

CONFLICT AND CONCORD: A STUDY OF PRE-COLONIAL PEACE BUILDING PROCESS IN ESAN LAND, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the nature of conflict and peace building process in Esanland. It is argued that the various polities in pre-colonial Esan were able to use various entrenched local modalities to keep the peace in an event of conflict the area. Moreover, the study shows that although the area did featured large state political system borrowed from Benin kingdom and other places, the various Esan polities remained largely autonomous, they were by no means isolated from one another. On the contrary, they evolved harmonious living through different forms and levels of peacekeeping in times of conflict which created room for unity and cooperation. Furthermore, although conflicts occurred from time to time among them, such conflict were mostly minimal in scale and easily managed due to several peace mechanism built around their cosmology. It is concluded that in order to curb the festering conflicts in contemporary Nigeria, there is need to look inward to tap into traditional methods of conflict resolution.

Keywords: Conflic. Peace building, Pre-colonial. Esan. Nigeria

INTRODUCTION:

Scholars have become increasingly interested in the study of conflict, peace keeping and cooperation in recent years because the quest for “peaceful” cooperation resulting from “conflict” have come to the forefront as a major interest for stake holders(Bande, 1998). The African Union, the European Union and United Nations have continued to play some crucial roles by investing much on pre-colonial peace studies and conflict resolution and co-operations methods in Africa. Pre-colonial Esan engaged in peacekeeping in order to mitigate conflict and maintain a state of equilibrium cooperation in their various communities (Lockwood, 1970). The focus of this study is on peacekeeping, conflicts and co-operations among the villages and towns in Esanland. Both levels of groups relations can be termed intra-group and inter group relations respectively. The study is divided into six broad parts i.e. the introduction which of course is this part; definition of terms, execution of war as a major source of conflict in Esan, post-war peacemaking instruments, inter-group cooperation and then a conclusion.

ON CONFLICT, PEACEMAKING AND CO-OPERATION:

Although conflict is a universal phenomenon and not a preserve of one region, group, religion or race, peace researchers are not in agreement on the meaning of the concept of conflict. But the causes of conflict are numerous; its conception contains some identifiable variables that distinguish it from other concepts such as instability, violence and crisis. Oyeshola proposes that there is conflict, ‘When there is a sharp disagreement or clash, for instance, between divergent ideas, interests of people and nations’. He asserted further that ‘conflicts are universal yet distinct in every culture. It is common to all persons yet experienced uniquely by every individual. It is a visible sign of human energy and often the result of competition for resources’(Oyeshola, 2005:101). Conflict as explained above is considered to be a product of disagreement that may be rooted in the belief system and perceptions of threat to people’s goal attainment. Spangler and Burgess noted that “conflict involves deep rooted moral or value differences high-state distributional question, such as who dominates whom. Fundamental human psychological needs of identity, security and recognition are of issue as well”(Spangler and Burgess, 2005).

For Chaplin, ‘conflict can be defined come antagonistic, particularly when they are faced with irreconcilable or opposing views’(Chaplin, 1979:109). In this series, the pre-colonial Esanland had conflict as a social phenomenon derives from a clash of goals, both personal and groups, which were later peacefully resolved. This calls for peace researchers to always look into the people’s pre-colonial conflict and how they were resolved amicably. The fact is that conflict among the Edo speaking peoples had been a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aim of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals(Otawama, 2008:77). Most of the conflicts in Nigeria today especially in the middle belts have always taken this form. Zagon Kataf, (1987) Tafawa Balewa, (1991) Jos (2001) Kaduna , Zaria , (1997) Bachama Hausa conflict, 1990). Etc.

PEACEMAKING:

Peacemaking is the term used to refer to the process of negotiating the resolution of a conflict between people, groups, or states. It goes beyond peacekeeping to actually deal with the issues that cause a conflict. In pre-colonial Esan, peacemaking and peacekeeping was blended and tied together in the various communities. Both aimed towards reconciliation and normalization of relations between ordinary people and those in authority. Peace derived its origin from the Greek word “Pax” .Peacemaking, building or keeping to an average Esan person , is a process which recognizes that certain concrete effort and processes are required to be made by individuals, groups and communities for conflict to be reduced to a minimum level, and for a peaceable society to be achieved. According to Okoduwa; “Peace thrives on justice, fairness, equity, trust, friendship, mutual respect, communication, a common aspiration and similar elements. So it added titles does not make any different in pre-colonial Esan”(personal communication with Esangbedo on 25/6/2005). Unlike a situation of conflict, it encompasses a state of harmony, free from violent or intolerable conflict, discord, hostilities and war of any type or any disagreement which could disrupt the daily routines of citizens. The aim of peacemaking and any peace is to bring about trust, tolerance and confidence among the people living as groups in a community”. In pre-colonial Esan, the processes of peacemaking and peacebuilding began at the level of the individual and his household, Uelen made up of a man, his wife or wives, his children and younger brothers and their wives, his children and younger brothers and their wives, the unmarried sisters and his mother. The underlying principle is that a man who is free from inner and domestic conflicts is able to not only to behave in a less aggressive manner but also a builder and keeper of peace.

INTER-GROUP COOPERATION:

Afigbo, in his analysis of the Igbo and their neighbours offers an important theoretical formulation and meaning of inter-group relations. According to him, 'inter-group relations presupposes contact and interaction between groups each of which has an identity, to make some inputs into the relationship, in short, each of which has some scope and area of autonomous action(Afigbo).This raises a number of fundamental conceptual issues regarding the phenomenon of inter-group relations or cooperation that should be clarified. The first of these is that inter-group co-operations entail contact and interactions between groups. This ordinarily implies that it is the logical consequence of contact between people, in which case, it deals with human beings and is therefore a social phenomenon. Emphasizing this point Lohor (1998: 28) observes that, inter-group co-operations,... refers to the interaction which takes place between members of different group and societies who come in contact with one another'. It pertains to the symbolical or face-to-face interaction between people and between different societies.

There is enough evidence to suggest that prior to Esan colonial experience, an intricate system of socio-political, economic and cultural co-operation had been established between Esan people. Through these linkages, there emerged continued cross-fertilization of ideas which tended among them. The degree of cultural exchange and the manifest impact on the people perhaps prompted Reverend Smith Bulkson to remark that "of the Edo speaking peoples, the Esan are perhaps the most united and is started long before their contact with the Europeans"(Smith, 1953:146).

PEACEMAKING/KEEPING PROCESSES IN ESANLAND:

Peacemaking or any other peace to the people is the process of maintaining normal relations between people. It requires the reconciliation of differences, offering apology and forgiveness on past harm. The process of peacemaking as we earlier hinted began at the level of the individual household or family. Consequently, different communities had various conventions concerning individual behaviour so as to mitigate intra-human, inter-human and domestic conflicts(Babatunde, 1999:29). That of Esan can be approached generally as attempted here. The conventions which were backed by taboo which must be observed, regulated activities such as cohabitation, relationship between husband and wife, father and children, inheritance, adoption, justice, land tenure and the like. As head of the family, a husband, (odafen) was expected to be at peace with himself. He was expected to have some peculiar behaviour worth emulating. Thus in real sense a peacekeeper, maker and builder. He was also held responsible for keeping the peace in his household and ensuring that its members related well with others in the compounds and words in their village or town. The compound heads, *Omijogbe*, king, Onojie and village heads, *Odionwele* had similar responsibilities in their respective domains. Also included were the titled chiefs, *Ekhaemoi* and the chief priest, *Ihaza, Ohen*.

They guarded their communities' laws and customs and applied appropriate sanctions against any breach. A breach of conventions was regarded as "a crime against the ancestral spirits and as a disturbance of individual or communal equilibrium". Imposition of sanctions on individuals or a group of deviants was a justifiable means of restoring the pre-existing balance in the society and traditional device for crime prevention or deterrence of deviant behaviour. Three broad types of sanctions existed in pre-colonial Esan. These were moral, legal and ritual sanctions. A moral sanction was imposed on actions which were contrary to the conventions and set-values of the society and were consequently likely to lead to social disorder. An authority such as the compound head, the village head, the chief-priest or the king may express this type of sanction verbally. In a more serious way and in consonant with the severity of the offence, moral sanctions were mostly expressed in mass action achieved through public disgrace, ostracism (*Amuolen, Obiro*), banishment, (*Anolen ubi kua*), purification of the earth, *Ikpotoa* and absolute banishment, *Isunfia*. Some of these crimes which attract mass action through public disgrace included: adultery, *Ughelemi*, rape, *Obhigedu* witchcraft confession, *Okahi*, incest and others. Disgrace, as a punishment, existed in two categories.

The first involved mass action executed by the *Egbonughete*, an age-grade which performed police and civil duties on the community after an instruction from the Edion based on a trial and judgment at the public square. Ostracism was the punitive measure reserved for crimes tending to mar peaceful village life. For example, a non-co-operation in the village, where all other punitive measures at the disposal of the Edion elders or *Egbele*, family members has failed to cause a change of heart. Such a man might refuse to take part in a lawful communal labor, or might be guilty of disloyalty to the community as for example, trying to undermine the authority of elders or selling of his people to another village during land dispute or war etc. In such a case, the whole village gathers at the village square *Ughele* and using their *Okpo Edionnenen* a law was made that from them on nobody was ever to greet or answer the greetings of the man in question, no one was to enter his house for fire nor was he to inter another's house to take fire, he was thus given the most dreaded punishment the

gregarious Esan have social ostracism with its divesting psychological effects. Finding himself cut off from the rest of the community, including members of his family, he either had to go on his proud knees and pay heavy fines or quit the village altogether. Banishment was another punishment inflicted on a gracious crime for which the punishment could have been death, but granted an appeal by the accused family or friends from other villages. Such crimes as persistent practice of witchcraft, having hands in causation of diseases, possession of bad medicines etc. all merited this punitive measure. The punishment consisted of the two lower age-grades, *Igene*, the oldest group of middle aged men in the village younger than the *Edion* and the *Egborughele*, assembling with drums, sticks, coconut palm branches minus the leaves, broom etc. at the man's house. He was asked to make a load of his most valued possession which he carried on his head. As he left his house with the people drumming and singing, his footprints were systematically swept off the village street. He was led up to the village boundary and left to his fate which might be death at the hands of wild beasts or rescued by other villagers or captured by slave raiders. Punitive punishment for the purification of the earth, *Ikpotoa* also take the same approach after an oracle was courted at the village square by the whole community (Itama, 2001:70-75).

Isunfia which meant absolute banishment is not much different from the earlier mentioned punitive measures. In this case, the angry people following do not go into bother of seeping, since the unfortunate man dragged on the ground automatically did all the necessary seeping. After trial and judgment at the square, sentence of *Isunfia* was passed on the accused, usually an evil minded one. *Ojomen* (palm fronds) were tied round his waist, the head of a dog, a whole rabbit (the two signifying *Isusu*, trouble or unrest) a chicken and a tortoise were tied to the fronds with all dragging along the ground. The *Igene* and *Egborughele* came after him drumming and jeering. As he was drummed out of the village in alter disgrace, his footprints were swept off by the *Ojomen* and junks which raise dust after him.

The second type of disgrace was carried out through judicial process. The culprit would be recommended for discipline after being found guilty. For instance, an adulterous woman, who, by action had caused a breach of the peace in her home would be recommended to the head of the married women, *Ilchuo Idumu* and the delinquent woman was sent for. She was then shared (in this case to humiliate her), stripped of all her clothes and the terrible stinging nettle leaves were wrapped round her waist and body, a heavy load made so cumbersome that it would require the two hands to balance on the head, was put on her and with her hands already employed for this purpose, she could not scratch her intensely itchy body. She was to sing and danced round the village with her load made heavier by the addition of rubbish which was picked up at every corner of the village. She was mocked and flogged and when her tormentors were at last tired she was returned to her husband's house, as disgrace to herself and her husband. The goat bought by her co-respondent was slaughtered at the family ancestral shrine. The elder (*Egbele*) in the family shared the meat (Timothy, 1991).

A legal sanction involved the use of judicial action by recognized authorities such as the *Edionwele*, the oldest man in village, the rulers, *Onogie*, the chief priest were they existed and the council of chiefs, *Ekhaemon*. These classes of elite made laws to keep peace and maintain intra and inter-group relations in their domain. Capital offences such as murder, *Ugberia*, stealing the seed yams already planted; kneading mud to build over a site owned by another person; climbing an oil palm on when a man was already up; one hunter driving another from his hunting place, tying palm fronds around a farmland or a house; abuses with the genitals; cutting of kolanut tree and robbing of strangers, visitors and refuge seekers etc. For instance murder charges were tried by the *Igene* and the *Enogbonule*, sometimes in the presence of the *Onojie*, and sometimes in the village of the accused. Any suspected person would be arrested by these spies and police. When the hue and cry was raised it was the duty of *Igene* to organize a search, news being sent to their peer group of neighbouring villages, and report to the *Onogie* and his council of titled chiefs in the state capital. The punishment for murder was death; the execution as in *Uromi* was carried out by *Igie* in *Ewoyomon* village. If the killing was found to be manslaughter or even accidental killing a heavy fine was imposed. In some Esan communities, the judicial council including the king, chief, village heads sit as the judicial council with the *Igene* as observers, or as investigation police officers and reminders of the crime. Each village had its own *Okogele* where trials took place and in *Egware* was one which housed the joint meeting of the executives. Only serious or capital offences or civil matters which came before the village that were tried in the *Okogele*.

Ritual sanction was another instrument of achieving peace and in the prevention of conflict among Esan people which fostered much cooperation in the pre-colonial period. This was deeply rooted in the religious beliefs of the people described as "the engine of the law" (Oshodi, 1973:1-9). It gave the kings and the chief priest divine authority and were ipso facts the *pontifex maximus*, they could impose ritual sanctions. The *Onojie*, king has divine sanctions on crime that demands ostracism, banishment, earth purification, and application of trial by ordeal i.e. the use of *Sassword* in dealing with suspect accused of witchcraft, stealing, murder, use of magic on innocent people etc. Parrinder, in his analysis of divine rulers opined that:

Belief in divine kingship appears in early forms of religion, and Hocart suggested that perhaps there never were

any gods without divine kings. Before 2000 B.C. The city kings of ancient Mesopotamia claimed descent from the gods and the people looked on them as divinely sent redeemers. In Egypt the king was the son of a god or his incarnation, and there is a theory that these “children of sun” established their way by claiming divine honours and possessing occult knowledge.

The foregoing is in tune with the Divine theory of kingship that in all societies, and throughout the ages, the king is not merely a semi-divine person, in consequence of which his person regarded sacred. In Esanland, the king is accepted as a coordinating factor, the symbol of society's unity, the fountain of peace and of all peace processes, the link between the people and God, *Osanobua*, the source of all benefits both spiritual and material thus, his ritual sanctions and laws were taken with utmost fear and awesomeness. Moreover, the chief

priests were the official servant of the divinities. They are the mediator between God or divinity and man. They serve as a link between the worshippers and the object of worship. They know the divinity, hears them and speaks to them for themselves and on behalf of other members of the communities. As the mouth piece of the divinity, they take messages from him and deliver them to the people. It is the duty of the chief-priests to offer sacrifice, make offerings and say prayers at temple or shrine on behalf of the people. As the custodian of religion and the keeper of religions tenets, he uses ritual sanctions on deviants who go against the peaceful co-existence of the people. Some of these sanctions include the demand or seizure of fowls, goats, tortoise and some other items to be used as ritual to appease the divinities offended by these deviants (Inneh, 2006).

Infact, there was also the efficacy of Esan traditional religion. The Esan people like other West African peoples believe that the world is under the unitary control of God. They have it that numerous divinities worshipped exist with the beneficency of the supreme God. He is Omnipotent, and this is sometimes emphasized in their songs. God is in front, He is in the back or, and should you do anything that is evil or beautiful, God sees you and your reward you will get on this earth (Oniawu, 1979:239). It is in this sense that God is all knowing all seeing, all wise, all powerful, all good, omnipresent loving and merciful. To many God sees both the inside and outside (of man), the discernor of hearts. This is to say that God is ever seeing the offenders even if the earthly king does not see you. This fear is always in the mind of the people who dread the judgment, punishment and retribution thus creating the desire peace and tranquilities needed in the communities. In many of the creation stories of pre-colonial Esanland, we find that God, from the beginning, maintained communion and fellowship with man until the later sinned and God placed a barrier which cut man off from the unrestricted bliss of heaven and in effect he was isolated from God. This is saying that for man to have fellowship with God, he must obey and continue to be at peace with his fellow brothers and sisters.

WAR AND PEACE IN ESANLAND:

Whatever might be the cause of war, it was always the last resort in inter-village relations. Concerted efforts were always made to prevent war; *Ukhuo* (Adesuwa, 1989). Modalities for preventing outbreak of war follow almost similar patterns in pre-colonial Edo communities. No war was fought until efforts to prevent it had been exhausted. First envoys, made up of *Ekhaemon*, chiefs, elders, *Edions* and some other war captain, *Okakulos* were exchanged between two estranged villages for amicable settlement of conflicting issues at stake. Proposals or demands to be met to avoid war were spelt out and discussed. Secondly, after it had become clear that the diplomatic approach had failed an ultimatum was sent by one of the communities to the other asking whether it wanted peace or war. The ultimatum was usually in form of diplomatic messages and pressures (Isichie, 1976). Thirdly, when it was certain that the other village wanted war, the king call for a full-house council for advice. The resolution of this council could delay or prevent or result in the war and the consent of the entire people through the chiefs and the village heads and the support of the warriors had to be sought. Once this mass meeting of the people gives approval and acclamation a war is declared

The war between *Irrua-Ekpoma* in 1908, the *Illeh* war of 1899, and the *Okhuodua-Ewatto* war of 1869 and several other wars vividly illustrated the process mentioned earlier. Before the outbreak of any war there were always anti-war passions in both sides due to inter-village marriages, common use of streams, rivers, non-aggression pacts, common histories of origin, shared religious beliefs and several inter-group connections. To many Esan, the ancestors disfavoured war in settling disagreement especially any activity that threatens societal peace (Itua, 1989).

CONDUCT OF WAR:

It is however, not always that efforts to prevent war succeeded. When war was eventually declared, its conduct war regulated by conventions operating in each geo-political area of Esanland. Generally, wars were fought outside the towns in order to avoid the loss of lives of the civilian population. Trade routes, shrines, grooves, economic trees, rivers, streams, farmlands etc were also spared during wars. It was only when a weaker town

was obstinate in its defence that the stronger opponent decided to crush it by breaching some of the war conventions (Itua, 1989:47). For instance a long siege could be laid against a village to force it to submission. When a village was conquered, all the elders and the *Okakulo* call for a cease fire and the inhabitant were allowed to return and go about the normal business. The conquered not in a hurry to further humiliate the defeated imposes some “conditions” which gives room for the defeated king, council, elders and the ex-warriors to discuss and appeal to be allowed to make observation and contributions before acceptance (Idehen, 2005:125). This does not mean the war has ended⁴⁵. The wounded on both sides were allowed to return home and were not treated with unusual harshness. Women, children, priest, the aged, war captains, unarmed, village heads, the king strangers, disabled and visitors were not killed in wars. They could be captured for ransom. The only exemption to this immunity is when any of this class of people was discovered be the major perpetrators of what led to the war. The *Ukhuodua-Ewatto* war mentioned above was a typical and rare example. The war leader, *Alogun*, founder *Iligun* of *Idumu Ugbalogun* in *Uwokwen*, led one battle against *Ewatto* and in a desperate disregard for his personal safety, got at the *Onogie* of *Ewatto* proximity and recklessly beheaded him. To add insult to injury, he came home with the head as a trophy, to the astonishment of all *okhuodau* (*Okojie*, 1956). Conventionally, the *Onogie* in particular and some key political officers enjoyed the best protection in *Esanland*. The *Onogie*’s crown, position, person and staff of office were regarded with awe and regarded as divine. He might be captured, but he would not be killed or tortured. For instance when *Onogie Eromosele* the Great of *Irrua* 1876-1921 with his strong and dreaded warriors over whelmed *Illeh* in 1895, he sacked the entire village of *Imule* sparing all the chiefs protection during wars. Tradition still narrates how the elders of *Efandion* and *Oyomon* all in *Uromi* prostrated to show respect for the *Onogie* of *Ekpoma* in 1809 after he was captured and detained in *Oyomon*. In 1853 the *Amahor* warriors treated the *Benin* army captain in the same respect accorded a king when his army were defeated and himself captured (*Okpewo*, 2000).

Traditional attitude to the conduct of war described above was to show that conventionally wars in *Esanland* were not meant to be particularly destructive in terms of life and property. They were not fought in a way to destroy the chances of early restoration of peace. According to *Otayegbe*, “the truth was that, after every war, limbs, lives and properties were destroyed. Apart from these losses war can result in family dislocations, distortion in career, loss of vital organs of the human body, loss of friends, relations and colleagues....The terrible experiences they had during the war may continue to disturb their thinking. This is commonly called post war trauma, which the *Esan* people tries to avoid in preventing protracted and destructive wars to prevent the community be confronted with psychological problem” (personal communication with *Amos Atayegbe* on 30/9/2005).

However, the convention changed as new dimensions occasioned by the introduction of the slave trade, the Islamic *Jihads* and other diversified issues at stake were introduced into warfare. For instance, in the 19th century, not only did the *Bini* incursion and hostility against the *Esan* country undertaken to capture slaves but must have also deliberate intended to reduce the growing *Esan* population seen as a threat to *Benin* expansionism and imperialism. Thus total wars featuring wholesale destruction or burning of towns were witnessed. The *Nupe/Hausa Jihad* into the *Esan* country took the form of slave raids and looting of foodstuff and livestock’s, rape, killing of the aged, disabled and children (*Ebosole*, 2006).

TERMINATION OF WAR AND ARRANGEMENT OF TRUCE:

According to oral traditions, wars were terminated when one party surrendered or through the intervention of an external agent or third party. The process of surrendering was almost similar in all *Esan* communities. A besieged or defeated town desiring to surrender to the enemy sent a deputation of elders wearing on their heads the marked signs of white chalk as a token surrender. They were preceded by the young persons who carried valuable presents, *kolanuts* wine, beads, and the like for the commander in-chief. They also carried a selection of articles symbolic of their submission, their readiness to abide by their treaties, and payment of tributes and be chastised for their offences. After this deputation had been received by the commander-in-chiefs, a similar deputation was sent to the king and his council in the capital and the delegation was made to swear fidelity for the future. After this, the warriors received permission to return and those captured released to their *Okakulo*, captain.

Truce might either be forced on the warring parties or be prevailed upon through diplomatic means to stop hostilities. This was normally done by a higher authority or a buffer village when the war was stalemated. For instance when the *Ewu* and *Ekpoma* war reached a stalemate in 1813, the *Onojie* of *Irrua* sent a delegation bearing the symbols of an olive branch on both parties to end the war.

A truce might be a temporary cessation of war if the issues at stake were not properly and finally decided consequently, it could be said that agreeing to a truce or signing of one was the beginning of the process of peacemaking processes to prevent future hostilities-commonly referred to as post war peace Agreement (*Samson*, 1993:36). Arrangements leading to the settlement and preventing issues that led to wars in *Esanland* were handled by elders in council through the use of an *okoven*, Oath, the use of negotiations and the signing of peace treaties.

The respect for and dignity of elders, was not limited to the family as it transcended its boundaries. It was also at work in line with ages and in other Esan socio-political associations. The result of the seniority utilization in Esan society was found in the sober and subtle decisions often taken by elders. Elders took decisions after careful considerations of the issues involved, based on their profound experience and knowledge of Esan traditions. This respect for elders assumed a wider dimension as it was effectively used in post war peacemaking and keeping processes. Their counsels were ever sought before major decisions were taken. They were always accorded some immunity which resulted from the deep respect and reverence they enjoyed as living representatives of the ancestors. They have extended relations with their counterparts in neighboring villages in an informal league of elders. Under their cover of immunity they carried messages to and fro and arrangements for cessation of hostilities as to provide conducive atmosphere for peace processes through negotiations, signing of peace treaties, and endorsement of non-aggression pact, swearing of oath, *okoven* implementation and invocation of sanction of isolation on adamant or war mongers. According to Okojie (1956), 'the pact, treaties, sanctions in pre-colonial times were instrumental in the cohesion and of peacemaking processes in Esanland. As we mentioned earlier, the Esan people were closely tied to the spirits and therefore strove not to provoke the anger of the elders who represents these ancestral spirits on earth in the administration and places where the oath were taken.

INTER-GROUP COOPERATION:

The major feature of the socio-political organization of the area during the pre-colonial period was the presence of Benin imperial expansionist policies which encouraged the need for the people to develop large and expansive polities and centralized state systems, which facilitated inter-group cooperation (Egbewan, 2008). Moreover most of the village groups, at least in the very early times were made up of lineages which were descendants of founders who were themselves related by one or more of the following factors: consanguineous ties, marriage ties, totemic ties, common experience of migration, common threat of extermination from the Benin kingdom, common occupation such as hunting, farming, fishing and other factors. In such settlements, it did not require any demonstrable craft to evolve harmonious and humane co-existence among the people.

The common traditions of origin, common experience of migration, and ancestral and genealogical affinities are of central importance in understanding the unit and intermingling of the groups even across the immediate neighbourhood. The Ekpoma villages and village groups of Irrua, Ubiaja, Ahia, Okhu esan, Ilah, Ewatto, Ewohimi, Amahor, Egori Na Oka share the same tradition of origin with Uromi, Ekpoma, Irrua and Ubiaja. Other major traditions of historical relationships include those linking Ewu and Uzea, Uroh, Ekpon and Ujiogba, Urohi and Ujamen.

These seems to be good reasons to believe that these ancestral ties and the common experience shared by the founders of particular groups of villages helped to bring the people together in the early period of their history. Apart from common origin and common experience of migration especially from Benin, the shared experience in dealing against the enemies, the Binis in particular lingered in the people's memories for several generations and would appear to have brought them closer (Omokhan, 2000). Several generations and in some cases after the foundation of the villages, the elders in villages and village-groups in question still generally maintain *Okpamakhin*, We are all one.

The spread of population in the area was largely by the mechanism of internal movements and intermingling of waves of migrants from Benin-kingdom, Igboland, Yorubaland and Nupeland; etc. Most of the secondary and tertiary settlements created were composite in that they were composed majorly of migrant groups from Benin and thus share many socio-political and cultural heritages in common. A classic example was Irrua, Ekpoma, Uromi, Ewu, Ubiaja, Udo, Ugboha which as the name clearly shows, was of mixed peopling. Other communities grew and with the gradual decentralization of power Esan progressed to the modern territorial units, each autonomous and headed by its own *Onojie* king. These earliest villages groups did not only help to bring the different migrant groups together, there were healthy relations between each such composite settlement and the various sources of its peopling, especially in cases where the settlers broke links with their former home.

There were also political links among the Esan when in Oba Ewuare's wooing in 1463 of the Esan, war leaders were given similar titles of *Onojie* to enable them rule their respective communities. Yearly they went personally or through accredited agents to pay homage to the Oba. The ruling families in the polities especially in case of where the institutions of *Onojieship* existed were said to be brothers. Apart from vague qualms over going to war with each other, usually expressed colloquially as 'not seeing each other's blood', Irrua was as related to Uromi or Uromi to Ugboha, each an autonomous state. Because the villages and village-groups within a chieftdom were frequently offshoots of one ancestor or related ancestor or were founded by persons sharing some common experience, such villages were at any time under the ruler-ships of 'brothers' or persons related in some way. This is what some scholars have termed perpetual kinship or positional successions.

Vansina has pointed out that “the institutions (of perpetual kinship and positional succession, were an integrative mechanism which is social in its idiom but which is often political in its purposes and effects”(Vansina, 1966). Doubtless, ancestral or other historical relationships bonded the rulers and consequently, the villages under them also together. Although the various chiefdom and villages seems to always assert their autonomous and unique identities, decisions on matters of common interests were jointly taken from time to time. Among such vital decisions were those bordering on inter-group trade, inter-marriages, the use of boundary lands and frontiers for farming, hunting, trapping, tapping of bush and water resources and particularly, the problems relating to the politics of war and defence against their neighbours.

Of importance, too was the fact that whenever there was a dispute between any two chiefdom the other chiefdoms-in cases where there were more than polities united in perpetual kinship and positional succession intervened for peaceful settlements, imposing fines and sanctions where necessary. To be stressed in the fact that the same spirit which guided and permeated joint decision processes also was at work in the execution of decisions. Thus, like in other areas where the institution of perpetual kinship existed, it was a centripetal force bringing different polities in a loose but single political unit.

The problem of security and defense against external attacks and invasions was one major source of unity. In times of external invasions particular autonomous villages, usually in a neighbourhood, come together in military coalition for defence purposes. The number of allies and the nature of the coalition were in each case determined by the nature of the threat. An example was the coalition of Uromi, Ewohimi and Ubiaja against the Nupe/Hausa Jihadists. Another example was that of Ekpoma, Ewu and Agbede against the Idah warriors in 1616 and 1769. The military cooperation was in fact, largely because of other existing forms of unity. Unity was enhanced by the fact that most chiefdoms living as neighbours had common ancestry and as a consequence, the problem of one was regarded as that of the entire chiefdom and was treated collectively in the spirit of oneness. This was one major factor in military coalition and cooperation.

There was also the fact that neighbouring chiefdoms and chieflets were united by the fact that they shared common farm boundaries, had their farms and farmlands overlapping, exchanged farmlands, shared farmsteads, farm together and lived communally. Apart from direct farm activities, the cooperating farmers also carried out such other activities as hunting and trapping together in small groups (Okonofua, 1999).

In the area, too, rivers and streams, where they are available, were shared by different chiefdoms. The rivers and streams which served primarily as sources of water supply to the communities in the neighbourhoods also gave rise to some fishing, pottery and where raffia palm trees flourished with basket and mat making. In the river Niger area oral tradition narrates how some people of Ozigono, Ekpoma, Ukhun fished jointly in the Niger. The relevant point to note is that the common use of the rivers and streams like the sharing of farmlands mentioned above helped to promote oneness among the different groups involved in each case served and worshipped the spirits believed to be dwelling in the river or streams brought the group even close.

Esan polities were also brought closer by the practice of inter-groups marriage. Endogamy was not practiced initially. Most of the chiefdoms were settled by a few persons more or less bonded by blood and other ties. Thus, endogamous marriages were ethically and ritualistically forbidden and consequently people went and looked outside their ‘boundaries’ for courtships and marriages. The result was that a complex interlocking way of marriage relationships resulted in several alliances, pact and treaties of understanding among the chiefdoms. Trade was another important sector in pre-colonial Esan economy. Apart from the simple exchange which took place in each of the villages, commercial relations existed among the villages and also between the area and the neighbouring peoples- the Benin, Asaba, Agbor, Igala, Urhobo and the western communities. Trade among the communities was made possible by the existence of periodic town markets which alternated in the individual clans or neighbourhood and at which some exchange was done.

However, the germane point to our discussion is that the markets which were important primarily as exchange centres also had an inherent social significance, facilitating the intermingling of people. Market is an excellent meeting place not only for buying and selling but also for exchanging ideas and forging friendships (Amosun, 2001). Moreover, long-distance trade necessarily involved traders spending days outside their homes. Inevitably, this produced new relationships. There were no hotels or developed tourist centres to cater for the needs of traders and travelers. In this way, long distance traders made new friends on whom they depended for accommodation. However, these traders who had relatives in places to which they traded were housed by such relatives. These commercial relations between the various chiefdoms were important in that they enabled the various groups in the area to trade their produce for the produce of other economic or ecological zones. This trade across the borders towns underscored the complementarity of economic life and promoted healthy inter and extra-group relations.

Culturally, some village groups institutionalized social relations with other groups within Esan society according to their conveniences and interests through dance alliances. Esan had numerous dances like *Ilo*, *Agbega*, *Oleke Abayon*, *Aghamojie*, *Obodorhibhaje* and *Igbabonalimin*. Each village group had up to about five

different types of dances for the social recreation and relaxation. These dances were usually practiced from the periods of harvest to the beginning of the next farming season. The most popular of these dances and indeed unique to Esan people had been the *Igbabonelimin*, acrobatic dance. The relations mustered among the Esan people had been considerable. A village in one specific village group could establish friendship alliance with another village groups that hitherto had not been in any specific relationship through the *Igbabonelimin* dance. Yearly visit was exchanged and with reciprocity of valuable gifts like tobacco, salt, meat, fish and sometimes woven cloth (Ojieze, 2000). In the general social situation, they also concluded a friendly alliance which was capable of weakening hostility and enhancing cordiality and solidarity. This was a common feature in Esan, where most village groups contracted.

Apart from security, Esan dances had other uses. Esan communities had also used dance to teach the cherished societal virtues and to condemn vices which are anti-social. Promoting morality in the society was done through the *Ikhio* dance. The dance was by women only unlike the *Igbabonelimin* which cut across the confines of local community, *Ikhio* was internally organized. The dance was nocturnal. Women used songs to satirize women and men with criminal tendencies in the society. The effect of this was to serve as a deterrent against one's involvement in anti social acts. The role festivals played in Esan relations and cooperation can not be over emphasized. Each Esan village had at least a traditional annual festival which was celebrated during harvest periods. In some village groups, two categories of festivals existed, those of women and those of men. The women festivals like the one celebrated at Uromi called *Igb-agwa-hol-sague* were usually performed in June and July when cereals had matured. In most other village groups festivals called *Ukpe* or *Ihumlan* were generally celebrated by all and sundry. Its celebration marked an annual commencement of the harvesting of Yams which the Esan people regarded as the "king" of farm crops (Omolumen, 2006).

Festivals were not celebrated simultaneously throughout Esanland, instead each village had specific periods for their own celebration. What is significant of this occasion is its provision of a forum for contracting inter-group relations between one village group and another. The festival periods provided opportunities to increase the number of friends and individual had outside his own village group. In this process, the village generally would be drawn in to the vortex of inter group co-operation; each adult celebrant would make prodigious provision to adequately entertain his expected guests. The Esan staple food of pounded yam and *ohele* or *ikpepan* soup were made plentiful. Palm wine, its distilled gin and high quantity of tobacco were provided to be consumed during the ceremony. Indeed the period was always marked with great festivity and revelry.

The period also provided an occasion for a traditional distribution of wealth in Esan land. On the one hand, visitors were expected to bring along with them various gifts ranging from the highest valuable product of yam to the lowest market product, like pepper to their hosts. On the other hand, at the end of the festivals the visitors were also expected to be given gifts to take home commensurate with what the visitors had offered in the first instance. In this process, it would seem that an enduring relationship and cooperation was built by the people in one village group with the people of another group. The people of a village group who were previously visitors would now become hosts as they celebrated their own festival. They would naturally expect their formal good gesture to be reciprocated. Friendship build up in this relationship jointly established were not terminated since the friendship jointly established were extended to wives and children. Therefore, once such friendship was established it was bound to enhance cordiality and peaceful coexistence and cooperation among neighboring peoples.

The gifts presented during festival celebrations or simply at harvest times had various names. Some writers had referred to this presentation as tributes. In Esan land, it would appear that people who were involved in the traditional transfer of annual gifts do not conceive of such interaction in terms of master -servant connotation. Traditional rulers, or even ordinary citizens were obliged to send gifts to their distant or near friends, landlord and god fathers especially at harvest times when ones wealth usually increased. Structurally, such traditional exchange of gifts emphasized the individual determination to remain in cooperative relations. These extensions of gifts or tribute payments had proved useful in the diplomatic relationships which existed among Esan communities. Even Esan kings often sent gifts annually at harvest times to their counterparts in other communities, yet this presentation hardly showed inferiority of one Onojie to the other. Rather, such presentation emphasized interdependence and cordial relations. This gift were never unidirectional but was usually reciprocated by the receivers.

CONCLUSION:

It follows that, within the individual polities in Esanland and among them harmonious living was ensured not only by intrinsic integrative forces and ingredients, but also by the people's ability to devise additional mechanism for communal living and peaceful coexistence. It is particularly instructive that the absence of large and expensive state systems like that of Benin kingdom in Esan did not mean that the groups were isolated from one another. Indeed, they were conscious of their common traditions of origins, kinship ties and share historical

experiences and this helped to bind them together. This was further consolidated by economic factors and social cultural ties, the necessity to cooperate against external harassments particularly from Benin .

We have also shown that although the polities were deeply united and cooperated to meet their challenges, their relations were not altogether without stains and stress. However, it is again instructive that inter-group conflicts were not only minimal; the groups were able to devise effective mechanisms both for the prevention of conflicts and management of peace. Thus the contemporary Nigerian state can learn from it especially in its greater emphasis on peacekeeping at all levels of the society and especially at the grassroots using traditional agencies to minimize criminality and conflicts; cultivation of good inter-ethnic and inter-community co-operations through visits by traditional rulers who are the royal ambassadors of their various communities; exchange of visits by state governors in order to promote mutual understanding; inter-state, inter-ethnic or inter-group co-operations in the country. Internal crisis whether political or religious must be managed with minimum application of force so as to make reconciliation and early return of peace possible. The use of impartial elders and neutral agencies/bodies in peace negotiation cannot be over emphasized.

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