

Effectiveness of Public Relations in the Resolution of Communal Conflicts: A Study of Ikwo-Izzi Crisis

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ABSTRACT: There was an unprecedented outbreak of conflicts in the 20th Century. And with the development of the world and thus more understanding of the human psyche, the conflicts raged beyond the battle fields to use of Public Relations and propaganda. This paper therefore undertook to study the relationship between conflicts and public relations and how much effect the latter has on the resolution of the former. The Ikwo – Izzi conflict of Ebonyi State, Nigeria, which had raged intermittently for almost six decades, yet grossly unpopular was chosen as a practical context. Findings suggest that public relations is a very potent contrivance for influencing the tides of conflict especially towards resolution. It is however not employed in that regard but used as a weapon to win.

I. INTRODUCTION

Most of the living world and indeed humans live in social communities and entities. These communities innately demand and encourage connections and sharing of resources; thus breeding systems [1,2,3]. However, due to the diversity and profundity of the human species, differences in outlooks, opinions and fundamental primal survival instinct ensures that conflict is inevitable [4,5,6,7]. These conflicts can be as simplistic as a minor disagreement amongst siblings on who is a better football player between Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi; or as profound, multi-layered/faceted and violent like the conflict between Bokoharam and the Nigerian Society and Government [8]. However, save for the primary parties involved in a conflict, - who only know and understand their own side and claim in the conflict, all other secondary parties rely on information about the conflict from the primary sources or other secondary sources. This information greatly influences opinions formed about the conflict and the primary parties engaged in the conflict [9]. Thus, public opinion about a conflict, which can deeply influence the length, type, and eventual resolution or nonresolution of a conflict is greatly hinged on information, - deliberate, calculated or just arbitrary – on and about the conflict. Against the above backdrop, this paper attempts to examine the influence of Public Relations on conflicts; with special emphasis on the Ikwo – Izzi protracted conflict in Ebonyi State of Nigeria. The paper will also ultimately pose the puzzle of truth versus patriotism in conflict situations for the press.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Public Relations play an indelible role in the human society today; and public relations is aided and fostered by the press [10]. The effect of public perception in and about any idea, news or conflict today is majorly dependent on press reportage of said subject matter. Thus, this study is anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory of the press, in her utility and clot over the public's perception especially in delicate issues such as violent conflicts. This study also employs the Situational Theory of Publics in the analysis of the role of public relations in conflicts; and contextually, the Ikwo – Izzi Conflict. The Social Responsibility Theory, a fine blend of the Authoritarian and Libertarian Theories of the Press sanctions press freedom but with responsibilities. It therefore denotes a press that 'moves beyond the simple "Objective" reporting (facts reporting) to "Interpretative" reporting (investigative reporting)'; whilst upholding fairness and balance (Communicationtheory.org) [11,12]. The writer however further asserts that a major shortcoming of this theory, – which has been adopted by many economies in the third world including Nigeria, - is that it 'avoids the conflict situation during war or emergency by accepting the public opinion' (Communicationtheory.org). A move which is rather paradoxical in relation to the mandate of the press, and even further inimical in conflicts and to conflict resolution.

And so bridging this divide, the Situational Theory of Publics as proposed by Professor James Grunigin 1968 suggests that a communal problem can only be solved effectively to the extent of which the public know about that problem (Wikipedia). Further expatiating on the theory, [13] avers thus:

This concept of active or passive information gathering and processing is the backbone of the situational theory of publics. Every person is a part of one of the four publics in regards to a situation or topic. When communicating with publics a public relations professional should take into mind the behaviors of the public they want to influence and communicate with. Each of the four publics have different ways they gather

and react to information on a scale from most active to most passive. Non-publics are the most passive of the groups. This group is made up of people who are unaware or do not acknowledge certain situations. Latent publics are aware of a topic or issue but do not recognize it as a problem. Aware publics see a situation but do not participate in finding a solution. Active publics are the least passive. These people see a situation as a problem and are involved in finding the solution to it.

Contextualizing, this study evaluates the role of the press as the tool for public relations in the Ikwo-Izzi conflict, vis-à-vis their analysis of the publics and how these publics influenced the resolution or non-resolution of the conflict [14].

III. METHODOLOGY

The Ikwo-Izzi conflict has not enjoyed same popular research and coverage as some other conflicts in Ebonyi State and indeed Nigeria. The Strategic Conflict Assessment of Nigeria published in 2017 makes no mention of said conflict. Therefore, due to a scarcity of popular literature on the Ikwo-Izzi conflict, this study depended heavily on information from secondary sources and data from oral interviews carried out on four indigenes each of both communities. Also, content of press reportage of the conflict, critiquing and evaluating four online reports from one local and three national news mediums, served as samples and conduits for Public Relations in the conflict; which were then analyzed in the study.

The Notion of Conflict

The diverse and complex context in which the modern human exists – comprising of independent but interdependent systems and subsystems and sub-subsystems -is undoubtedly a breeding ground for conflict. However, conflict has always been an integral part of social reality. [15] asserts that ‘Conflict generally is reality of social relation. Conflicts at any level arise from divergences of interest, desires, goals and values aspirations in the competition for resources to meet imposing demands on social life in a defined socio-physical environment’. It is thus safe to infer that the fundamental foundation of conflicts is the primal instinct to survive in a reality where the resources for survival are scarce. [16] was more broad, but apt and holistic when he defined conflict as ‘a struggle over values or claims to status, power, and scarce resources, in which the aims of the opponents are neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals’. However, Schelling (1960) states that ‘conflict occurs when competing groups, goals, objectives, need, or value clash, and aggression, although not necessarily violence, is a result’ [17]. Since conflicts are not a new phenomenon, communal conflicts resulting from affiliations and loyalties have also been a part of the human socio-cultural context. [18] argue that ‘conflict is devised to resolve divergent dualism, and to achieve some sort of unity, notwithstanding its propensity to eliminate one of the conflicting parties’. Communal conflicts constitute one of the major recurring problems bedeviling the sociopolitical landscape of Africa. To be sure, communal conflicts are not new, particularly in sociocultural complex societies defined by a high number of ethnic nationalities and language groups such as Nigeria. Pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria experienced inter-kingdom dynastic feuds, and inter-community conflicts [19].

Conflict Resolution can be understood as ‘the methods and processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict [20]. Some tools used in facilitating the process of Conflict Resolution include negotiation, mediation, mediation-arbitration, diplomacy, and creative peacebuilding [21]. The nature and oomph these listed tools indicate that compromise is an essential part and end of Conflict Resolution. Thus, it is safe to align with [22];

‘Trying to “win” the argument or conflict is dangerous for conflict resolution. If people are focused on “winning” the argument, the relationship loses! The point of the conflict resolution process is to reach a mutual understanding and find a resolution that respects everyone’s needs. Making a case for how wrong other people are, discounting their feelings, or holding tight to a point of view does not help resolve conflict’.

Communal Conflict and Public Relations and the Nexus

[23] defined communal conflict as a conflict that occurs between two or more communities. [24] further elucidates on communal conflicts as conflicts involving two or more communities engaging themselves in disagreement or act of violence over issues such as claims for land ownership, religious and political difference leading to loss of lives and destruction of properties. Nigeria is today fraught and overwhelmed with pockets of communal conflicts. Some of these include the farmer herder conflict, Ife-Modekeke conflict, Aguleri-Umuleri conflict, Jos conflict, Tiv-Jukun conflict, the ikwo-izzi conflict, Nasarawa conflict, Igbira conflict, Warri conflict, among others. However, an underpinning factor in all of these conflicts is the claim to land and land resources.

Public Relations is the deliberate art and process of influencing public opinion. [24], further defines Public Relations as the profession that ‘influence public opinion or attitude in such a positive direction understanding and acceptance’. It establishes a two-way communication to ensure mutual understanding, resolve conflicts of interest between individual organization and its publics. The processes involved in Public Relations include tracking, analysing, collating, presentation of data and making practical recommendations

[24]. [3] even further contextualizes Public Relations when he asserts that its purpose is to establish two-way communication seeking common ground or areas of mutual interest and to establish understanding based on the truth, knowledge and full information. Thus the use of public relations as a tool for information or misinformation in conflicts; and its consequent resultant effects is extensive.

Public Relations is therefore an inalienable tool employed in conflicts and warfare in today's liberal world. [6] argues that 'Public relations today is an essential part of modern warfare, and the recent war in the Persian Gulf provides an excellent public relations case study of its successful use. The author argues that in the war either history's most impressive use of military weapons, or history's most thorough use of words and images as weapons of war, or both were witnessed'. It therefore implies that in all conflicts, there is the desire to win by the conflicting parties. Thus, they would employ Public Relations and propaganda strategies to be victorious. However, this study focuses on the press as the only conduit for Public Relations and opinion formation to the outside publics not directly involved or affected by the conflict. In the fight against insurgency in Nigeria, the use of Public Relations by both sides of the divide – the Nigerian Military and the Insurgents is quite elaborate and channeled towards winning.

Pulse.ng in a December 13, 2018 Army holds private burial ceremony for dozens of soldiers killed by Boko Haram report published online stated thus;

'...Even though many reports indicated that over 100 soldiers were killed in the attack, with many others missing, the Army disclosed in a statement that 23 soldiers were killed with 31 others injured... A colonel who spoke to The Punch reported that the ceremony has been made private to conceal the real figure of casualties from the attack. He said, "General Buratai said only 23 soldiers were killed in the attack. He also put the number of troops wounded in action at 31. However, we all know that is not true. Over 100 were killed and a private burial is now being organized in order not to expose their lies."

Whilst on the other hand, [8] opines that book haram public messages are intended to display strength, claim attacks, and issue future warnings; whilst stating particular grievances. He further avers that 'Although not always consistent, Boko Haram has ensured its narrative is publicly disseminated, which is revealing for a group that is extremely secretive. Messaging creates awareness about the group and its activities, which can tie into recruitment'.

Contextualizing the Ikwo - Izzi Communal Conflict

Ebonyi State is one of the five South-Eastern states of Nigeria created in 1996 by the Military Regime of Gen. Abacha. With a land area of about 5,935 square kilometers, the state shares border with Benue State to the North, Enugu State to the west, Imo and Abia States to the south and Cross River State to the east. The Nigerian Population Commission estimates the population of the state to be 2,880,400 (citypopulation.de). The state has 13 local government areas that are further divided into 51 Development Centers. Indigenes are renowned for their agricultural practice and as such attach an enormous value to land. It is estimated that more than 75% of Ebonyians engage in farming and related activities. As agrarian society, access to land is vital to sustaining livelihood in the state, and it usually counts in favour of social status and identity [6]. It is therefore geometrically logical that the number of conflicts over land and landed resources is on the increase in recent years; especially vis-à-vis the surge in the state's population [8]. The communal conflict between Enyibichiri Alike in Ikwo Local Government Area, and Oferekpe Enyigba (Izzi) in Abakaliki Local Government Area of Ebonyi State is one of such. Both communities share same ancestral linkage and have dwelled in cordial neighborhood for centuries until 1961 when the Ikwos began to dispute the common boundary between the two communities; insisting it is located at Ngele Echi [10]. This was firmly resisted by the Eferekpe Enyigba of Izzi clan; the latter maintaining that the boundary is at Ngele Akwayeruoniya.

Findings from interviews in this study suggest that the initial dispute came to a climax in 1963 and there was an attempt to resolve the matter in court. The process was however stalled by the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) and was never resumed. Since then, intermittent rivalry and violent demonstrations have persisted between the two communities with period of relative peace in-between. Some significant years in the timeline of the conflict include: 1963, 1964, 1975, 1983, 1987, 1993, 2008, 2016 and 2017). The depth and brutality of the conflict is largely undocumented nor reported as earlier asserted. The 2017 Strategic Conflict Assessment of Nigeria published by the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Abuja makes no mention of the conflict; but recognizes others in the state such as the Ezzllo – Ezza conflict. In 1993 for instance, about 19 lives were lost to the conflict. The conflict periods are mostly associated with farming seasons thereby revealing the linkage the struggle over land in Ebonyi State has with livelihood practice.

The disputed land used to be a forest. The Enyibuchiris claim that they cleared a portion and by that rite claimed it for themselves; (this is a common traditional practice of acquiring land in the region before the colonial system), and so did the Enyigbas. But when group farm came into play in Ebonyi, The said land was later leased to a group called Enyibuchiri Farm until the lease was revoked by the disbandment of the group. The civil war further severed the Enyibuchiris link with the land as their people ran away from the war which was

heated up at the region. It was during this time that the Enyigbas allegedly took over and kept the former away from returning to the land. The immediate cause of the recent conflict however, was a clash over a piece of land at the disputed boundary between one Mr. Sunday Nwonu of Ikwo and Mr. Sunday Nwovu of Enyigba in 2016. The duos' disagreement sparked communal sentiments which metamorphosed into violent conflict resulting in destruction of properties and injuring lives in the communities. The recent attack this year has seen about dozens of houses destroyed while about several persons have been killed and properties looted and destroyed. Attempts at Conflict Resolution and Intervention in this conflict like most conflicts in Nigeria is a militarized quelling of the uprising and violence. The police and military are drafted to maintain the peace but no concrete resolutions have been achieved. Persons suspected to be involved in the various attacks were ordered for prosecutions but nothing substantial have come out of their trials in the various courts. And in recent times, governments at the local and state levels have sought to mediate in the peace process by setting up several peace committees to intervene in the crisis. There was one in October 2008, a joint committee made up of men from Enyida and Ikwo East Development Centers respectively (dailyposts.ng). Their intervention was marred by divisions within the committee; resulting in an unacceptable resolution which did not appeal to the parties. Consequently, another crisis took place leading to yet another peace committee set up in March 2014, this time, by the state government. Also, the politicization of the interventions by the government on the conflict have not fostered the resolution process of the conflict. The Catholic Bishop of Abakaliki – Micheal Okoro however also set up a Peace Committee which eventually saw to a temporal resolution of the conflict [8].

Press Reportage of the Conflict

A search of the reportage of the Ikwo – Izzi conflict indicated a profound lack of balance and fairness in the press coverage of the conflict. Whilst there were more reports about outbreaks of violence and the resultant damages, the interventions and peace processes did not carry as much significance or reports in News Fora. The News Pane of the official Ebonyi State Government website on July 23, 2018 carried a lengthy report with the headline 'UMAHI TO IZZI AND IKWO WARRING COMMUNITIES: FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER, SO THERE'LL BE PEACE'. In the report, The Governor David Umahi of Ebonyi State avers thus:

'But today, we are all pretending and an elder like Martin Elechi is saying that it was politically motivated. A former governor who could not solve a problem in his community until he left office, now has the audacity to talk about the problem. I do not know why God is so merciful to wicked people. It is terrible that a former governor could not solve a problem that happened in his community. And now, the problem is growing' (ebonyistate.gov.ng).

Martin Elechi here referred to is a former governor of the state and an indigene of Ikwo.

Another online news medium – thenigerianvoice.com in May 15, 2019 had the report Ebonyi: Three missing in renewed Izzi/Ikwo boundary crisis. The writer of the report only reported the facts whilst almost revealing the gruesomeness of the attacks. Punchng.com on April 9, 2019 reported Infant, seven others killed in Ebonyi communal clash. In the report, Edward Nnachi also professionally reported the facts of that particular eruption of violence as ethically required. A dailyposts.ng report of May 4, 2018 however, in the report - Killings: Ebonyi Deputy governor, speaker on war part over communal crisis further aggravated the divide between the communities, further exposed the politicisation of the conflict and pitched the elites of both communities against one another. The report displays the Speaker of the State House of Assembly - Mr. Francis Ogbonnaya Nwifuru of Izzi Local Government Area; and the Deputy Governor of the State - Barr Kelechi Igwe of Ikwo Local Government Area, trade accusations and counter accusations at each other for complicity in the conflict;

'Since 1961 when the crisis started up till date, Izzi people on their side never violated instructions given to them by the state government. Starting from when His Excellency assumed office in 2015, there is a committee already on ground and they made their submission and their submission was turned down. They said that the submission was barbaric but that doesn't border us. But, what borders us your Excellency is that you traveled [sic] and came back. You went to that disputed land and you gave instructions to all of us there, that no clan should violate this instruction. You left, the next morning sir, a woman by name Angelina was arrested by Ikwo people and we asked them to provide her. They killed her and shared her body within the community there. They didn't provide her till date...'

The Deputy Governor alleged thus;

'Echi-alike Ikwo was where the recent hostility was recorded high, but the Izzi people denied and said it was ikwo people that did it. Ikwo people have in their ancestral home taken a decision that anybody who defiles the order of the state government is on his or her own and shall be held responsible for his/ her actions. But, on 29th, the information I got was a text message forwarded to me, that after the governor's directive, ikwo people went and burnt down a school in Izzi land. We were supposed to be meeting that day but all of us as soon we got that information had to move to Echi-alike. We interfaced with the inhabitants of Echi-alike that was present, including the youths. We asked them questions and they said that there was no inhabitants of Echi-alike

that slept in that place between 27 and 28. It would have been very strange for them to hear that an Echi-alike son or daughter went there to perpetrate that type of mayhem...’

IV. FINDINGS FROM ANALYSIS

After careful interpretative analysis of press reportage of communal conflicts in Nigeria, and contextually the Ikwo-Izzi conflict, the following can be deduced;

- ❖ The press reportage is not always holistic; more emphasis was always placed on the sensational aspects of the conflict especially in to the detriment of other aspects of the conflict such as history, resolution and reconciliation moves and efforts. These latter do not get any mention.
- ❖ Due to the political hijacking of communal conflicts in Nigeria, press reportage overly increased suspicion and mistrust amongst parties; especially with the coverage of the political elites opinioned accusations and counteraccusations.
- ❖ There is very little research, feature, or investigative reports and Public Relations messages aimed at healing and reconciliation. Instead, it is employed as a tool for winning; which is entirely paradoxical to the tenets of Conflict Resolution.

Overall, Whilst Public Relations is a veritable tool that can greatly influence the tide of a conflict – both positively towards resolution and reconciliation, and negatively towards further exacerbation, it is rare largely unemployed for resolution. It is instead more utilized by the conflicting parties to gain argumentative advantage over one another; a move inimical to Conflict Resolution.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper undertook to unearth, if any, the effects Public Relations has on the process of Resolving Conflicts. To further aid the contextual reality of the study, the Ikwo – Izzi conflict was selected for the study. The rampancy of communal conflicts in Nigeria today is popular enough to make the formation of opinions and biases. However, the press, the primary tool for public relations especially in conflicts have been very rigid and ethical in telling the facts safely, but yet unethical enough to tell the history and also share peace-moves as much as they do peacekeeping moves.

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