

## **Violent Conflicts in Nembe: 1980 - 2020**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

The main issues of this paper is to present an historical account of violent conflicts in Nembe Kingdom from 1980-2020 which has bedeviled by the menace of underdevelopment. This violent conflicts have resulted to the economic hardship and social miscarriages on the citizenry. However, Nembe Kingdom is having a rough time, there is uncontrollable inflation and unemployment in the Kingdom. The paper examines the effects on political leadership crises, insecurity and the area of Godfatherism in Nembe city, and Government efforts in resolving these conflict, and how it has aggravated the existing peace and harmony among the Nembe people in Bayelsa State of Nigeria. The sources of information is largely on journals, books and oral history. The rational theory was applied because it provides explanations for violent conflicts between groups by exploring its economic, political and historical relationship between individuals and groups in different ways. The findings shows that constant interference by various political elites and economic gladiators whose intension is to frighten their opponents with conflicts and wars as a means of survival or recognition by the government in the State is responsible for the conflict. It recommended that the government civil society organizations, religious groups, and non-governmental organizations should enlighten the people on the effects of conflicts and wars such as the wastage of time and energy, loss of lives and properties and the displacement of population from the communities thereby destabilizing their social stability and the economic underdevelopment of the state and the country at large.

## Introduction

Nembe was one of the prominent city-states in the Niger Delta in pre-colonial times. The others were Elem-Kalabari, Okrika, Bonny, and Opobo in the present Rivers State, and Ode Itsekiri in the present Delta State.

The word "Nembe" refers to both the people and their language with the morpheme "Se". Nembe, Se, refers to the Nembe nation which comprise the people of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas of Bayelsa State,

The major Nembe settlements are Ogbolomabiri, Bassambiri, Twon, Okpoama, Odioma, Egwema, Beletiemma and Liama. Other sub-ethnic groups of the Nembe Se are the Tereke, Mini, Ikensi and Oluasiri. Nembe-n-ama (Nembe town or Nembe city) is also the name of the two towns of Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri being the chief towns of the Nembe people<sup>1</sup>.

Since Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri are seen as twin communities and are only separated by a small creek of about 40 to 50 meters wide, it is necessary to locate them in geographical proximity. The two communities are considered as Nembe in identifying their location. Nembe occupies an area of 760 square kilometer" Much of the area is covered by the Edumanon National Forest Reserve. However, the people call themselves "Nembe". Their fishing system is familiar with their neighbors. These people are called different names by their neighbors. While the Kalabiri call them "Nembe", the Ogbia call them "Aboh", while the Ijaw clans call them "Debe"<sup>2</sup>.

Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri which are the two principal cities of the Nembe are separated by a small creek. Around the two communities/cities are three smaller towns namely, Otatubo, Etiema, Orumabiri (juju town), Okipiri and Tubopiri (watering bush). They look up to Nembe as their mother town. Other people that have come in contact with the Nembe but have a distinct culture and background are the Ogbia, Akassa and the Okoroma people.

It is debatable that most of the smaller towns look up to Ogbolomabiri for political leadership, but Odiana, Okoroba, Idema and Agrisaba are more loyal to Bassambiri. This alone shows the struggle between the two mega cities,

Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri and has brought about some political and social conflicts<sup>3</sup>.

### **The Earliest Conflicts**

Conflict is an intrinsic and inevitable part of human existence. The people of Nembe are therefore not exempted from this phenomenon. From the early stage of the development of Nembe society, there have been some forms of conflict. However, what became the foundation of the present Nembe was started by the two predominant villages of Ogbolo-amabiri and Obolodio-amabiri.

From the oral traditions Ockiya recorded two accounts. One of the accounts states that some people from Obolodio-ama-biri went and made fishing stakes at the water front of Olodio-ama-biri without permission. The people of Obodio-ama-biri saw this as a direct insult and violation of their native laws and customs, and therefore, resolved to wage war against Olodio-ama-biri. They immediately destroyed the fishing stakes. The Olodio-ama-biri thought the action of the Obolodio-ama-biri to be unkind and so were offended. They decided to fight against Obolodio-ama-biri. Thus, a civil conflict broke out which lasted for some weeks, when the people of Olodio-ama-biri and Obolo-ama-biri sought for peace.<sup>4</sup>

The second version has it that the war was the result of a quarrel between both parties. It is said that some young men from both towns went hunting using the pride method, that is, "chasing animals at one end of the bush" by making terrible noise through shouting and beating of vessels towards the other end where shooters were in ambush. In the process, only one duiker (*antelope*) was killed. Seeing that the one animal would not be enough to share, they decided to cook pepper soup with it. However, in the process of serving the soup, one active participant in the chasing was left out. This resulted to a quarrel between the cook and the man. Unfortunately, the cook and "Obolodio-ama-biri man, murdered the Olodio-ama-biri person. As vows were usual in those days, it was promised that the killer would be sent over to be killed, but the Olodio-ama-biri preferred to kill the murder's elder brother who was wealthier. The Obolodio-ama-biri people rejected this demand, and another civil war broke out in which many people were killed on both sides. However, the Obolodio-ama-biri were said to be victorious. To revenge for their defeat, the Olodio-ama-biri chief sent an emissary to a witch

doctor in Saka (Odual) who prepared a charm with a live black tortoise, being the totem of the god of the Obolo-ama. This led to the death of about one-third of the population of Obolo ama-biri. It is alleged that the Obolo-ama-biri people enquired of the source of their misfortune from their god and it was revealed to them. So, they paid a higher amount to the same witch doctor who prepared a charm with a life python, being the totem of the tribal god of Obodio-ama-biri, killing a large number of their population."<sup>5</sup>

The Olodio-ama-biri not relenting went again to the Saka witch doctor and this time came with small-pox epidemic, which nearly wiped out both towns. The survivors- of both towns migrated and settled in other places. Some of the Oboloamabiri people went to Sangana, Oruma, Okodia and Buseni, while others went as far as Okrika and Bonny. This is one reason why the Bonny and Okrika are said to have blood relationship with Nembe. It is also why the present sprang from those led by Kala-Ekule to found Ekule-ama, now in Kalabari district who returned to their former abode though what prompted their return is not clear to us. It might have been perhaps prompted by some historical events like the war boat display, dancing and music as a symbol of unity.

Another conflict of historical importance was that of Mingi and Ogbodo over succession to the throne of Nembe. This conflict led to the founding of Bassambiri as a kingdom. Ogbodo claimed succession to the throne by virtue of him being the son of the late king, Obia VII, who died when he (Ogbodo) was a minor. As a result of this, his uncle, Basuo, was crowned king. A war broke out between the two cousins and all efforts by the chiefs, priest and elders to reconcile them proved abortive. The conflict escalated to war between the two cousins which wasted several lives including the son of Ogbodo and a sister of Mingi. The chiefs and elders carefully examined the conflict and came to the conclusion that made Ogbodo king, but Minigi was not satisfied with their judgement and he quickly went on exile with his followers to Ondewari in the Olodiamabiri district of present day Southern Ijaw Local Government Area' Mingi blocked the major trade routes in their terrain that brought famine to Ogbodo and his followers. Ogbodo, to avoid famine, relinquished the throne to Mingi and crossed over to Oromabiri and later settled in Bassambiri where he established his kingdom called Bassambiri, "meaning" the settlement of Bassai".

In 1846, another conflict arose between Chief Koki and Chief Kien. Chief Koki claimed the family throne by virtue of his being the eldest son of the late King Boy Amain. Chief Kien also claimed it by virtue of his being the eldest man and nephew of the late king. Chief Amange and his supporters, supported by European traders, upheld the claim of Chief Koki. The case was taken to Oromabiri for final arbitration where the national god chose Chief Koki but he died uncrowned in the same year, 1847<sup>6</sup>.

After the death of Chief Koki in 1847, a second-dispute arose between Chief Amange and Chief Kien. Chief Amange claimed that he was the rightful heir to the throne because he was a grandson of King Forday Koko. This dispute was fierce and they were advised to go to Oroamabiri for peaceful settlement. From there, they were further referred to Arochukwu. At the end of it, Chief Kien was crowned king in 1849.

An armed conflict also arose between Chief Ogbari's House of Amasara Polo in Ogbolomabiri and that of Chief Owaji of Sikaka-Polo, Bassambiri. This conflict occurred during the reign of King Kien. The cause of the conflict is not known. It is said that both chiefs prepared their naval forces (war canoes) and the fighting took place at Tubo-kubu (lagoon flat), close to the small island now called Owaji Otokolo (Owaji Island). Both parties fought desperately but Owaji's forces were defeated. Owaji himself was wounded. He struggled to the middle of the small island and died. Hence, the place is referred to as Owaji Otokolo. Chief Ogbari, for fear of being punished by King Kien, submitted himself to the king. Rather than being punished, the king gave Ogbari additional men and ordered them to cut off and bring the bow and war canoes of Owaji which was placed as a trophy in his shrine. According to F. Iriakuma the people of Sikaka-Polo in Bassambiri were to search for the bodies of Owaji and his followers for burial.<sup>7</sup>

In the year 1892, a violent conflict arose between the house of Chief Iwowari (new wari) and Chief Kari, all of Bassambiri. It was an armed conflict that lasted for months. In the last battle, five members of Chief Kari's house were feared dead), namely, Akoko (the officer), Pappa, Osokpo, -Oboriyaomo, and a child. When peace was restored by King Koko and the priest, Chief Iwowari was told to make

restitution for the five persons killed. The names of those given in restitution were Pip, Odomina, Teiki, Osio and the fifth being a child was paid in goods.<sup>8</sup>

From the foregoing, it is clear that the Nembe people have had several intra-conflicts both armed and unarmed, between Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri. They have also had conflict with their near neighbour such as the Kalabari people.

### **Contemporary Conflicts in Nembe: 1980 -2020**

There is no doubt that communities in Nembe Local Government Area of Bayelsa State had been ravaged by crises during the period under study (1980 – 2020). Although inter-communal crises are engendered by so many factors, the Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri crises are mostly motivated by political and socio-economic struggles.

### **Community Development Committee (CDC) versus the Nembe Youth Movement Fraccas of 1994.**

In April 1994, a conflict arose between the Community Development Committee (CDC) and the Nembe Youths Movement. In that conflict Christopher, Ibolanyolgbeta, Ikiomogha and Mesis were brutalised by the members of the Nembe Youths Movement led by Bubeley Esegbe. They frighten their opponents away from the community by destabilizing them with violence in order to sustain their economic benefits in the Kingdom.

### **Agbarafuro-Isongufuro Encounter of 1995**

Agbara-Furo means "family of sniper fish" and Isongu-Furo "family of Ancovery". These were the code names of the political groups led by Kombo Itari and Lionel Jonathan respectively. The groups stood in opposition, caused by political disagreement of interest.<sup>9</sup>

In December 1995 the two groups engaged themselves in a violent encounter in which several people were wounded. The House of Kombo Itari was broken into and properties worth millions of naira were looted while some were destroyed by the Isongufuro group. This clash led to the death of one Mr. AkamodgioAyafa on 14th December. A detachment of the Nigerian mobile police Force (Mopo 130) was sent to quell the situation.

### **The Isein-Asawo-Isongufuro Crisis of 2000**

This was another armed conflict between two youth groups. This conflict started in the year 2000. The fracas started in Ogbolomabiri, leaving some injured and a few dead. The following persons Nengimote Benibo, Beriakumo Francis, Okutu popularly known as strong man were arrested and detained and their properties destroyed. Those who escaped the arrest came in the midnight and released their followers. The detainees and their followers that released them became known as the "Isein-Asawo" or "Isein" aka "Teme".

In July of the same year 2000 a factional conflict broke out between the Alien Alagoa-led faction of the Isein and the Asari Mangite led faction. Alien was the Youth Vice President while Asari, was one of the functional members of the Isein. This conflict resulted to a gun battle that led to the expulsion of the Asari led faction. The Allen leadership became known as "Allen Government",<sup>9</sup>

On 24th December, 2001, the community witnessed another attack lunched by the Asari led faction against "Allen Government". The result was the dethronement and expulsion of the Allen Government and its faithful after a clash that lasted over ten hours.

On July 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> 2002, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) primaries in Nembe saw a bloody gun battle between Isongufuro and Isein-Asawo at Ogbolomabiri, leading to the expulsion of Isein-Asawo from Nembe. By this time, Chief Barigha Amangi has adopted the Isein-Asawo for his political ambition in Nembe. The armed conflict was the result of Chief Lionel, Jonathan Omo's refusal to release electoral materials meant to conduct the primaries in Ogbolomabiri. It was confirmed that the electoral materials were in his possession in Bassambiri. The efforts of the Isein-Asawo group to retrieve the materials proved abortive. Meanwhile the Isongufuro group was also set to attack the Isein-Asawo in Ogbolomabiri on their way back. Friday 5<sup>th</sup> and Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> July, 2002 witnessed a conflict that could be described as a full blown war between the rival cult groups.

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Fifteen days later, precisely on the 21<sup>st</sup> July, 2002, a reprisal attack was made by the Isein-Asawo which led to the final expulsion of Isongufuro. The total number of deaths cannot be ascertained but is said by Iriakuma Friday to be about 30 to 40.

### **The Youth Election Crisis of 2006**

In 2006, series of conflicts occurred as a result of two youth groups engaged in a conflict that led to several youths been injured and properties destroyed. This conflict emanated from a disagreement between Kuroghoekigha Walter's (aka Odogu) support for Mr. Korighanyo Yosuo for President while Chief James Jephther (aka Octopus) supported Inemi Sidni.<sup>11</sup> It is said that the dispute arose between Octopus and Odogu over returns from local government council allocations. Kurogheokigha Walter being the Council Chairman was said to be making returns to Octopus his "godfather". Octopus later requested for an increment, which Odogu refused and stopped further payment. These issues resulted to animosity between the two factional groups in the youth organization.

### **Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Labour Party (LP) Crisis of March 2011**

On 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2011, some People's Democratic Party (PDP) faithfuls disrupted an occasion at the Labour Party (LP) Campaign Office in

The launching of the office resulted in a fracas that led to one person being injured on the side of the Labour Party (LP). The basic reason given for this action was that the PDP faithful declared that no other political party would be allowed in Ogbolomobiri.

March 29, 2011, witnessed another attack on Labour Party faithful in their attempt to organize themselves for the National Assembly elections coming up on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, 2011. That night saw an assault that left many injured. Consequently, a curfew was imposed restricting movement from 9.00pm to 6:00am it was later extended to 12 midnight to 6.00am.

### **The People's Democratic Party (PDP) Versus All Progressive Congress (APC) Crisis of November, 2019**

It is not a hidden fact that politics is one of the major causes of conflicts in Nigeria and Nembe society, as political parties used thugs to frighten their opponents, in



order to rig elections in their favour. Things were not different when a People's Democratic Party chieftain in Ogbolomabiri, Mr. Jonathan Obuebete, disrupted the peace of Nembe City with his campaign train to mobilise support for Hon. Seriake Dickson's preferred candidate, Senator Douye Diri for the forth-coming governorship election in the state. This incident led to the gruesome murder of 21 persons and the destruction of properties of some PDP members in Nembe City. This ugly incident brought government presence and security agents to restore normalcy in the area.<sup>12</sup>

### **Causes of Conflicts in Nembe**

In discussing social causes of conflicts one has to look at the works of classical social theorists from Marx and Comte to Simmel and Sorel, providing explanation for social conflicts, whether on a small or large scale, whether interactions between social groups or caused by external factors have been issues of common concern. This basically means that social conflict is a situation in which a person has a private or personal interest in influencing or inciting a conflict.<sup>13</sup>

In Nembe society, groups have been formed by both the Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri people, thereby inciting a clash of interest at every given situation. Some people see them as youths who carry out the will of the communities. There have been some cases where these youths go to their opposition towns to cause havoc. Sometimes these groups are supported by capitalists who use them for their personal ambitions. For instance, it can be argued that pressure groups such as the Bakassi boys and the militants in the Niger Delta started from such social groups. However, social conflicts are caused by struggles over values or power. The pursuit of interests generally generates conflicts. Thus, conflict is seen as a normal aspect of life rather than an abnormal occurrence. Society is composed of different groups that compete for resources. This causes a continual power struggle between the social groups as they fight for their own interests.<sup>14</sup>

### **Economic Causes**

An investigation into the causes of the conflicts reveal a contest for the control of oil royalty and employment opportunities accruing to the Nembe people from oil companies operating in the area. A good example is the CDC Youth Movement Fracas of 1994 in Ogbolomabiri and the factional youth crisis of 2006 in Bassambiri.

Some may argue that every economically driven conflict has a political undertone. The Nembe case is not different because most youth conflicts in Nembe are usually fueled by politicians who want to control the oil companies or the economy as there is much to gain financially. The Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri conflicts are up till date, said to have some political undertones to swing the multinational oil companies to their side, thereby gaining more financial benefits.

### **Political Causes**

In 'political violence, power generally translates into the ability to enact policies that sustain a particular political figure. Political conflicts often arise when one party, or political figure has the power to make changes that will affect the opposition party, thereby causing political violence. Some things include withholding of voting materials, conducting secret voting and manipulation of election results and a desire for or actual monopolistic control of politics by a group, thereby denying others of a level playing ground.

In Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri, there is also a political struggle that has destroyed many lives and properties, especially since the local government headquarters was transferred to Ogbolomabiri from Bassambiri in 1996.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Consequences of the Crises**

Crises never bring 'chocolates and bread', but death and destruction of properties. Therefore, it would not be far from the truth to say that these crises and wars discussed within the stipulated period of this work had brought about loss of lives and properties of both communities in Nembe Local Government Area of Bayelsa State of Nigeria. For example, in the Agbarafuro – Isongufuro crisis, over 30 lives were lost.

Generally, these crises have brought gross economic, social, educational and political backwardness and underdevelopment to the communities involved. No form of development can be achieved where peace and unity have ceased to exist, and have been replaced by war, hatred, bitterness and rancor.

### **Government Efforts to Resolve the Crises**

In the old Rivers State of which Bayelsa State was part, Col. Dauda Komo constituted a Commission of Enquiry in 1995 headed by Navy Captain Ombo (retired as Commodore) to investigate the causes of disturbance in Nembe Local Government Area. The report of the Commission was submitted to the State Government in 1996 but there was no result as the issues were not discussed or any recommendations made.

In 2000, the Bayelsa State Government under Chief (Dr.) D.S.P. Alamiyeseigha constituted a Judicial Commission of Enquiry to investigate the remote causes of the crisis in Nembe. The report indicted Chief Lionel Jonathan Omo and Chief Barigha Amangi as the causes of violence, resulting from political tussles in Nembe. The enquiry also identified the youth groups compelling oil companies operating in their respective areas to pay "stand by" salary (money). The Commission recommended a formal constitution that will guide the power structure, control and management of resources, as a means to create lasting peace.

In 2002, the government set up a Peace and Reconciliation Committee headed by Lady Mercy Alagoa. Discussions were held with several stake holders and a decision was taken to draw up a constitution for implementation.

In 2003, Chief (Dr.) D.S.P Alamiyeseigha and the Nembe Chiefs Council reached a decision that erring youths and individuals involved in the crisis should write a letter of apology and forgiveness to the offended chiefs and the community members. Subsequently, pardon was granted to 12 youths of the community, but the State Government was accused of supporting one faction against the other.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the immediate past governor of Bayelsa State, Hon. Henry Seriake Dickson received a report of the Panel of Enquiry on the Pre-Election Violence in Nembe Local Government Area. The government described the incident that led to the death of 21 persons during the PDP campaign in Nembe City three days to the November 16<sup>th</sup> 2019 gubernational election in the state as barbaric. Hon. Seriake Dickson in a statement by his Chief Press-Secretary, Mr. Fidelis Soriewei described the level of violence perpetrated in Nembe as tragic, and expressed dismay that the perpetrators of the heinous act were yet to be apprehended and brought to

justice over two months after the elections. He stressed the need for his administration to properly document the incident for posterity. He contended that while the wheel of justice may be slow, he was optimistic that justice would prevail in the issue of the slaughter of innocent people just before the Bayelsa State gubernatorial election. He urged the people to be law abiding, embraced peace and unity among themselves for sustainable developments in the State.

### **Conclusion**

Conflict has tarnished the image of Nembe society or kingdom. It is revealing that the various socio-political groups that have aspired to control the Nembe society and those still in place have not exhibited good moral standing. The period of these conflicts has witnessed both political and socioeconomic stagnation among other negative effects. The pulling down of the bridge linking the two communities shows the extent of hatred they had for each other, instead of being their brothers keepers. This unveils the level of backwardness occasioned by the fighting.

For lasting peace in the area, it is suggested that the Government of the State and the Council of Chiefs of both sides should establish Conflict Management Centers to orient the youths on the dangers of conflicts in their respective communities and the state at large. This will enable the youth leaders and the political elites to have a rethink concerning issues effecting the development of the Nembe people, and to formulate policies toward establishing lasting peace in the two Nembe Kingdoms.

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