

Cultural Affinity and Cooperation of Internal Borderline Communities of Nigeria's Bayelsa and Delta States

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Abstract

Conflicts amongst internal border communities in Nigeria has been an unending challenge. This paper examined the borderlands of Bayelsa and Delta states to uncover what brought about the seemingly peaceful relations since their separation into two states. The sample size was 231 respondents of five borderline LGAs of Sagbama, Ekeremor, Patani, Bomadi and Burutu using interview schedule. The people were collectively known as western Ijaws in then Midwest and later Bendel states. State creation and boundary adjustment exercises transferred Sagbama and Ekeremor areas to present Bayelsa. The people speak same language, practice same or similar culture and occupations and have remained peaceful amongst themselves without government initiative. Common historical heritage, culture and occupations are the factors responsible for the peaceful relations. The people freely access each state without discrimination and participate actively in the socio-economic and political activities of both states. Bayelsa State has appointed a good number of Delta born Ijaws into positions of trust, and some personalities of Delta Ijaw not only collectively fought for the creation of the state but have since settled in it.

Keywords: *Culture and Cooperation by Borderline Communities*

Introduction

Sociologists study group behaviour and often seek to know the reactions of people when they meet - cooperate, fight, and merge (Ekpenyong, 2010). This postulate agree with communities when they meet. When communities who find themselves on different sides of divide in this case, different states (politico-administrative units) meet as reports abound of fighting or cooperation among communities.

Bayelsa and Delta States are part of the South-South region of Nigeria. They are coterminous and to a large extent share similar geophysical environment, history and culture. The borderline LGAs of Sagbama and Ekeremor in Bayelsa State before the 1975 Justice Ayo Irikefe Panel on State

Creation, and Justice Nassir Boundary Adjustment Committee of 1976, were part of Bomadi and Burutu LGAs, respectively, in the then Bendel State. The 1976 Justice Nassir Boundary Adjustment Commission ceded the present Sagbama and Ekeremor area to Rivers State in 1976, which became Sagbama LGA. Thus, the present day Ekeremor was carved out from Burutu LGA, and Sagbama from Bomadi LGA, all in the then Bendel State. In 1991 Sagbama LGA was again restructured into Sagbama and Ekeremor LGAs. In 1996 the Abacha administration created six more states (Bayelsa, Ebonyi, Nassarawa, Kogi, Ekiti, and Zamfara) and LGAs. Bayelsa State was created out of Rivers State, alongside two additional LGAs of Nembe and Kolokuma/Opokuma. Also, Patani LGA was created out of Bomadi LGA in Delta State. Thus, on the western flank of Bayelsa, two LGAs - Sagbama and Ekeremor shares boundaries with Delta State LGAs of Patani, Bomadi and Burutu along Forcados and Ramos rivers, where Ijaw, Urhobo and Isoko coexist on both sides of the divide, sharing cultural traits and occupation.

Demands for new states and boundary disputes precede Nigeria's independence, as demands by various groups made Lugard and Macpherson to appoint commissions at different times, though these commissions did not recommend boundary adjustments, and in 1957 the British government appointed the Willinck Commission to hear the petitions of the agitators, which only recommended boundary adjustment with a plebiscite, and the creation of a special area status in the Niger Delta (Humanus, 2022; Anongo, 2001). New states were not recommended even though the Commission found the fears of many (particularly the Ijaws) as genuine (Willinck Commission, 1958). Demands for new states, LGAs and boundary adjustment intensified after the creation of states and LGAs by the Murtala-Obasanjo regime, compelling government to appoint the Justice Nassir Commission to study and make recommendations to government.

Statement of the Problem

National and international border communities have often presented peculiar problems. They are gateways to and from the territory, where lies their special characteristics and importance. Borderlands have been known to lack all sorts of amenities in many societies and history of marginalization (Lee & North, 2016). Poorly managed borders are known to pose security and economic challenges to the regions and nation states, be they internal or international. The rise in drug trafficking, arms dealings, existence and sale of prohibited items, rising immigrant population from other nations, presence of non-state actors, etc. pose serious security threats (Guardian, 2020).

Boundary conflicts have been a regular future of many developing nations and Nigeria has had a fair share of it. Many internal boundary conflicts in pre-colonial Nigeria arose basically as scuttles or conflicts resulting from disagreements between neighbours, each exerting claims and counter claims on indigeneship or ownership of lands, lakes, rivers, etc. (Offor, et al., 2018). The Federal Survey Records identified as much as sixteen inter-state boundary disputes, some becoming very violent. Many such disputes emanate from struggles over land for agriculture, and presence of mineral resources. Others were promoted by the elite for political gains (Otor, 2019; Eliagwu, 2004).

Boundary lines limits the territorial ownership of one, and ends the area of land a particular community or leader could exercise authority. A border is the edge of an area that forms its outer part. It is for this reason that geographers use the concepts of boundaries and borders as lines that demarcate one area from another or spheres of jurisdiction of groups (Familugba & Ojo, 2013).

Bomadi, Burutu, Patani, Sagbama, and Ekeremor LGAs were between 1963 and 1967 part of the Delta Province in Western State in Nigeria. In 1967 when Gen.Yakubu Gowon created 12 new states, they were part of Midwest State. In Murtala Mohammed's state creation exercise of 1975, Midwest State was renamed Bendel. In 1987 Babangida restructured Bendel state into Edo and Delta States. The Justice Nassir Boundary Adjustment exercise of 1976 had earlier transferred the Sagbama and Ekeremor areas from Bendel to Rivers State, which became part of the new Bayelsa State. Many communities who had stayed together as one before their separation on political, economic and/or other reasons now finding themselves under different jurisdictions have histories of hostilities, litigations or boundary disputes. From the foregoing the LGAs of Bomadi, Burutu, Patani, Sagbama and Ekeremor who are predominantly of the Ijaw ethnic nationality are now divided between two states of Bayelsa and Delta. They are kit and kin, only separated by Forcados and Ramos rivers. Like many other communities separated on political, economic or other reasons, do they fight, do they cooperate? If they do cooperate, what were the factors that brought about their peaceful coexistence? The need to uncover the aforesaid is the crux of this paper.

Objectives

The overriding objective of this paper is to unearth the factors that have made the area to be relatively peaceful since their separation into two autonomous political territories. The specifics are to:

1. find out policies and programmes initiated by government to bring about peaceful relationship amongst the people,
2. determine factors that impede socio-economic and political cooperation among the borderline communities,
3. uncover the socio-economic, political and cultural elements that bring about cooperation amongst the people despite finding themselves as borderlands of two states?

Research Questions

1. What programmes and policies were initiated by government to bring about peaceful existence amongst the borderlanders?
2. What factors impede cultural, political and economic cooperation amongst the borderline communities of Bayelsa and Delta States?
3. What socio-economic, political and cultural elements brought about the continued cooperation amongst the people?

Literature Review

Border regions also referred to as borderlands, borderlines, frontiers or subnational areas is the outer edge of a territory (Bobbo, 2004; Ingiabuna & Uzobo, 2017). Ekpenyong stated that many borderline communities are from same ethnic nationality, same language group, and share identical institutions, buy and sell in same markets and so would not likely accept continuous conflicts or feud. Similarly, Bobbo (2004) noted that planning for the development of border regions must take into account their history, proximity, culture and inter-relationships which the people very much cherish. The state creation exercises often divide people of same ethnic nationality or history, with some finding themselves on the wrong side and dominated by larger groups. This happens because the creators of such states and LGAs use maps without ensuring that they agree with the position on ground. The ceaseless demands for boundary adjustment, merger or new states emanate from such faulty actions (Humanus, 2022).

Adejuyigbo (1993) noted that development planning for border communities often have political, social and economic components aimed at integration, development of local resources, provision of employment and increased production opportunities. Ingiabuna and Uzobo (2017) found borderline communities of Rivers and Bayelsa States generally not happy with their living conditions, deprivation and alienation from employment even in firms operating in their backyards.

The European Union identified border agencies cooperation as necessary to help traders overcome the bottlenecks in trans-border trade, easing documentation with a view to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of trade transactions. The European nations thus entered into agreements to allow easy passage of people and goods across their borders aimed at facilitating trade, and make plans for future trade activities as well as encouraging internal boundaries utilization and cooperation (Wikipedia).

Nigeria's National Boundaries Commission deliberately charged states and Local Government Councils to establish functional boundary committees, encouraged more fieldwork aimed at physical investigations and making the boundaries more visible on the ground. Its strategy on internal boundaries was focused on dispute prevention and resolution, boundary definition, trans-border relations maintenance and joint sensitization and enlightenment campaigns, ethnographic studies in border communities and advocacy visits to disputing communities, amongst other activities to encourage them live in harmony (Adaji, 2023).

Conflict is ubiquitous and exists everywhere even though the rate and the type of conflict may differ. Conflict is endemic as there is hardly any society that is devoid of one (Inyaya, 2006; Familagba & Ojo, 2013; Okoi, 2021). Conflicts between frontiers of states are also common. Local (inter-state) and international borders are known to generate conflicts that are similar even though the later involves more than one nation (Otor, 2022). Boundary and land-related conflicts at the countryside or frontiers over oil wells or other important resources, on simply in defense of community property and pride have been in the increase in recent times which has led to loss of lives and property of people who before now lived in relative harmony with each other (Nwanegbo, 2009; Uwake, 2017; Oji, Eme & Nwoba, 2017; Ingiabuna, 2017).

Conflicts result from continuous attempt by groups or persons to cease, consolidate or monopolize scarce resources such as trade routes, source of revenue or survival, and recently in the Niger Delta regions claims and counter claims over ownership of oil wells, lands or destruction of the ecosystem (Ogen, 2005; Okoi, 2021). Inadequate or ineffective use of spatial data in boundary management, ineffective utilization of colonial, post-colonial and sometimes traditional policies or structures were largely responsible for many ethnic and boundary disputes (Ademola, 2005).

Methodology

The study deployed the cross-sectional survey design to examine the level of cooperation or conflict amongst borderline communities in five LGAs – two in Bayelsa State – Sagbama and Ekeremor, and three in Delta – Burutu, Bomadi and Patani. A total of 250 copies of questionnaire were administered in ten communities in both states, using the simple random and accidental methods. The instrument captured the bio-data of respondents, and substantive research variables which border on respondents’ knowledge of cooperation and conflicts amongst borderline communities in the area. The study chose the 4-point Likert type scale and mean for the analysis of substantive variables. In order to make valid decisions the mean responses were computed on a four-point scale, thus: $4+3+2+1 = 10/4 = 2.50$. Mean scores from 2.50 and above were accepted, those below were rejected. The cross-tabulation statistical tool was adopted in analyzing the demographic variables while the mean was used to determine the strength of variables. The sample size comprised of 231 respondents whose questionnaires were correctly completed and retrieved.

Study Area

The study area is the internal boundary communities of Bayelsa and Delta states, along the Forcados and Ramos rivers which demarcate the two states. The five LGAs of both states are neighbours sharing common boundaries. They are mainly of the Ijaw ethnic nationality with same culture, dialect and occupation, but painfully severed from their kit and kin for political and administrative reasons into different states and territories.

Table 1: Demographic variables of respondents

S/N	Variables	Freq.	Percentage
1.	Sex		
	Male	143	61.90
	Female	88	38.10
2.	Age		
	18-25	48	20.78
	26-35	51	22.08
	36-45	63	27.27
	46-55	43	18.61
	56 & more	26	11.26
3.	Marital Status		
	Married	122	52.81
	Single	85	36.80

	Separated/Divorced	13	5.63
	Widowed	11	4.76
4.	Education		
	No formal schooling	21	9.09
	Primary	47	20.35
	Secondary	99	42.86
	Tertiary	64	27.70
5.	Occupation		
	Farming/Fishing	104	45.02
	Palm wine tapping	23	9.96
	Self-employed	48	20.78
	Student	27	11.69
	Unemployed	29	12.55
6	Region/State of origin		
	Bayelsa	93	40.26
	Delta	81	35.06
	Rivers	10	0.43
	Southeast region	15	6.49
	Middle Belt	12	5.19
	Others	20	8.88

The sex distribution of respondents indicate 143 (61.90%) as male and 88 (38.10%) as female. The ages of respondents were 48 (20.78%) 18-25 years, 51 (22.08) 26-35years, and 63 (27.27%) 36-45 years. The rest were 43 (18.61%) 46-55 years, and 26 (11.26%) 56 years old and beyond. Similarly, the marital status of respondents were 122 (52.81%) as married, 85 (36.80%) as single, 13 (95.63%) as either divorced or separated, and 11 (4.76%) as widows.

On educational attainment of respondents, 21 (9.09%) had no formal education, 47 (20.35%) had primary level education, with 99 (42.86%) attaining secondary level education, and 64 (27.70%) as graduates of tertiary level education. Their occupations were 204 (45.02%) as farmers and fishermen, 23 (9.96%) palm wine tappers, 48 (20.78%) self-employed, with 27 (11.69%) as students, while 29 (12.55%) were unemployed. The geographical spread of respondents in terms of states of origin, were 93 (40.26%) from Bayelsa State, 81 (35.06%) from Delta state, and 10 (0.43%) from Rivers State, all from the South-South region. The rest were 15 (6.49%) representing the five Igbo states of Southeast Nigeria. The Middle Belt region of Nigeria had 12 (5.19%), while other unclassified population were 20 (8.88%).

Table 2: Programmes and policies initiated by government to bring about cooperation amongst border communities of Bayelsa and Delta States

S/N	Options	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean (X)	Decision
1.	Specific projects and programmes were initiated by each State government on the border communities to help foster cooperation amongst the people	20 80	35 105	101 202	75 75	462	2.00	Rejected
2.	Federal, NDDC or State Governments provided roads/bridges linking borderland communities	11 44	27 81	134 268	59 59	452	1.96	Rejected
3.	Government provided higher educational institutions that provide admission placements and employment of people from both states	31 124	43 129	99 198	58 58	509	2.20	Rejected
4.	Government sponsored inter community/ LGA competitions involving people of both states	23 92	30 90	30 60	48 48	290	1.26	Rejected
5.	Government initiated agricultural programmes/ industries, etc. which assisted the people in their quest to make a living	33 132	42 126	102 204	54 54	516	2.23	Rejected
6.	Government appointed people of other States into state offices	61 244	72 216	47 94	51 51	605	2.62	Accepted

In Table 2, almost all items were rejected because their mean value was less than 2.50. This suggests that neither the federal government, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), nor governments of Bayelsa and Delta States provided amenities for joint use by the frontier communities, to encourage cooperation amongst them. It also demonstrate the rate of neglect of

borderland communities by both federal and state governments. However, item 6 was accepted as Bayelsa State government has continued to appointment Ijaws of Delta origin into positions of trust.

Table 3: Factors impeding cultural, political and economic cooperation among Bayelsa and Delta States borderline communities

S/N	Options	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean (X)	Decision
1.	Land and boundary disputes	31 124	33 99	116 232	51 51	506	2.19	Rejected
2.	Religious beliefs and cultural divergence among the people	17 68	31 93	88 176	95 95	432	1.87	Rejected
3.	Politico-administrative differences	55 220	78 234	65 130	33 33	617	2.67	Accepted
4.	Difference in clans/dialects	16 64	17 51	94 166	104 104	385	1.67	Rejected

Table 3 reveals that three items - land and boundary disputes, religious beliefs and cultural divergence, and differences in clans/dialects amongst the people were rejected because their mean values were less than the acceptable mean of 2.50%. On the other hand, politico-administrative differences was accepted with a mean of 2.67%. It is indicative of the fact that separation of people of similar language, culture, occupation, etc. for political and administrative reasons was not in the people's interest and tend to be a factor impeding political, economic and cultural cooperation amongst the people

Table 4 Cultural elements that brings about cooperation among the people

S/N	Options	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean (X)	Decision
1.	The practice of returning corps of married women for burial in their ancestral home	70 280	79 237	49 98	33 33	648	2.81	Accepted
2.	Similar history of emergence and ethnic nationality	84 336	93 279	28 56	26 26	697	3.02	Accepted
3.	Similar burial rites, <i>owigiri</i> songs and dance styles	83 332	93 279	33 66	22 22	699	3.03	Accepted
4.	Similar occupation or trade in the local gin industry (ogogoro or kaikai).	89 356	91 273	27 54	24 24	707	3.06	Accepted
5.	Inter marriage among the communities	62 248	78 234	53 106	38 38	624	2.70	Accepted

6.	People whose parents are from both sides freely farm, vote, contest for elective positions employed in the civil/public service on either side of the divide	61 244	93 279	47 94	30 30	647	2.80	Accepted
7.	Inter-community cultural displays and performance during festivals (e.g. wrestling, songs, dance, etc.)	75 300	79 237	45 90	32 32	659	2.85	Accepted

Table 4 seek to know the cultural elements that encourage borderline communities of Bayelsa and Delta states to cooperate. All items in Table 4 were accepted which means that the practice of returning corpses of dead women back to their paternal home for burial, history of emergence and being of same ethnic nationality, similar burial rites, music, dance steps, occupation/industry, inter-marriages and inter-communal wrestling as well as cultural displays were significant factors that have brought about unity and cooperation among borderline communities of both states.

Discussion of Findings

The borderlands of both states are occupied largely by the Ijaws who find themselves divided between the two states. They belong to the same Ijaw clans, and practice same customs and occupation have INC (Ijaw National Congress) as their central socio-political organization promoting Ijaw unity and development. There are also a few Urhobo and Isoko settlements along the border areas, who now find themselves in Bayelsa with the majority of their people in Delta. This position agrees with Okoi (2021) that internal boundaries divide people with homogeneous cultures and occupations in different states, making them not comfortable with their placement and so are more loyal to that which is denied them than the one which they are placed. This is exactly the situation if the Ijaws in Patani, Bomadi and Burutu LGAs who continue to see themselves as Bayelsans, as well as the Urhobo and Isoko settlements in Sagbama LGA who are more loyal to Delta State.

The border communities of both states lack social amenities. Governments and NDDC have not initiated programmes for their joint use to bring about unity and cooperation. The only government projects in the area are perhaps the Bomadi Bridge and road constructed by the Delta State government, and the ongoing extension of same road to Torugbene I by NDDC. The Ekeremor people had used this road to access their communities until the ongoing construction of Sagbama-Ekeremor road which now makes it possible for them to travel by car to other communities without going through Bomadi. This is in line with Lee and North (2016) that borderlands suffer from marginalization and neglect.

One factor that appears to affect their cooperation is the use of river to divide communities of same clan and dialect between states without looking at their history, culture and location. In table 4, all items were accepted. The people are mainly of the Ijaw ethnic nationality with same cultural

practices and occupations. They freely cross over the river to do their fishing and farming occupations without obstruction. Uwakwe (2017) and Offor, et al. (2018) findings that internal boundary conflicts originate mainly through disputes over agricultural land and presence of oil mineral does not apply here. Ojobo community in Delta State is the landlord to Beniseide flow station yet the site is across the river in Bayelsa State. The Ojobo people fish and farm here without conflicts with Peretorugbene. While Bayelsa State controls activities here, the Ojobo community get compensations from the oil exploration activities.

Many have homes in both sides and so actively participate in the socio-political and economic activities of both states, including participation in elections. To make good their claims genuine, they now found new towns, such as Torugbene II, and Aduku opposite their original communities of Torugbnene I and Abare, respectively, in Bayelsa State. The same is true of Bolou Ngoro people who have massively relocated to Toru Ngoro to be part of Bayelsa State. The people border less on their state of origin as they traverse both without restrictions.

One factor that has brought about unity and cooperation amongst the people is that Bayelsa is a homogenous Ijaw state and all Ijaws claim ancestry to it. The Ijaws of Delta, Edo, Ondo, Rivers, and Akwa Ibom states all believe in their Bayelsa ancestry. Some highly placed people who claim to belong to Bayelsa go over to Delta and contest for elections, and return to take on to their jobs where they fail. This reflect the position of Ekpenyong (2010) who argue that because border settlements have same or similar history, language, live and do business together, they would unlike continue like to maintain feud or fighting.

The Bayelsa State government have consistently appointed sons and daughters of Ijaw extraction in Delta and other states into positions of trust. These include Commissioners, Accountant-Generals, Permanent Secretaries, and a lot of other public and civil servants without minding their state of origin. This was being done to make all Ijaws feel that they have a stake in the governance and development of the state, the artificial boundary notwithstanding.

Conclusion

The borderlands of Bayelsa and Delta States have so far had no history of serious conflicts. They have cooperated in all fronts. The cooperation and peaceful relationship has been possible with their common history, culture and occupations. Besides, they all claim ancestry to Bayelsa. Again, they have participated equally in the socio-economic and political activities of both sides, including voting, contesting elections and holding public offices.

While government at Federal level, and Bayelsa and Delta States have not consciously provided projects/programmes for their common use to encourage cooperation and unity, the Bayelsa State government have appointed a number of Delta born Ijaws into positions of trust without discrimination. This action have brought a sense of belonging. The Ijaw National Congress (INC) with headquarters in Yenagoa also encourage participation in the affairs of the states. Meanwhile, prominent Ijaw sons and daughters were part of the fight for the creation of Bayelsa State, and many of them now own properties and settled in Bayelsa. These factors has cemented cultural affinity, unity and cooperation among communities and the people.

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