identified as one of the catalysts for political violence in Ebiraland (Otu: 2008) because politicians have equated clan popularity with political popularity.

Recent Political Violence in Ebiraland

To many, violence in recent times has become a daily occurrence in Ebiraland and it has also been given a wide media coverage. This is the nature of the strategic location of the area particularly Okene which is the political headquarters of the land where most of the violent political activities start from. Okene is centrally located as it links: the Eastern, Western and Northern part of the country. For instance, if you are traveling to Lagos or Enugu from Abuja, by road you must pass through Okene, also you can't avoid Okene if you are traveling to Abuja or Lokoja from Lagos. Between August 1999 and March 2008, virtually all the five Districts in Ebiraland have witnessed severe political violence (Ebicom news: 2008). In June 1999, there was a month-long violence between two communities in Adavi Districts; about 20 people were reported killed while over a hundred houses were razed down by angry youths. Shortly after that, the communities of Oboroke and Ikuehi in Ihima District engaged in violent over the chieftaincy stool of Obogbanyi and who should produce Okehi Local Government Chairmanship zoned to the District. As a result of this violence human and material losses were suffered by the people.

In March 2007, violence broke out between Emani clans and it allies on one hand and Ohiongwa clan on the other in the same Ihima District over who has the right between Emani and Ohiongwa to pass through a territory, regarded as sacred during Ekuechi festival. Days later it took a political meaning as the Emani clan and its supporters are tagged Action Congress (AC) politicians/supporters, while Ohiongwans are regarded as the P.D.P. loyalists. The political interpretation of the violence drew support and sympathy from other part of the Ebiraland, even beyond.

In November, 2007, the appointment of the P.D.P. flag-bearers as the caretaker chairman in Kogi state once again triggered off another political violence across Ebiraland. One may wonder why the protest was more severe in Ebiraland than any other part of the state. There are two possible reasons. First, because of the volatile nature and how strong clan feelings are in the area, "unofficially", and the principle of rotation of certain political posts among the clans in all the Districts are adopted. This is to avoid some clans unduly dominating others; this practice has been on for decades (even during military regimes). Therefore, the appointment of the caretaker chairman by the state governor violated this principle of rotation. Secondly, because of the internal conflict within the P.D.P. in the region and the infighting between senators Ohize and Ohiare on one hand and the incumbent Deputy Governor, Chief Salawu Philips, a faction; supposedly, the aggrieved faction broke out of the P.D.P. to join Action Congress (AC). Subsequently because of the popularity of the Senators that left the P.D.P. to the A.C., AC later became a dominant party winning all the available seats in the area. People felt the appointment of the less known P.D.P's. candidates for Local Council Elections as the caretaker chairman did not only violate the rotation principle, it did not reflect the present popularity of the P.D.P. in the area also the appointment gave the caretaker chairman who are also candidate in the local councils, advantage over other candidates, considering the fact that incumbency factor and the use of state machineries favour the care-takers.

The supporters of the two parties mainly youths no sooner than later began to engage in violent to either to make the areas ungovernable for the newly appointed chairmen or for the chairmen to consolidate their grips on the areas. As expected, the benefiting clans rallied round their men to consolidate their gains, while the disadvantageous clans vehemently and by all means tried to reverse the situation. For instance, in Okene Local Government, Avi clan was to produce the next Local Government chairman since Omoye clan produced the last one, but the appointment of the interim chairman from Ogu clan, the clan believed to have dominated the politics of the area in recent times was seen as act of injustice been perpetuated by the state.

Electoral campaigns for the chairmanship elections postponed several times have turned violent on many occasions. This started when the A.C. chairmanship aspirant, Alhaji Isah Kaita died on a motor accident. People, particularly his supporters did not hesitate to point accusing fingers on the P.D.P. The resultant violence escalated on the 19th of December, 2007 when a father and his son, both alleged to be members of the A.C. were brutally murdered. Immediately, the A.C. youth wing responded resulting to the killings and destruction of houses, subsequently it took a clannish confrontation between Omoye and Ogu clans.

The Role of Youths in the Violence

From the above analysis of the nature of the recent violence in Ebiraland, the violence has been spontaneous, widespread, and persistent and has cost a lot both in terms of human and material losses. The victims cut across the length and breath of Ebiraland; involving almost all the districts and clans. All of these violent incidences were sparked off by the same factors and the trends similar to one another. Young people between the ages of 15 years and above 30 years were at the forefront, unleashing terror on their perceived enemies. There was a particular case where some youth numbering 100 exhumed the bodies of their alleged opponents that were dead and buried, display their bodies in public before setting them ablaze. In another similar situation, some of the houses destroyed were totally uprooted from their very foundations, it was done in such a way that no further repairs could be carried out. These monumental destruction and killings require a lot of energy to be likely to be carried out by the youths.

It is a misplacement of analysis if we attribute the violence to youthful exuberance. A host of factors are responsible: Hobbesian elites, particularly politicians who are desperate in either capturing or consolidating political power are most times behind the violence who insight the youths to fight for so-called rights. Ordinarily such a category of people should not be directly involved in who becomes the local chairman/senator etc., position that requires a relatively high educational qualification.

Secondly, who becomes the clan head across the area in a keenly contested issue because the clan leaders do not only represent the people traditionally, they can as well influence who takes what positions that are allocated to the clans, as such, there is a going awareness among the people, particularly the young ones to determine their destiny when it comes to political matters.

Conclusion

Able young men in Ebiraland have actively participated in the violence that has characterized the politics of the area. This category of people is characterized by lack of awareness, illiteracy and poverty. All these attributes make them an easy and cheap tool used by the notable politicians in the area to actualize their political goals.

Social and political problems in Ebiraland require both short-term and long-term solutions. Short-term solutions should involve setting up a committee made up of men and women of proven integrity to enlighten the youths during election periods and during cultural festivals. Government should not hesitate to identify and punish the culprits accordingly. On the long-term solutions, marriage institution in Ebiraland should be re-evaluated. Men should not perceive marriage as a mere avenue of reprocreation. Parents in the Ebiraland should try as much as they can to provide the basic, the necessities of life, particularly education to their children. An educated mind values human life and can not be easily manipulated against his or her fellow human beings.

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