



Conflicts and Peace in Southeast Igboland of Nigeria: A study of Ezza Inter-group Relations

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Abstract

The predominant occupation of Ezza people in the northeastern Igbo land is agriculture. To a traditional Ezza man, land is next to God. Ezza people were said to have fought wars to acquire lands for their farm works. But the British colonial forces halted the Ezza military might. Since then many communities that had benefited from Ezza military assistance have sought to take back the lands given out by their ancestors to compensate the Ezza warriors, thereby generating fresh wars with Ezza communities. This study examines these contentious questions of Ezza rights to continuously own settlements outside the Ezza traditional homestead. The study adopts the balance of power theory popularized in 1979 by Kenneth Neal Waltz, an American scholar and realist, who believed that co-operating States will fare better in an arrangement that does not allow any of the States to exercise domineering power over others. The data of the study derives from the primary and secondary sources. The study uses the chronological, thematic and analytical methods of history. The study concludes that the Ochinkpuru Council, an Ezza mediation group, would be more effective in its peace efforts if Ezza women and women of any clan in conflict with the Ezza are made part of the mediation efforts for peace in Ezza inter-group relations.

Key words: Igbo land, Ezza Clan, Land quests, Ezza Diasporas, Dialogue, Ochinkpuru Council.

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Introduction

From the pre-colonial days up to the post-colonial period, the Ezza people of the Abakaliki region had acquired to themselves the sobriquet of a war-like clan. From hunting experiences, they seemed to have turned their energies to war, starting from notable hunters who switched to bands of mercenaries to assist other communities win wars against their troublesome neighbours in exchange for land. That way, Ezza people gained lands outside their ancestral home land. In Ezza land, farming was a predominant occupation even though their soil was not really favourable to agriculture.



With the coming of the British troops in 1905, Ezza wars for land got a jolt. First, the unexpected defeat of Ezza warriors by British forces altered totally Ezza war beliefs that “Ezza alone rules the earth besides God,” and that made them believe there was a superior force to Ezza military might. The incessant wars with the Oshiri people over a lush farm land on the Oshiri side across the Ebonyi River brought British forces into Ezza affairs when Izzi, a brother and neighbour to the Ezza, in an attempt to save Amegu, their ancestral home land, from Ezza warriors, invited the British for assistance. Angered by that effort, Ezza warriors attacked Izzi. Fighting then on two fronts, it became easy for the British superior might to overwhelm Ezza warriors. From then on, erstwhile weaker communities, many of whom had benefited from the Ezza military might, began to seek the revocation of their earlier military pacts which had given Ezza people inviolable rights to occupy sections of earlier disputed territories as their Diaspora homes. (Anyanwu, 2005) The development resulted to pockets of resistances to Ezza’s claims over areas they had gained through covenants for their military services. The readiness of some Ezza host communities to forcefully evict their Ezza settlers had resulted to full scale wars in many instances.

With the fall of the Ezza warriors under the British in 1905, the later decided to stay behind to rule over both the Ezza clan and other communities within the Abakaliki area. It was only then that the Ezza people learnt about the futility of wars. Watched on all sides by agents of the British, Ezza people decided to seek peace with all their neighbours. To show their seriousness and for effective results, they created a mediation council called Ochinkpuru Ezza to mediate in all communities where Ezza citizens were having problems with their landlords. Created in about the 1930s, the Ochinkpuru Council canvases peaceful resolutions of all manner of conflicts between the Ezza and their hosts. And in places where no conflicts exist, the Council advises Ezza citizens desiring to own land to reach their host land owners and negotiate for prices of the size of land they desire.

That has resulted to healthy relations between Ezza citizens and their landlords in many communities. But wherever the Ezza are experiencing hostilities from their hosts, the Ochinkpuru Council have successfully negotiated amicable resolutions that include, in some cases, the permanent demarcation of Ezza settlements into separate autonomous communities. Ugbo (2017. See Appendix 4) averred that the Ezza/Agbogazi in Enugu State



and the Ezza/Ezillo conflicts are good examples of where the meditation efforts of the Ochinkpuru Council had paid off well.

Historicizing the Ezza People

Ezza people are a group of Igbo people occupying a part of the northeast region in today's Ebonyi State of Nigeria. They are a major part of what is commonly referred to as the "Abakaliki block." The people are politically divided into two local government councils of Ezza North and Ezza South, with head quarters at Ebiaji and Onueke, respectively. These two Local Government Councils had a total population of about 278,824 people, according to the 2006 census. (*2006 National Census Statistics*)

Originally, the Ezza clan was made up of twelve communities of Umuezeoka, Umuezeokoha, Umuoghara (Izzo Group); Oriuzor, Ekka (Imoha Group); Amana (Oldest Ezza Village Group); Amaezekwe, Amegu, Idembia, Ameka, Amuzu and Ezzama (Kpakpaji Group).² Over time, nine additional communities were added through migrations and conquests, excluding communities in the Diaspora. The nine additional communities are: Okoffia, Echara, Ukawu, Nsokara, Amudo, Okpomoro, Amaewula, Ogboji and Inyere communities. While the Izzoh and Imoha village groups are all found within Ezza North Local Government Area, the Kpakpaji group and some other communities are found in Ezza South Local Government Area. (Onuoha and Ani, 2016:131)

There are still conflicting accounts of the origin of Ezza people. Like in many other traditional societies, knowledge of Ezza origin seems lost. Worse, no one remembers the meaning of 'Ezza' and why it was adopted as a name for the Ezza clan. Some oral accounts claimed that Ezza is a corruption of Ezra, son of Seraiah, a priest and scribe who led the second movement of the Jews to rebuild the temple of God in Jerusalem under King Artaxerxes of Persia (Ezra 7). Nweke (2017. See Appendix 1) said that the many cultures and environments that the Ezza encountered on route out of Israel corrupted Ezra to Ezza. This view could be taken as one of the many opinions on the origin of the core Abakaliki clans of Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo, and to an extent, the Ngbo group.

These clans are closely knit with some linguistic similarities and other aspects of their cultures. Yet they held different views about their migrations and origin up to the time a consensus was said to have been taken on Ekuma Enyi as their common ancestor. But



questions on where they migrated from remain unanswered. While the Israeli origin of the Ezza lacks substantive historical backing, popular opinions claim that Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo migrated out of the Afikpo area in about the 16th Century. But there is still the Ikwo version that says that the three clans migrated from Igalla under a legend called Enyi Nwegu who became their ancestor.

Igalla is in the north of Igbo land, and the “Abakaliki” clans are all Igbo groups found within the northeast of Igbo land. So far there is no account of a direct northeastern wave of migration of any Igbo group from either the Nri-Awka or Awka–Nsukka core centres of Igbo dispersals into the Abakaliki area. Afigbo (1987:44) talks of dispersals from Nri to Awka to Nsukka; then Nri to Awka to Isuama/Orlu to Okigwe axis. The dispersals of the Igbo groups tended to be mostly southwards because of the dire need of fertile land for agriculture. If that was the case, the Igbo groups today known as the “Abakaliki people” must have been part of the early Igbo groups that moved southward from the Awka core through Isuama/Orlu to the Okigwe area where further dispersal was said to have taken place. (Afigbo, 1987:46) From there, a secondary dispersal moved into the Umuahia-Arochukwu and Ohafia axis until it got the northeastern Igbo area that includes the Abakaliki area. Afigbo (1987:46) maintains that:

One can more positively distinguish a later and more massive dispersal which traditions do refer to, and which was mainly South-eastern-wards from the Ibo centre into what is now Eastern Isuama area. From this subsidiary dispersion area there was one movement South-South East..., and another movement East into Umuahia and hence to the Ohaffia–Arochukwu ridge, with an off-shoot that struck North to become isolated in the heart of the Eastern plains and to develop into the North – Eastern Ibo.

Afigbo stressed that it was from the ‘off-shoot’ dispersion that places like Edda, Item and related peoples of today were founded. In Afikpo historiography, it is believed that these early migrants who founded Ehugbo, Amasiri, Akpoha, and the Abakaliki area in the northeast of Igbo land, were originally called the Egu/Nkalu group (Egu meaning ‘wilderness’ or ‘Ozara’ in local parlance). The Egu group was said to be the first settlers of the present Ehugbo territory. (Agha, April, 1990) They were followed by the Nkalu group



from Ikpom or Ukpom in the Cross River who settled first at a place today called Enohia Nkalu in the Ehugbo clan.

Sections of the Egu/Nkalu group later left to different locations as a result of a disastrous war popularly remembered in Afikpo traditions as *Agha Ogbugbu Umuruma* (war for children massacre). The talented and powerful Egu people, according to Aja (2005:80-86), were said to have been betrayed by Aja Ogbenyi, a mole planted by Egwu Urochi, an acclaimed son of Igbo Ukwu, who had tried severally in past years to subdue the Egu to no avail. It was in the effort of some Egu/ Nkalu leaders that left Ehugbo for new homes like Akpoha and Onueke, where pockets of settlements were later founded to give birth to the “Abakaliki area.”

A remnant of the Egu/Nkalu group stayed behind at the original site that is today identified as Ugwu Egu in Afikpo urban. In Abakaliki historiography, the leader who founded the Abakaliki area remains obscured. It is argued that Anekewhaliki was the great grand father of the Abakaliki people who led them out of Afikpo until he was struck by *Igbogbo* (small pox), a mysterious disease then, which later killed him. Because of that, he was said to have been abandoned in an evil forest called *Ebonyi furu Egu* located somewhere in Onueke. (Mgbada, 2004:44) Oral accounts had it that ignorance in those days of a cure for the small-pox disease was the reason why Anekewhaliki was so abandoned in an evil forest and remains obscured in the history of his people.

Thus, Anekewhaliki, as the grand ancestor of the Abakaliki people, remains an understudied aspect of Abakaliki history. His obscurity in the history of his people is attached to the fact that death by small-pox (*Igbogbo*) was seen as shameful in those early days. Orthodox medicines were not common then, and there was no known traditional treatment for diseases like the small-pox. Hence, those who contracted strange diseases were believed to have offended the gods in some unknown ways and therefore, were adjudged as deserving to be abandoned in the evil forests without befitting burials, no matter their socio-political standing.

The absence of Anekewhaliki from Abakaliki history has given rise to claims to many descents among the different clans in the area. While the Ezza clan claim Ezekuna was their ancestor, Izzi hold that Ekuma Enyi was their forbear; and Ikwo believe their ancestor was



Enyi Nwegu. (Mgbada, 2004:44; Steensel, 2009:6) But in Echiegu (1998:8), Ekuma Enyi was an ancestor to Izzi and Ikwo only while Ezekuna was their brother-in-law because he married their sister, Anyigor.

That assertion raises questions on the identity of Ezekuna, the acclaimed ancestor of the Ezza group. Ezza historiography recognizes Anekewhaliki or Anekewa as the grand ancestor of Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo because “he was the father of Enyi who begat Una and Ekuma.” (Nwinya, 2016:12) He maintained that:

The Ezza people’s migration ... is traced to Anekewhaliki, father of Enyi ... the great grand father of Ezeke Una (Ezeke-Una), the legendary war lord of the Ezza people and the greatest general of all times, who brought Ezza to lime light.

Nwinya did not mention where the migration began but rather stressed that Ezeke changed the settlement pattern of Ezza people ‘automatically’ from his father’s clustered type to a scattered pattern to enable him secure the vast land that his father had acquired while he was away. Accordingly, Ezeke had gained knowledge of the scattered settlement pattern through his wide travels to different places to “fend for himself as an orphan.”

Having been brought up as an orphan under the tutelage of his uncle (Ekuma Enyi), (Ezeke) learnt so many things in his life such that the can bear hardship. As he was living with his uncle, he was tortured to a point that he escaped from home to fend for himself outside the country home. While away from home, he got in touch with the Akpa group of warriors. Also, he visited so many towns like Edda, fikpo, Ohafia, Onitsha (Onicha Mmiri), Awka (Oka), Iddah, Tiv, etc.

Nwinya maintained that Ezeke Una returned home when his uncle, Ekuma Enyi, had died and decided to dislodge his cousins, Nnodo and Noyo, from Enyi Anekewhaliki, his grand father’s home, on the ground of being the most senior among the grand children. Harping on the tradition of primogeniture, Ezeke Una hoped to inherit his grandfather’s home. As a result, Nnodo and Noyo conspired to eliminate Ezeke because they perceived Ezeke as a big threat. Unfortunately, Nnodo lost his life in the conflict that followed. But Onuoha and Ani (2016) argued that there was never an Ezeke Una but simply Ezekuna, as the ancestor of the Ezza people. They disagreed that Ezekuna left his father’s compound at Onueke to wander about before he returned home to start a fight with his cousins over primogeniture rights.



Meanwhile, on a different occasion in 2017, Onuoha (See Appendix 2) conceded that the clans of Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo had reached a consensus in recent time by which they adopted Ekuma Enyi as their common ancestor. Without explaining further on the consensus of Ekuma Enyi and the wide claims that Ezekuna was the Ezza ancestor, Onuoha and Ani (2016:131) contested Nwinya's account on Ezza origin, describing it as spurious postulations that needed further investigation. But as a matter of fact, consensus does not often mean correctness of facts but simply a kind of compromise where closer ties are required for some social and political gains.

Afoke and Nworie (2010:8-9) seem to be in support of the consensus adoption of Ekuma Enyi as the ancestor of all Abakaliki people. They averred that:

Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo were brothers, grand children of Ekuma Enyi. Ezekuna is the father of Ezza, and Noyo, the father of Ikwo whereas Olodo is the father of Izzi. The three brothers have one father, namely, Ekuma Enyi.

Afoke and Nworie argued against the notion that the Ezza or any Abakaliki clan had any relationship with Afikpo. They said that such a claim can not be accepted because it "fails to establish the cultural relations between the Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo." They also opposed any argument of massive movement involving any Abakaliki group from Okigwe through Afikpo. They tenaciously hold that the theory of "massive movement ...from the Okigwe escapement into Afikpo," ignores the obvious fact that Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo have been together as one family begotten by one ancestor from time immemorial. Accordingly, Afoke and Nworie (2010:9) wrote:

We have established... that Ezekuna is closely related to the Izzi and Ikwo but the Afikpo version says little or nothing about Ezza's obvious cultural affinity with Ikwo and Izzi, which is evidently decipherable upon meeting these three brothers in their children.

Nonetheless, they summed up without an attempt to prove the identity of Ekuma Enyi or Ezekuna, a lacuna that tasks historical objectivity. Meanwhile, Afoke contradicted his earlier opposition to the massive movement of people (that included Ezekuna) from the Okigwe escapement into Afikpo, in the *Discourse Journal* (2000: 18-29), an indigenous publication on Ezza history and social events, where he claimed that:



Oral traditions passed from generation to generation by the Ezza agree...that the legendary founder of the Ezza ...was Ezekuna (who) was said to have migrated from Afikpo. It is not clear whether they came to Afikpo in the company of migrants who may have started their journey from the Okigwe escarpment or (even Item).

Facts on traditional and cultural grounds now abound to prove Afikpo and Abakaliki relations from time immemorial. Odeke and Onuoha (December, 2020) observed that:

there are several cultural traits that are common to Afikpo and Abakaliki clans ... there are several gods and cultural identities that are peculiar (only) to the people. For example, gods like *Ukoro* or *Ikoru* for war and hunting; *Okikeuwa* for fertility in women and child care; *Njokuji* for better yields of yams; *Njaji* for the protection of yams in the barns; *Ogbube Ali*, a support deity to the earth-goddess; and *Oriete* or *Orinte* for peace covenants and detection of the truth, and so on.

Other cultural practices that are peculiar to the people of Afikpo and Abakaliki include adult circumcision known as *Iba Ogo* or *Ime Evo* in Afikpo clans; *Ibvu Ubvu Ogaranya* (among Ezza and Izzi people) and *Afiafia* or *Ofiasha* in Ikwo clan. Another common cultural trait between the people is the *Ogbu Isi* (Head hunters) secret society for warriors and valiant men. It is called *Ishiagu* cult in Ikwo land. There is also the peace covenant culture called *Oriete* in Afikpo and *Orinte* in Ezza, *Erinte* in Izzi. (Aja, 2005; Steensel, 2009; Odeke and Onuoha, 2020) There are yet any historical or anthropological records about the dispersal of the early Igbo groups after the death of Eri, acclaimed progenitor of the Igbo race, which went eastern ward from Awka or Nsukka, through Enugu into the northeastern region where the Abakaliki people are found today.

Wars in Ezza Inter-group Relations

Ezza land, like the United State of America, is a place where wars were largely taken for diplomacy. Americans fought wars to defend democracy and they took it for diplomacy, even when they were not invited to fight. But the Ezza fought wars to suppress suppression only when they were invited to assist a suppressed people. In the case of the Americans, victory gave them the right to rule the defeated through proxies while in the Ezza case, the profit of war was only the parcel of land extended to them for their sacrifices in saving a



people under the threat of extermination. Wars are fought for different reasons by nations. While Ezza warriors accepted to go to war against a community, its target was the parcel of land from the communities that requested their military services.

The piece of land given to the Ezza group served different purposes; first, to the Ezza; then to the rescued community; and lastly, the bellicose defeated community. Because of the terror Ezza warriors struck on communities, the community they helped always accepted that an Ezza community be settled at the boundary between them and their hostile neighbour to prevent further hostility. That way, the new Ezza settlement served as a buffer zone that gave the hope of peace to Ezza hosts as well as forced the defeated community to accept to remain in peace with their neighbours. On both sides, souls were saved.

Meanwhile, Ezza warriors never went to a war unless they consulted the spirit of Ezekuna, the grand spirit of Ezza wars. "In all Ezza relations, Ezekuna is recognized and honoured as the physical and spiritual leader of the people." (Odeke, 2018) Oral sources had it that Ezekuna, a courageous disciplinarian and the Ezza ancestor was consulted at Nchonu where he was believed to have been buried, and some sacrifices were made on his grave. Promises of better thanksgiving were equally made by the Ezza warriors to the spirit of Ezekuna; that is, if he helped secure victory for his people. In Odeke (2019), it is noted that when Ezza warriors prepared for a war, they first of all assembled at the Nchonu Shrine (the Ezza national shrine) where prayers and sacrifices were made to the spirit of Ezekuna for the protection of the warriors. Ezekuna was promised bountiful thanksgiving in return at the end of every successful war.

Ezza warriors exerted a covenant from any community that called for their assistance against a bellicose neighbour. The covenant was sealed between the two groups with a life fir (Ogbu) tree planted at the centre of the portion given to Ezza people for permanent settlement by their host. That was after all necessary sacrifices were conducted at the centre of that portion, to ascertain that the host community will not plan any evil against the Ezza, and vice versa, as long as the Ezza settlers lived in that community. That piece of land also served as a continuous sacrifice for all Ezza souls lost in the battle to save the host community. The fir tree, a symbol of the peoples' covenant, must not be uprooted or cut down by anybody at any time. It stands as a mark of an everlasting agreement in honour of Ezekuna, the great ancestor



and spirit of Ezza wars. Ugbo (2017. See Appendix 3) said that to cut down the tree was a great dishonor to the Ezza ancestor and an open invitation to Ezza attack because it stood for arrogance and reckless violation of a covenant entered into with the blood of Ezza warriors. “Ezza people cannot take that.” The tree signified Ezza’s right of permanent settlement in any community.

Though Ezekuna, a thorough disciplinarian, according to Ugbo, instructed his descendants never to engage in unjust wars against any community, and never to drive their hosts out of their homes, he did not instruct that the Ezza should fold their hands and watch people take away anything that belonged to them. “Throughout the ages, the Ezza man will not dishonor Ezekuna, his ancestor.”(Ugbo. See Appendix 3) He preached against unjust wars, and warned his children to avoid them. According to Ugbo:

Ezekuna wanted his children to stay peacefully with their hosts, and to settle as peace makers between their hosts and their bellicose neighbours so as to prevent the escalation of hostilities between them.

The Ezza would have loved to stay peacefully without wars. But he needed land for his extensive farm works, and land was in short supply in his traditional homestead. Thus, he was available whenever a community in trouble called for assistance. The quests for war became a major trait in an Ezza man because of his dire need of land. Ugoh (2003:26) said that for the Ezza,

To refuse to farm means refusal to live a normal life and normal life is to farm and farming requires fertile lands which they lacked from (the) onset of their history. This has led to a lot of migrations by the people to other lands ... in search (of farm lands). Thus, whether they are found in Effium or Ishielu (Eha-Mufu) or Onicha or at Enugu (Mpi), they are ready to adapt to the life style of their host, provided they do their farming.

To achieve that, Ezza people sometimes adopted subtlety in their relations with people of other communities. By that they won the hearts of their hosts through submissiveness, friendliness, and hard work. To the Ezza, that was a form of diplomacy because it influenced their allies and got them to fulfill Ezza’s biddings without confrontation. That was one peaceful approach that granted the Ezza their much desired lands in many areas outside their original homeland in the Abakaliki region. While many believe that the Ezza unilaterally



dispossessed weaker communities of their lands, many are not aware that most Ezza wars were fought through invitations extended by communities that were in danger of losing their entire territories to their enemies. Yet, such invitations were thoroughly evaluated by Ezza elders at Opoku Ezekuna in Onueke, the traditional headquarters of the Ezza nation. (Opoku Ezekuna is the preserved residence of the Ezza ancestor, Ezekuna.) Unless justifiable grounds were established, and a covenant that ensured Ezza will be given a permanent portion of land for their farm works was entered into with the community in need of military assistance, Ezza elders would not declare war on any community. These, according to Nwofeke Offia, were important factors in all Ezza wars. (See Appendix 8)

Attempts to End Wars in Ezza Inter-group Relations

The coming of colonial rule to the Abakaliki region altered the people's pre-colonial methods of diplomacy, especially the Ezza people, affecting their drive for land, and humbling their self-ego as the sole super power in the northeastern Igbo land. It also encouraged the rise of weaker communities against the might of Ezza warriors. These were the main historical events that took place in the Abakaliki region between 1900 and 1960 when British troops held sway over the entire region.

After the British conquest of the region in 1905, Ezza people were forced to adopt peaceful means to their quests for land. Some Ezza men were captured and forced to Calabar to work in the construction of houses and other quarters for the British captors. Others were forced to migrate elsewhere to seek wage labour to pay the newly introduced taxes that could only be paid in British currency. The migrant Ezza labour force went places like Ishiagu, Umuahia, Enugu, and other places to offer their services at colonial construction sites. Ezza farmers also migrated to distant rural areas like Ondo (in Western Nigeria), Ikom (in Cross River), Ikorodu (in Eko/Lagos), Onuogba Nike (in Enugu), and many other places in search of farmlands. (Anyanwu, 2005:137-138) As noted by Naanen (2006:69-102), direct taxation, the catalyst of Ezza wide dispersal after their fall in 1905, was introduced in southeastern Nigeria on April 1, 1928.

The coming of the British troops to Ezza land was necessitated by their incontractable wars with many other communities. Before then, the Ezza were dreaded by all neighbours and admired by those who sought their mercenary services. It was unbelievable to many that a



force existed that could surmount the Ezza military might. Ezza hegemony in the Abakaliki area crumbled totally in 1918, after their 1905 punitive war against Izzi for inviting and accommodating the British forces. But the invitation saved Izzi from losing Amegu, their ancestral home to Ezza warriors.

The beginning of the decline of Ezza military was its frequent wars against the Oshiri. The wars were intermittently fought along side the wars with Izzi. The British defeat of the Ezza was the result of the Ezza's bluff of the British's call for armistice over the attacks on the Oshiri. (Anyanwu, 2005:138) Then the fall of the Ezza military and the consequent imposition of British rule over the entire Abakaliki region altered Ezza's land instinct. War mongering came under question as many Ezza young men left home to far communities to seek wage labour to meet the demands of the strange colonial rule. Bartholomew Ugbo said that Ezza people realized the vanities of war which called for the re-engineering of Ezza inter-group relations. He noted that real diplomacy was the ability to live friendly with strangers while influencing them to do one's biddings. In his view:

Ezza people are always submissive, hard working and loyal to their hosts. They are very, very friendly to people. It is by these means that they win the hearts of their hosts and sustain their relations with them. (See Appendix 5)

The main reason for setting up the Ochinkpuru mediation council was to negotiate an end to all conflicts involving Ezza citizens everywhere. Knowledge of such conflicts is made known to Ezza elders at Okpoku Ezekuna traditional ground at Onueke where they are thoroughly considered. Then members of the mediation council are mandated to find a better way to intervene and restore peace between the Ezza citizens and their hosts. To the Ezza, dialogue has become the only way to peace and progress in the pursuit of his interests everywhere.

The initial Ezza proud claim that 'between heaven and earth stands the Ezza; the three of us own the world' (*owa elu, owa ali, owa Ezza; ono g' anyi ha nweru uwa*) is now down played. It changed after the 1905 Ezza defeat by British forces. Anyanwu (2005:140) postulated that the new belief became: 'between the heaven and earth; apart from the white man, who does the Ezza fear?' (*owa elu, owa ali, ewezuge nwa mbeke, ala ma atu onye egvu?*) The



mellowing of Ezza propensity for wars encouraged weaker communities to rise individually against Ezza's right to own permanent settlements among them, even in communities where the *Ogbu Ezekuna* was still standing. According to Romanus Nwafor (See Appendix 6), these open rebellions were the worst consequence of the conquest of the Ezza clan by the British.

James Nweke, the 9th Head of Ezza Oji-enya Community, maintained that the only allegation against the Ezza in most conflicts is their refusal to drop the Ezza identity. He accepted that allegations of encroachment may be true in some cases but in many others, some hosts of the Ezza people merely fabricate issues that will breach existing peace. (See Appendix 7)

However, oral sources in Echara/Nkaleke contended that the greed for land was one issue with the Ezza group. They believed that an average Ezza farmer can not share a boundary with a neighbour for three consecutive years without attempts to grab portions of the other man's land. Questioned on whether that trend still obtains in the present, they greed that the tendency might have reduced in the new age due to civilization and its consequences.

Nkalagu youths once revolted against the Ezza community in Nkalagu over boundary disputes. In that uprising, Ezza farms were destroyed with their crops, and many Ezza houses were burnt down. The Ezza Nkalagu people ran to Ezza elders at Okpoku Ezekuna, to request that war be declared on Nkalagu. But the elders decided to involve the Ochinkpuru Council for a thorough investigation on: the true cause/causes of the uprising, the extent of damage done on the two sides (if any, including casualties), to seek evidence of an old agreement for military assistance between Nkalagu and the Ezza, possibilities for lasting peace, and recommendations from the Council on the situation. Ugbo said that at the end of the investigation, the Council could not find a good reason for war on Nkalagu.

We then decided to mediate peace between our people and the youths of Nkalagu. But the youths were not ready for any peace that will let the affected Ezza citizens return to Nkalagu We could not establish an evidence of old military pact with our people. So, the Ezza victims of that revolt were advised to bear their losses. Going to war against Nkalagu under the circumstances would be unfair and unjust. That would be against the instruction of



Ezekuna to his children, which has been passed down from one generation to the other. It can not be violated in our own generation. See Appendix 4)

Ugbo maintained that peace was now the watch word in Ezza inter-group relations. Ensuring tolerance and peaceful co-existence were now part of the efforts of the Ezza in communities where they were having conflicts with their hosts. The traditional Igbo dictum of *onye biri, ibe ya biri* (Live and let live), has become relevant in Ezza inter-group relations and has been incorporated into Ezza relations with all communities.

We don't want to engage in wars to secure our interests. We no longer assist communities in wars. We now go by dialogue, no matter the provocation. Wars are no longer fashionable in this age where all lands are legally owned by societies. We now adopt dialogue. (See Appendix 4)

The Ochinkpuru Council has recorded some successes in its mediated task. Agbogazi (in Enugu State), Nkalagu and Ezillo (in Ebonyi State) were cited as communities where the Ochinkpuru Council had achieved peace for the Ezza clan. Nwaofeke Offia said that the Ochinkpuru Council has the backing of the apex Ezza Council of elders (*Nde Nze na Ozo* council or *Nde Ogaranya Ezza*). (See Appendix 8) For that power conferred on the Council, its decisions can not be questioned by an Ezza person after they have been enforced.

Prospects and Challenges to the Ochinkpuru Mediation efforts

Dialogue is a formal discussion between two individuals or groups when they are trying to settle a problem or end a particular disagreement or about to commence a relationship. (Hornby, 2010:402) Dialogue works under peace conditions without which parties will not be comfortable to sit together to discuss a way out of their differences. Between two warring groups, dialogue is impossible unless an armistice or cease fire is obtained first.

If the claims of Ezza people about Ezekuna, their progenitor, and the kind of discipline he bequeathed on them are anything to go by, then there is good hope for Ezza citizens over land boundaries. But land is too dear to an average Ezza person that life seems meaningless to him except he controls a good chunk of it for his farming purposes. Ugoh (2003) made it clear that the Ezza are found in many communities outside their traditional home due the "poor nature of the soil in their original area of inheritance." He accepted



that farming requires fertile lands which were lacking in Ezza's traditional homeland, leading to their wide migrations to different communities.

Ezza wage labourers migrated massively to Ishiagu in about the 1930s to gain jobs at the construction of the railway station there. The migration was result of the introduction of direct taxation in 1928. After a while at the railway station, the migrants began to buy lands for personal homes. Parts of those lands were turned to farms. Encroachment beyond the purchased portions then began. The Ezza were said to have adopted apologies and settlements whenever confronted until a well integrated Ezza community developed in Ishiagu town till the present. Afoke and Nworie (2010) noted that it would amount to an unpardonable sin today for anybody to tell an Ezza-Ishiagu man or woman to "return to his Ezza ancestral homeland." Ezza settlers enjoy relative peace in Ishiagu town.

Nevertheless, in places like Agbogazi (Enugu State), Nkalagu, Ikwo, Izzi, Ishielu, Effium, and many other clans, boundary disputes have been a common occurrence between the Ezza and their hosts. In these communities, Ezza settlers are accused of encroachments, resulting to bloody conflicts in many instances. On the other hand, an oral source at Echara/Nkaleke said: "But for anybody to trespass into an Ezza territory anywhere amounts to an unforgivable offence to Ezza people, and may result to a conflict." Till the present, facts of such encroachments and their aftermaths were not available in any community.

However, Afoke and Nworie (2010:111) tried to justify the alleged Ezza encroachments with the fertility of Ezza women and the consequent rapid rise of their population. The question of encroachment is a serious issue between the Ezza and many of their host communities. Afoke and Nworie admitted that fact when they wrote:

for a people that practice shifting cultivation, access to new and unused land was a constant temptation. But there was bound to be resistance that often results to wars when one group encroaches into a neighbour's land.

About the gift of fertility to Ezza women and its resultant high population, fact remains that women everywhere give birth to babies that grow to increase populations. Thus, fertility is observed not to be peculiar to Ezza women, and populations of communities all over the



world increase because child birth is a natural phenomenon. The Igbo saying that *amuta madu, ya amuta ibe ya* (Translated: A person born must give birth to another person), proves the dynamism of birth in population growth. That is to say, every human society, no matter where and how small, must grow continuously through child births. That some communities sought Ezza military services in the past did not mean that women were not giving birth to children in those communities.

Now, how can conflict be avoided between the Ezza and their host communities? The Ochinkpuru Council said that part of its mission was to ensure relative peace between Ezza citizens and their hosts in all communities. The Council claimed to have achieved success in some conflict situations involving its people of the Ezza clan. Apart from Nkalagu where the Council resolved that all Ezza citizens affected by the youths uprising there should bear whatever loss they sustained, Ochinkpuru had been able to manage other conflicts in favour of Ezza people.

In Agbogazi (Enugu State), the Council succeeded because the original boundary covered by an earlier Agbogazi -Ezza covenant was identified and easily demarcated against further encroachment from either side. In Ezillo community, even though some youths did not approve of the final resolution of the Ezza-Ezillo conflict, the Council also negotiated a successful demarcation of an autonomous community for the Ezza group. Again, that was because there was a proof of an old covenant between the two groups in time past. The Ezza-Ezillo autonomous community was gazetted by the Ebonyi State government under former governor of the State, David Nweze Umahi.

There are observable factors that may stand against the success stories of the Ochinkpuru mediation. The first is the problem of “modern times.” These times are influenced by so many forces that are often unimaginable, ranging from Western orientations and values, questions on the actions of the ancestors in the past, and the justification of some of their deeds as binding continually on their descendants in the present. Two, lack of tolerance, love and unity among off-springs of the ancestors. Last but not the least, impatience, greed and self-centredness of the youths of today.

The Western civilization which was foisted on most parts of the world has left confusion and disasters on peoples and their perception of the rights of others to co-exist with them. For



instance, before Western civilization was introduced in Africa, people of different nations related as members of the same group based on communalism which was a way of being one's brother's keeper. But Western civilization when introduced into the continent destroyed the people's bonds and set them against themselves. The economic quests of Western imperialists beclouded their patience and robbed them of the knowledge to recognize the humanity in Africans. Thus, they went against the people's traditions for the gains that brought them to the continent.

Again, the Christian religion which was tactically used to herald Western imperialism into Africa made use of Western form of education replaced the traditional orientation of the African about himself and his ways of life with capitalist tendencies that encourage individual acquisition of wealth at the expense of others. Apart from preaching the conversion of the African from his traditions (which were classified by the imperialists as primitive and paganism), Christianity (and Islam) established schools that were used to further brainwash the African out of his reality. With the strange knowledge, the remolded African developed a new vision of the world and began to imagine him-self living like those that were actually destroying his natural ways of life. That love for the strange ways soon metamorphosed into total acceptance and adaptation of foreign values, goods and means of acquiring them. Greed, self centeredness and avarice were part of the means to meeting up with these foreign notions.

The Abakaliki people, including the Ezza and the people of the communities wherever they are found, are not in any way immuned from the viruses of the foreign ways of life. Whenever the evil tendencies of the foreign systems rare their divisive heads, there are bound to be conflicts against any giant of peace mediation and conflict resolution. How conscious is the Ochinkpuru Council of these dangers, and how prepared is the Council to surmount them? The youths of today seem to have given up everything Africa and have embraced in its entirety, everything Western as the ideal. (Odeke, 2020: 37-38) It is never out of place to witness youths of today questioning the wisdom in the actions of their fathers of old, and sometimes their readiness to kill to correct what they perceive as the mistakes of their ancestors.



Another serious challenge to the mediation efforts of the Ochinkpuru Council is the greed of the youths of today, and their determination to be counted among the successful people in town. In many places, such youths always see opportunities in fomenting troubles within areas occupied by any settler group in their midst. Greed breeds envy, and envy breeds intolerance and bitterness among a people. That seems to have been the case in the Ezza-Ezillo conflict whose remote cause was said to be envy over a recharge card sales spot in an open space in the community. Whether correct or wrong, that a section of the youths of Ezillo was said to have distanced from the eventual settlement of the crisis signaled the deep seated envy and animosity against the settlers. Although such unsatisfied youths may have nothing to do against the agreement of their people, their unattended grievances are potential threats to all peace efforts within communities where they are found. Has the Ochinkpuru Council any after peace mechanism to counter eventual uprising from such a disgruntled group?

One would have recommended the involvement of women groups in the efforts of the all-men Ochinkpuru Council if lasting peace is envisaged to come faster. This is because women as mothers of the youths, who often take up arms and are killed in battles, are natural mobilizers. It will amount to an effort of great gain, according to Heater and Berridge (1993), if the Council could consider involving women from both ends of any conflict to lend their voice in support of peaceful co-existence of their children and people. This opinion is hinged on the fact that peace is sine-qua-non to progress and development of any society, and women as carriers of natural peace dispositions, have always succeeded whenever allowed to intervene in conflict management and resolution. The Ezza Ezekuna Women Association (EEWA) demonstrated that capability in 1978 when they were given opportunities to intervene in some conflicts between the Ezza and some of their neighbours.

Conclusion

In those days when might was right, the Ezza was the military super power in the whole of northeastern Igbo land. They offered mercenary services to many far and near communities in exchange for parcels of land which have formed the extensive Ezza settlements in the diaspora. This helped the farming interests of the Ezza groups outside their traditional homestead. It was the coming of the British colonial government that brought an end to that approach of land acquisition by the Ezza. But the turn-around approach by communities that



had enjoyed Ezza military services before the coming of the British have resulted to tensions in different host communities of Ezza citizens. Though efforts are made by different groups like the Ochinkpuru Ezza Council, to stop the tensions, there have been reoccurrences of the conflicts every now and then, especially in communities where Ezza people have stayed for many years based on old covenants with Ezza warriors.

An average Ezza person views these attempts as a major affront to Ezza's inalienable rights. Thus, the Ochinkpuru Council of Ezza clan has tried to negotiate peaceful co-existence for the Ezza and their hosts everywhere. While this paper condemns the fomenting of crises against the Ezza over lands they gained on covenants in years past, it does not support the view that the increase of Ezza population on such lands guarantees them any right to over step the boundaries into areas of their hosts unless permitted. Such encroachments are the alleged causes of many conflicts between the Ezza and most of their hosts. The efforts of the Ochinkpuru mediation council will pay off better if both the Ezza and their landlords all over would desist from encroaching into each other's areas of influence.

Again, it will be helpful if the Ochinkpuru Council could, as a matter of policy, find a way to involve women of both sides of a conflict to intervene for faster resolution and attainment of lasting peace. This is because women as mothers, with their natural compassion for their own children dying in avoidable wars, have the capability for easy and faster mobilization of people for even peaceful settlement of any crisis. (Ihuagwu, 2014) And when that peace is attained, its effects will show in the enduring progress and development of all in the community.

Ezza women had demonstrated that capability in many past conflicts. In 1978, for instance, the Ezza Ezekuna Women Association (Eewa) contributed in the resolution of a conflict between its community in Effium and the Effium landlords. In the same year also, the Association helped in settling the conflict between the Ezza in Umuhuali and their hosts. The women group had equally contributed to the restoration of peace in some inter communal clashes between Umuezeoka and Umuezeokaoha, between Umuoghara and Oriuzor, and others. These are just few examples of how effective women can be in negotiating for peace in crisis periods.



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APPENDICES

1. Nweke, Theophilus, about 48 years in 2017 and Youth leader of Ezza Oji-enya community in Nkaleke-Echara, Ebonyi Local Government Area, where he was interviewed on 29/07/2017 by the researcher on the meaning, origin and migrations of the Ezza.
2. Onuoha, I.O., about 44 years in 2017; a Public Servant. He was interviewed by the researcher on 26/07/2017 in Abakaliki, on who was the true ancestor of the Ezza people.
3. Ugbo, Bartholomew, was about 70 years in 2017 and Chairman of the Ochinkpuru Ezza Council, when he was interviewed by the researcher in his (Ugbo) compound in Udenyi Umuezekoha, on what was the place of Ezekuna in the life of an Ezza man, including his war-like life.
4. Ugbo, Bartholomew, on how far the Ochinkpuru Council has gone in its assignment of finding permanent peace between the Ezza and other communities.
5. Ugbo, Bartholomew, on the meaning of good inter-group relations.
6. Nwafor, Romanus, about 61 years and Chairman of Ezza Oji-enya Welfare Association in 2017, when he was interviewed by the researcher on 29/07/2017 in Ezza Oji-enya, on his views about some communities who received Ezza war assistance in time past wanting to recover their covenanted lands from the Ezza in the present times.
7. Nweke, James, about 62 years in 2017 and the 9th Community head (*Nna di uhu*) of Ezza Oji-enya community, when he was interviewed by the researcher there on 29/07/2017 on why some communities who received Ezza war assistance in time past want to recover their covenanted lands from the Ezza in the present times.
8. Ofia, Nwaofeke, about 97 years and a traditionalist in 2017, when he was interviewed by the researcher on 29/07/2017 in Ezza Oji-enya, on the place of Ezekuna in the life of an Ezza man, including his war-like life.