FROM 'MIGRANTS' TO 'MILITANTS': HISTORICIZING MIGRATION AND COMMUNAL CONFLICTS IN AGULERI AND UMULERI COMMUNITIES OF SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

Recent developments in global economics and international relations have inspired increased scholarly inquiry on migration. In sub-Sahara Africa, studies of migration have been largely conceptualized as a continuing process of circulation. As such, concepts like 'circulation of labour', 'target migration' and 'reciprocal migration' have dominated the literature on migration. Consequently, migration has rarely been adequately conceptualized and contextualized. While it is true that migration is a growing phenomenon anchored deep in history, it is not very often understood longitudinally as a central element in the composition and re-composition of human society. In the context of the incipient escalation of intra-state insurgency, the rise of ethnic militias and non-state armed groups in Africa, the role of migration in the constitution and reconstitution of communal and ethnic groups and fomenting 'new conflicts' between groups have elicited research interest. This paper focuses on the nexus between migration, urbanization and 'new conflicts' in Nigeria.

Population movements across local, national and international borders, otherwise referred to as migration, constitute an integral aspect of human history. Recent developments in global economics and international relations such as globalization, brain drain, human trafficking, Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and neo-Liberal economic doctrines, have inspired increased scholarly inquiry and social policies on migration. In sub-Sahara Africa, studies of migration have been largely conceptualized as 'a continuing process of circulation along origin-migrant-destination continuum'. As such, concepts like circulation of labour, circular migration, target migration and reciprocal migration have dominated the literature on migration. It would appear that circulation 'encapsulates the essence of specificity of migration dynamics in sub-Sahara Africa'. Consequently, migration has rarely been adequately conceptualized and contextualized.

This fact is well expressed in the prolegomenon to the 2007 CODESRIA/SEPHIS Workshop on Extended History. It argues that 'while it is true that migration is a growing phenomenon that is also anchored deep in history, it is not very often understood longitudinally as a central element in the re-composition of human society'. Although historical and anthropological studies have grounded migration in the narratives of historical origins, formation of primordial identities and constitutions of communal and ethnic groups, in the context of the incipient escalation and proliferation of intra-state insurgency, civil unrest, small-scale communal conflicts, the rise of ethnic militias and non-state armed groups in Nigeria, large-scale conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Angola, Somalia, Sudan's Darfur region and Nigeria's oil-bearing Niger Delta, the role of migration in the constitution and reconstitution of communal and ethnic groups and fomenting new conflicts between groups have elicited research interest. Thus immigration is considered a factor of intra- and inter-group conflicts.

Explaining 'new wars' and conflicts

Several perspectives have been deployed by scholars, commentators and policy analysts to explain the rash of nascent civil unrests and seemingly intractable bloody conflicts in most developing nations of Africa and Asia. These analytical paradigms, emerging from the 1990s, can be grouped into three broad themes: the 'post-Cold War barbarism', 'resources curse' and ethnographic perspectives

The 'post-Cold War barbarism' thesis argues that the Cold War politics placed a lid on local conflicts. But the end of the Cold War hostilities between America and the Soviet Union and their allies as well as the phenomenon of globalization transferred hostilities to local groups, notably in Africa, the Balkans, Latin America and Asia. Led by its major proponent, Samuel Huntington, the thesis contends that the most important distinction among people in the post-Cold War era is not ideological, political or economic but cultural identities shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration and conflict among and between ethnic and cultural groups. Hence local politics is dominated by the politics of ethnicity and the conflicts they often generate in the aftermath of the Cold War. This perspective has been deployed to explain the surge of ethnic insurgencies in the Balkans and former Soviet Republics.

Other variants of the thesis focus on the intense crisis of the African state in the post-Cold War dispensation. The termination of the Cold War meant an end to the massive loans, grants and aids flowing into Africa from the Western and Soviet blocs. The impact of this development was to further weaken the structural and institutional capacities of many African states and eviscerate their growing economic and political turbulence. Nevertheless, the influential Berg Report of the World Bank set the tone for the return of Africa to the path of economic recovery and political renaissance in the 1990s. It propagated an unshakeable faith in the abandonment of statist economy in favour of a set of market-driven, neo-Liberal economic principles anchored on SAP. As it turned out, SAP complicated the African crisis of governance and economy. By encouraging the state to renege on its traditional function of providing social and political goods, SAP provided impetus for the intensification of identity politics in nations like Nigeria where individuals were compelled to depend on ethnic kins and groups in the search for socio-economic succour and political survival. Accordingly, in the context of charged identities, the existence of horizontal inequalities among groups aggravated inter-group conflicts.

Espoused by Paul Collier, the 'resource curse' or 'greed not grievance' perspective challenges the conventional wisdom in conflict analysis, propounded by Ted Gurr, which attributes conflicts and violent confrontations between groups to the perception of relative deprivation, inequalities and social injustice held by aggrieved groups. Insurgent groups do not make wars solely because they are aggrieved by the status quo, but also because there are natural resources to forcefully acquire, illegally extracted and clandestinely disposed. The desire to win wars is secondary since the ultimate goal of war is to acquire profit, power and protection through looting and exploitation of natural resources like timber, rubber, oil, gold, and diamond. Wars are therefore hatched and executed to provide conditions facilitating the plunder of natural resources. Social injustice and grievances are mere excuses put forward by rebellious groups to justify their engagement in wars and violent conflicts. Although pioneered by economists, anthropologists and political scientists have adopted the perspective in their studies of large-scale conflicts and subsequent pillage of oil in Angola and Nigeria's Niger Delta, diamonds, rubber and timber in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Much as the two analytical perspectives provide useful insights to explaining recent conflicts, they have been criticized on various grounds. Yahaya Sadowski argues that the idea that ethnic pandemonium has exploded in the post-Cold War times is misleading. Ethnic conflicts, according to Sadowski, 'have consistently formed the vast majority of wars ever since the epoch of decolonization began to sweep the developing countries after 1945'. Although the majority of the wars that survive today are ethnic conflicts, they are, indeed, mostly persistent battles that have been simmering for decades. In the same vein, critics of greed-based theories contend that 'economic factors are necessary but not sufficient conditions for conflicts to occur'. Certain socio-historical factors are relevant in this regard. In addition, what Collier and his followers consider 'economic' might appear to other analysts as political. As Claude Ake opines, most conflicts categorized as communal or ethnic conflicts are no more than democratic struggles in which groups seek to exercise control over their political destiny and God-given resources. Put together, all

these point to the fact that conflicts differ from one case to the other, and so each conflict should be treated considering its own specificities, uniqueness and context. In this regard, we turn to examine another analytical framework recently canvassed by Paul Richards.

Beyond 'post-Cold War barbarism' and 'resource curse' theses: the ethnographic perspective

Drawing from previous anthropological works on violence, Paul Richards states that ''new war' needs to be understood in relation to patterns of violence already embedded within society', suggesting that 'the way to tackle this aspect of the subject is through the ethnography of practice'. He further argues that conflict can be understood from the analysis of what people do and how they do it. Rather than think of 'new conflicts' in terms of causative factors, the ethnographic perspective focuses on aspects of the social processes culminating to wars. Paul Richards and his disciples contend that the central question is not 'what triggered war' but the ideational factors relating to the social processes of organisation, mobilization and making wars among different communities and groups of people in a given geopolitical environment. As such comparative ethnographic analysis of violence suggests that no one single explanation fits all conflicts.

This paper draws inspiration from the ethnographic perspective. Using data and information from interviews and archival data, it seeks to locate the nascent conflicts in Aguleri and Umuleri communities in Anambra State of Southeastern Nigeria to the social processes of migration and urbanization of the communities from colonial times. Any genuine attempt to analyse the conflicts must necessitate an examination of the forces of migration, process of urbanization and the re-composition of the population of the communities. Moreover, it explores the link between the conflicts and historical forces of development, social change, inter-group inequalities and longstanding injustices fostered by the process of migration into the communities. The emphasis on migration is to highlight the limitations and weaknesses of the 'resource curse' and 'post-Cold War' theories in explaining intra-state conflicts and wars. In other words, if we accept the core arguments of the two theories as accounting for the Aguleri and Umuleri conflicts, what then do we make of the contributions of migration, urbanization, social change, social injustice and inequalities in generating the conflicts? The fact that the communities lived in peace and harmony until the movement of large population of peoples of diverse cultures into the communities was intensified in the late nineteenth century suggests that we interrogate and historicize the role of migration and urbanization in the conflicts. To achieve this end, the ethnographic perspective appears to offer a better explanatory model for the conflict.