

COVER

LAND. It never ceases to be the source of acrimony, sometimes even anarchy, among men. In days gone by, communities, towns, in fact whole tribes had gone to war in which thousands had died just because of a parcel of land. Even now, disputes over land constantly pitch communities against one another and in the process, a lot of damage is done to lives and property.

From between Akwa Ibom communities and their counterparts in Abia, Cross River and Ebonyi communities, Aguleri and Umuieri in Anambra State, Ife and Modakeke in Osun State, Benue and Taraba communities to, most recently, Ofia and Erinle communities in Kwara State, disputes over land have, over the years become the staple of community relations in Nigeria.

Consider the most recent one. On Tuesday, June 20, barely two weeks ago, two communities in Kwara State, Ofia in Ofia Local Council and Erinle in Oyin Local Council, fell upon each other in a contest that had no umpire! The hostility, the consequence of an age-long disagreement between two descendants of the Yoruba progenitor, Oduwa, raged for four consecutive days with catastrophic consequences.

The official death toll, when the booms and ghams of warfare went silent, according to the Kwara State Police Public Relations Officer, Deputy Superintendent Gideon Markus, stood at three but official sources said more than 10 people died, claiming ownership rights over what they no longer have to enjoy!

Ironically, the most reliable authority on Yoruba history Rev. Samuel Johnson in his work *The History of the Yorubas* groups Ofia and Erin-Ile as people of common destinies, state and hope.

Johnson says on page 201 of the book: "A sanguinary battle was fought in which the Fulanis were victorious. They routed the Yorubas and followed up their victory, which resulted in the desertion and destruction of many towns in the Ilobo province. The Only important town left in that part were Ofia, Igbona, Ileoma, Erin and a few others."

Giving the history of how the age long acrimony between the people of Ofia and the Erin-Ile started, a teacher of Law at the University of Ilorin, Mr. Rasheed Ijaola said it began in the First Republic when the people of Erin-Ile allegedly registered series of moves by the Ofia people to be classified

Blood For Land

The report was chilling: three persons beheaded in a communal clash between two communities in Kwara State following a dispute over a piece of land. These days, such reports are rather very common and seem to define the gravity of the mutual antagonism, even hatred, that appears to characterise human/community relations in Nigeria. From Ilorin, ABIODUN FAGBEMI reports.



The geographical placement of the two communities is such that unless the Erin-Ile residents consented to such a proposition, it would have been well nigh impossible for Offa to be merged with the defunct Western Region, because it is Erin-Ile and not Offa that is the demarcating settlement between Osun and Kwara States.

Ijadola noted: "The argument, then was that Offa people could not be in the Southwest when the town before Offa is in the defunct Northern region."

According to an Ilorin-based legal practitioner Joseph O. Ijadola, the cause of the intercommunal crises between the Offa and the Erin-Ile communities could not be divorced from the Dr. Funso Adaramola Awards of 1992.

Adaramola, now a professor of Jurisprudence, Lagos State University (LASU), had allegedly put the boundary between Offa-Erinle at NEPA Transformer (now PHCN) almost opposite Offa Descendants Union (ODU) secretariat Offa. The Adaramola boundary today is about one kilometer from where the Federal Polytechnic Offa is temporarily sited. By interpretation therefore, it means that Adaramola's demarcating point has been exceeded by a kilometer stretch of land.

The Adaramola award was, according to Ijadola, contested at the Supreme Court in 1973 but with the apex court describing the application as belated. "During his administration, the first civilian governor of Kwara State, Alhaji Adamu Attah while trying to foster unity between the two communities had remained silent on any Supreme Court decision, but instead had embarked on the construction of a modern market called 'Ajegunle Market', for the benefits of both communities.

According to Ijadola, the teacher of law, "the concerned people deserted the market and today it is being used as a motor park in Offa." The search for peace continued. But according to a secretary at Olofa's palace, who asked not to be quoted, "not that the Erin-Ile community was not provoking us especially by attacking our men in the farm, but you know it is commonly known that our Kabyesi (Olofa) of Offa, Oba Mustapha Olawore (Olanipekun II) and the Kabyesi of Erin-Ile (Oba Abdulganyu Olusookun) are friends, so we used to bear the unprovoked attack on our people."

But his counterpart at Erin told *The Guardian* of an alleged attempt by Offa people to dominate their adjacent settlements by encroaching on their lands and diverting the location of all federal presence to Offa alone. "It is not true that we fought their men in the farms. But like I had told you, if they had trespassed on our farm land, you know that naturally our people would resist such."

The communities continued their cat and mouse

One of the destroyed buildings in Offa



Governor Saraki of Kwara State

game until 1997, when the administrator of the state Col. Peter Ogar (Rtd.) had to declare the about four-kilometer radius disputed landed area a buffer zone.

But before this declaration after the conduct of a plebiscite, it was alleged that there was an industrial structure already erected by an Offa man late Major Bisi Oladipo. The structure coded "Biko Industry" was allegedly meant for the sale of vehicles.

Narrating the event that led to the recent mayhem, the chairman of the already dissolved Offa Local Council (in the aftermath the crisis), Mr. Tajudeen Aro Folaranmi linked the crisis to alleged sudden non-recognition of the buffer zone arrangement by his Oyin Council counterpart Mrs. Hellen Popoola.

According to Folaranmi, "as soon as Popoola came in, we started having problem with Erin people. The state government set up a committee and

at that time the Erin people were buying and selling on the buffer zone. The next thing was for us to see them removing the industrial structure set up by Major Oladipo a late Offa man, on the buffer zone.

Besides, for the past months, we have been recording cases of assault on our people in the farm. We did not retaliate and anyone who cares to check should confirm this in the police records. When I noticed the destruction of Oladipo's property, I tried to calm down our people but urged them to try and recover a taxi cab parked within it, so that it would not be destroyed," he said.

Folaranmi added: "When I contacted the state government, they assured us that a detachment of policemen would be ordered to the disputed area. But we were told that those people attacking us from Erin moved further into the area cordoned off by the police, killed one Deji Razaq who operated a car wash in the area. Besides, 10 other people were wounded. The feed mill and the sawmill were torched while a motor park at Idi Ogun was vandalized."

But Popoola countered, saying: "I do not understand what Folaranmi is saying. As a council boss, I know my civic duties and that I had displayed to the best of my ability. Now that a committee has been set up to look into the crisis, I think I better stop here until the panel starts its sitting."

Although peace has since returned to the troubled spot, after the deployment of some men of the 22 Armoured Brigade, Sobi, there, leaders of both communities continue to blame the police for their alleged complicity in the crisis.

They alleged that the police could have prevented further destruction of lives and property, but instead they appeared indifferent to the development.

One of the complainants said: "They

just stayed glued to an area and watched the wanton destruction unhindered. It appeared that they were only drafted there to guide a filling station closer to the scene said to be owned by a highly placed state government official."

Reacting to the development in a chat with *The Guardian*, the state's police spokesman, Deputy Superintendent Gideon Marcus described the allegation as unfortunate and frivolous.

Marcus said: "All of these people are accusing us. I have heard of their accusations. This is just one of the bad licks that we face in the police. Do you know that they even attacked us. We were there to ensure peace. As uniformed men, we are not always happy when there is crisis."

"But probably these people misunderstood us. We pray to God that they would understand us. This is a federal police, yet people are complaining. Over 90 per cent of our men sent to the area are not even from Kwara State. This is quite unfortunate and I will simply call it a frivolous accusation," he added.

Sources however told *The Guardian* that the state police command is at present experiencing shortage of manpower as more mobile police men have been deployed to Abuja for training before the 2007 general elections.

Although the police boss put the death toll at a mere two, sources said the toll could not be less than five. Besides, it was alleged that mercenary fighters were brought from neighboring settlements to enable the warring factions to prosecute the crisis effectively.

Unconfirmed reports said spouses of both Erin-Ile and Offa had to hurriedly file divorce suits, as the unluckier ones among them were either maimed or got their property burnt.