

# **PEACE COMMITTEE AND PEACEMAKING: STORY OF A COMMUNITY IN ENUGU NORTH SENETORIAL ZONE**

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## **Author's Note**

Name of the community discussed herein has been edited in other to ensure anonymity.

Peace eludes when parties are in conflict and Igbos of south eastern Nigeria strongly believe in the use of neutral third party in maintenance of peace among parties in conflict. There is proverb among Udenu people of Enugu state that “ebo n' ebo gburu onwe ha bu na onye eto anogh” ( parties in conflict kill themselves because third party is not around). Hence, whenever two or more people are in conflict, third party makes considerable effort to settle it thereby restoring peace.

Peace committee, neutral third party which is composed of individuals of integrity, that are known and trusted by parties in dispute significantly contribute to peacemaking. The objective of peacemaking is to end violence between contending parties. Peacemaking can be done through negotiation, mediation, conciliation, and arbitration. The main machinery Peace committee use in peacemaking is mediation.

Mediation is third party activity and involves attempt by independent third party to help contending parties reach agreement and maintain peace. It is a voluntary process (Best, 2006). It is the attempt to settle dispute through active participation of independent third party (mediator) who helps those in conflict to find points of agreement. It is a special form of negotiation in which a neutral third party has a role to help the parties in conflict achieves a mutually acceptable settlement, (Godongs, 2006). Moore (1996) refers to it as “...the intervention in negotiation or conflict of an acceptable third party who has limited or no authoritative decision-making power but who assists the involved parties”. Beer and Stief (1997) simply define mediation as ..."any process for resolving disputes in which another person helps the parties negotiate settlement..." . Mediation is a non-violent strategy aimed at assisting conflicting parties to voluntarily reach mutually acceptable settlement. It is the attempt to settle dispute through active participation of a third party (mediator) who helps those in conflict to find points of agreement.

Peace committee members are part of social environment that they operate. They mediate to produce agreement on matters of dispute. Peace committee members listen to each of the conflicting sides grievances and suggest possible directions towards arrival at mutual agreement for peace to reign.

Peace committee assists parties to find solution rather than judge who is right or wrong. Peace committee therefore, has no power to impose a binding solution but helps in breaking of communication barrier between the parties for the purpose of achieving voluntary mutually acceptable settlement.

Peace committee named Okike General Assembly was set up in Umuokike village in Enugu North senatorial district, in 2014 to help resolve conflicts that shattered the peace in the village. Conflict erupted among different parties nine years back and escalated to a point of fear of loss of lives and property. People in the village slept with one eye open due to fear of arrest and assassination. There was chaos everywhere. Concerned persons attempted to resolve the conflicts through religious activities by offering masses in the Catholic Church. Another group of persons organized crusade, retreats, revivals and masses at "ofu Okike" (Central village square). Another concerned group of person went up the mountain to pray ceaselessly. Catholic priests as well as Anglican priests prayed fervently for God's intervention for peaceful resolution of the crises. God answered the prayers as no life was lost considering the magnitude of the crises.

Women (Ndiom) comprising of daughter (Umuada) and wives (Ndi Alualu) of Umuokike village came together to seek ways for peaceful resolution of the conflicts. In Igbo culture, women rarely get involved in conflict involving the menfolk but are feared by men when they show interest in such conflict. Women in

Igbo culture are considered sacred and can administer any punishment to who they consider an offender and get away with it. For instance, Okafor (2011) notes that in Imezi - Owa a part of Enugu State when a communal problem has become intractable ... women tie some creepers round their waists, their trunks almost bare but painted with camwood march to the compounds of the important factors in the problem, where they could freely defecate. Peace march by women against disruption of peace also occurs in Yoruba culture. Okoye (2015) notes that in March 2015, half naked women in Ekiti state marched in protest against arrest of persons by the police command in connection with an attempt to burn down a monarch's palace. They demanded for the release of those arrested who they believed were wrongly accused. Women's indication of interest in conflict usually softens the disputants. Umuokike women in an attempt to resolve the conflict in Umuokike organized gathering of prominent and respected sons of Umuokike and presented about eighteen (18) cases which they identified as the sources of conflict that is tearing the whole village apart. The cases borders on exploitation, fights, deprivations, gossips, prominent cases include:

1. conversion of village land for personal use
2. Non settlement of traditional rites of the eldest man in the village known as "Onyeishi". There was disagreement between the Onyeishi (eldest man) and ndi oha (title holders).

3. Case of a lady and her umunna over the lady's father's land. The Umunna forcefully collected her father's land from her family because they had no direct male child. One of the ladies gave birth to male children which according to tradition are entitled to the land in question.
4. Genuineness of "Ama title" given to a prominent indigene
5. Funeral rites that were denied some people that died during the heat of the crises.
6. Issue of two significant trees - Iroko and Uvuru at Ofu Okike. The two trees were at the ofu okike and were suspected to be used for demonic purposes by some indigenes against others
7. Frequent arrest by police and other security agencies on orders of some indigenes.
8. Avoidable court cases involving Umuokike children versus Umuokike children.
9. Fights and quarrel between two persons from the same Umunna who are loyal to different groups in connection with collection of market tolls.
10. Case of a title holder who misplaced his "oti ufie" (symbol of authority) and was ostracized from "oha" (activities of title holders).

At the end of the gathering, in April 2014, a peace committee comprising of fifteen (15) members was set up. It was ensured that the seven (7) clans of Umuokike

were represented in the appointment of key officers of the committee. The committee created sub-committee who met several times and report their findings and progress to the general committee. The general committee had seven (7) sessions in 2014 .Information from sub-committees enabled the general committee to resolve some cases completely, some partially while some are yet to be treated.

Among cases peacefully resolved are:

1. The case of Onyishi and his installation:

The onyishi was successfully installed in June 2014. He now work harmoniously with ndi oha (title holders) in making, executing and interpreting of law in the village.

2. Case of conversion of land belonging to the whole village for personal use.

Land that belongs to the village were identified. It was discovered that some caretakers of the land pay compensation to the Onyishi while some don't. Parcels of land that are not managed by defined person or group were also identified. Parcel of land that a prominent indigene built school on was declared compensation – free

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