

Full Length Research

The Justice Mamman Nasir Boundary Adjustment Commission of 1976 and the Obolo (Andoni) People

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This study examines the Justice Mamman Nasir Boundary Adjustment Commission of 1976 report(s) / recommendation(s) on the Obolo (Andoni) people. The creation of states between 1967 and 1976 led to a lot of inter and intra state boundary disputes/adjustments. This led to the creation of the 1976 Justice Mamman Nasir Boundary Adjustment Commission to identify all boundary disputes with regards to creation of states and to make recommendations to the government accordingly. Because its chairman was justice Mamman Nasir, it was known as the 'Nasir Commission'. The Obolo (Andoni) people, being a distinct ethnic group, lived together in South Eastern State prior to the 1976 state creation. The Justice Mamman Nasir Boundary Adjustment Commission, however, led to the balkanization of the Obolo people into two different states namely; Cross River State (now Akwa Ibom State) and Rivers State respectively. Since then, the Obolo (Andoni) people are still faced with the consequences of this historical exercise.

Keywords: Justice Mamman Nasir, Boundary Adjustment, Andoni, Obolo People, Balkanization.

INTRODUCTION

Andoni is one of the coastal communities of the Eastern Niger Delta. The Obolo (Andoni) people were the earliest settlers in the Eastern Niger Delta, probably about 1255AD (Ejitiwu 1991; Enemugwen 2006). According to Ejitiwu, (1991) the Obolo always called themselves "Ebi-Obolo" or more succinctly "Obolo". The early European visitors to the Delta called them (Obolo) "Dony "Doni" or "Andoni". Ejitiwu opined that "Obolo" is both a linguistic and an ethnic term.

The Obolo inhabit a strip of territory extending from the Andoni River (7.21E) to the Qua Iboe River (8.00E). The area is bounded by Bonny and Kalabari to the West, Okrika and Ogoni to the North, Ibibio to the North-East, Ibeno to the East, and the Atlantic Ocean to the South (Ejitiwu 1991). The terrain is identical with that

of Bonny, Kalabari, Okrika, Nembe and other riverine communities. The people are involved in a bit of farming but derive a secure livelihood from fishing and with a population of about 84,693 by 1963 census. Also, the Obio community is made up of about one hundred and fourteen (114) towns and villages (Mbikan 1990).

Presently, the Obolo (Andoni) are found in two states namely, Rivers State and Akwa Ibom State respectively. Enemugwen (2006) says that the Obolo people are split into four sub-groups namely, Western Obolo occupying the Imo and Bonny Rivers estuaries. In River State, the Eastern Obolo spread from the Eastern bank of Imo River to the Kwa Iboe River estuaries, while the Ibeno are located between Kwa Iboe and Cross River estuaries and Oron are in the lower Cross River basin.

The last three are in Akwa Ibom State. It is pertinent to mention that Enemugwen in his work did not mention the reason(s) for the split.

However, the Obolo people were in one state that is, South Eastern State, until February 1976. The creation of States in 1976 and the setting up of Justice Mamman Nasir Boundary Adjustment Commission in that same year, as well as how the recommendation(s) of that commission impacted on the Obolo (Andoni) people, form the focus of this paper.

BOUNDARY ADJUSTMENTS IN NIGERIA

The issue of adjustment of administrative boundaries in Nigeria is closely related to the evolution of colonial administration in the country. By 1906, following the amalgamation of the Colony of Lagos with the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, nine provinces had been created in Northern Nigeria and three in Southern Nigeria. (Tamuno 1972). Under Lord Lugard a panel headed by E.D Morel was set up to look into the revision of the existing provincial boundaries and the need for establishing more administrative units in the country. Morel adopted as his criterion, the strict use of natural geographical features as administrative boundaries but Lord Lugard rejected the criterion. Accordingly, Lugard completely rejected Morel's recommendation for more provinces with boundaries drawn along geographical features. The result was that Lugard rather decided to retain the basic division of the country comprising the Northern part of the country and the Southern part of the country. The resulting North-South boundary, which has today remained as the most permanent feature of Nigeria's administrative history was drawn not along the prominent twin Rivers of Niger/Benue, but on the land.

Furthermore, in 1926, subsequent reorganizations were undertaken with more provinces created. Administrative boundaries were then revised on the following principles, linguistic affinity and local jurisdictional authority.

These principles employed in 1926 in revising administrative boundaries in Nigeria were clearly identified in 1976 by the Irikefe Panel on creation of states (see Federal Military Government view on report on states creation, 1976 p.7 paragraph 11).

In point of fact, these principles; local, jurisdictional authority and linguistic affinity, has through application by the colonial administration and independent governments, connoted the entire gamut of ethnic affinity. Breaches of these principles in demarcating administrative boundaries had been promptly addressed and rectified. One of the most noteworthy areas in the country in which the colonial government promptly rectified the misapplication of these two basic principles

in the revision of administrative boundaries was the Obolo (Andoni) area.

Between 1926 and 1931, the Obolo (Andoni) area, a small ethnic group, was erroneously divided between Owerri Province and Calabar Province. The colonial government therefore commissioned M.D.W. Jeffreys to study the ethno linguistic nature and local jurisdictional authority of the Andoni people. Jeffreys found that the Andoni ethnic group should be united under a single administration. In July 1931, the colonial government accepted the Jeffreys Report and effected the necessary boundary adjustment (See Intelligence Report on Andoni Tribe, 1930, by M.D.W. Jeffreys, National Archives, Enugu, Ref. EP 237 Min Loc 6/1/135).

Moreso, as further levels of administrative units in the country later became necessary, further revision of administrative boundaries was occasioned. In all these developments, the government kept the two fundamental principles of ethno linguistic affinity and local jurisdictional authority in view. The colonial government however added the all-important principle of the wishes of the affected people.

JUSTICE MAMMAN NASIR BOUNDARY ADJUSTMENT COMMISSION OF 1976

The creation of States in 1967 led to a lot of communal and inter-state conflicts. These crises were not resolved when the regime of General Yakubu Gowon collapsed in 1975 and was replaced through bloodless coup with General Murtala Ramat Mohammed as Head of State and Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces. It is pertinent to note that General Mohammed noted the criticisms that arose from the 1967 state creation based on the above, and by his determination to create more states; set up the State Creation Panel on August 7, 1975, headed by Justice Ayo Irikefe. The panel was charged among other things with the responsibility of recommending solutions to the various boundary problems.

Following Justice Ayo Irikefe Panel's report, seven states were created by General Murtala Mohammed's administration on February 3, 1976. Like the previous state creation exercises, there were many communal and inter-state boundary clashes. Also, there were several petitions and demonstrations in various parts of the country as a result of the 1976 state creation exercise. Therefore, Justice Mamman Nasir Boundary Adjustment Commission was set up on the 11th of February 1976 to examine the problems arising from the 1976 State creation exercise and make appropriate recommendations.

The terms of references of the commission were five, namely:

1. To examine the boundary adjustment problems identified by Irikefe Panel on the creation of states and in particular, work into the following areas: the Egbema villages in Rivers and Imo states, the Ndoki areas in Rivers, Cross Rivers and Imo States, Awarra/Asa and Umauakpu clan in Oguta Division. Amala, Alulu, Oburu Mboano and Obokwe communication council area in Ogbo –Eze Division Olumbanasa and Ozam in Anambra Division in Anambra State, the Ofe-Omuma in Aba Urban Division. The villages of Ikot Ibana, Ikot Uko, Ikot Ebok, Ikot Umo Essien, Ikot Imo in Ikot Ekpene Division of Cross River State. The Itu-Mbanuso clan in Cross River State, the Biase Administrative Districts in the Akamkpa Division of Cross River State. The Erei clan in Cross River and Imo States, the Itigidi Agbo clan in Cross River State, the Osopon clan in Obubra Division in Cross River State. Also, the villages of Sobe and Iyagba in Ondo State, and the Ikales of the Arijian Community in Okitipupa Division in Ondo State.

2. The Commission is to specify which areas of Andoni and Nkoro in Opobo Division of Cross River State should be in Rivers State and which areas of Ndoni should form part of Rivers State and which Ndoni areas, if any, should become part of Imo State.

3. To investigate and define the boundaries of any other areas, Districts or Division, that may be brought to the notice of the commission.

4. To define inter-state boundaries especially in cases of inter-governmental official disputes, and

5. Make appropriate recommendations on (1-4) above and on any other matters incidental to Boundary Adjustment in the new states structure. (Nasir Report 1976). It is instructive to mention here that number two (2) of the terms of reference of the Commission clearly mentioned Andoni (Obolo) as part of the Commission's assignment.

In addition to the terms of reference, the Commission was also instructed to use or apply the following principles for boundary adjustment. These were the ecological or economic characteristic of the existing area to be adjusted, the history of the people concerned and their inter-relationships with their neighbours.

Members of the Commission were Mr. Justice Mamman Nasir, Chairman, Mr. J. D. Ogundere, the solicitor General of the Federation, Mr. R. O Coker, Director of Federal Survey, Mr. G. A Menkiti, Mr A. I. Obeya, Mr. O. E. Ikpi and Mr. C. O. Audifferen.

Finally it is imperative to note that it was the recommendations of this commission (Justice Mamma Nasir) that led to the balkanization of Obolo (Andoni) into two different states namely: Eastern Obolo in Cross River State (now Akwa Ibom State) and Western Andoni in Rivers State, using Imo River as a natural boundary.

THE IMPACT OF THE NASIR COMMISSION ON THE OBOLO (ANDONI) PEOPLE

The division of Obolo (Andoni) people into two different states as a result of the Nasir Boundary Commission report has generated serious concerns among the Obolo people with positive and negative political and socio-economic impacts.

POLITICAL IMPACT

The twentieth century was a very important period in Obolo (Andoni) political history. This period witnessed the partition of Obolo people into two different states namely: Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State respectively, as a result of the Justice Mamman Nasir Boundary Adjustment Commission Report of 1976. It would be recalled that the division of Nigeria into provinces and later region did not affect the Obolo people, since they were usually in the same province or region (Eastern Nigeria). Even the creation of States in 1967 did not affect the Obolo because they were in one State. But the creation of States in 1976 and the boundary adjustment that followed it really affected the Obolo people and became one of the major themes of the Obolo twenty first century history. The 1976 boundary adjustment exercise marked the beginning of a new age or era in Obolo political history. The exercise had both positive and negative political effects on the Obolo people.

On the positive side, the Obolo (Andoni) has two Local Government Areas in two different States namely: Western Obolo (now Andoni Local Government Area) in Rivers State and Eastern Obolo (now Eastern Obolo Local Government Area) in Akwa Ibom State. This probably would not have been possible, considering the population of Obolo(Andoni) which was about 84,693 as of 1963 census, when Obolo (Andoni) was in one State. In addition, the Obolo people became known politically in both Rivers State and Akwa Ibom State as well as at the federal level. Between 1976 and 2015; several Obolo people in both states were holding various political positions. For instance, Ishmae Jakiri Igbani was appointed Honorable Minister of State for Industry in 1983, and in 2006 as Commissioner in the Independent National Electoral Commission in charge of party registrations while professor Nkparom Christian Ejitiwu was a member of the Asiawaju Boundary Commission in 1980. Also, Uche Secondus was the National Chairman of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) all from Western Andoni (Obolo). In Eastern Obolo, Francis Charles Uduyok was appointed member Board of the Nigerian

Product Research Institute and Member House of Representative.

Furthermore, at the State levels, some Obolo people were appointed Commissioners and Board Members in Rivers State and Akwa Ibom State. For example, in Rivers State, Professor Nkparon C. Ejitiwu was a Commissioner in Rivers State Civil Service Commission, about 1982, while Engineer Sampson Ngeregbara, was appointed Commissioner for Works in 1992. Also Engineer Tele Ikuru was elected Deputy Governor, 2007-2015. In Eastern Obolo in Akwa Ibom State, Mr. Geoffrey Uzono was appointed Commissioner for Special Duties and later Agriculture in 1994, Dr. Gamaliel Harry, Commissioner for Agriculture, Engineer Irogak Ikan, Commissioner for Works and later Commerce, 2005-2007.

Also, the political consciousness of the Obolo people have increased. The Obolo in Rivers States before the creation of Andoni Local Government Area in 1996, were in Bonny Local Government Area, and dominated politics in that Local Government because of their population. Between 1979 and 1983 Honorable Febia Urang, an indigene of Obolo, represented Bonny Local Area in the Rivers State House of Assembly, while Barrister Sham Asuk, also from Obolo, represented Bonny in the House of Representatives. Through elections, the Obolo people in Bonny Produced chairmen until the creation of Andoni Local Government Area in 1996. From 1999 till date, the Obolo people (now Andoni Local Government Area) in Rivers State maintained a seat in the Rivers State House of Assembly.

Moreso, in Eastern Obolo (now Eastern Obolo Local Government Area) in Cross River State now Akwa Ibom State, Obolo people had a seat in the then Cross River State and was represented by Honorable Sampson Urang from 1979-1983 and Honorable Chief Harry Efetor in 1983, while Honourable James Dan represented Eastern Obolo from 1992 to 1993.

It is instructive to note that Eastern Obolo was under Ikot Abasi Local Government Area from 1976 till 1996. And within the period aforementioned produced Vice Chairmen twice, while from 2003 to 2015 controlled Ikot Abasi / Eastern Obolo seat in the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly. Honourable Adasi Ubulom an indigene of Eastern Obolo Local Government Areas in Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly 2003 – 2007, also Honourable Dr. Charles Mboh 2007 -2011 and Rt. Honourable Uduyork Johnson Aboh 2011 – 2015.

Furthermore, before Justice Mamman Nasir report of 1976, one hundred and fourteen (114) towns and villages were gazetted in Obolo (Andoni) with Eastern Obolo in Akwa Ibom State having 27, (Mbikan, 2014). Conversely, between 1976 and 2006, over two hundred and eighty towns and villages have been

gazetted in Obolo Andoni (Mbikan, 2014). Ukpatu (2008) says one hundred and nine (109) towns and villages have been gazetted in Eastern Obolo in Akwa Ibom State while one hundred and eighty (180) were gazetted in Western Obolo (Andoni Local Government Area) in Rivers State.

On the contrary, the Nasir report has some negative political consequences on the Obolo people. The report has redrawn Obolo (Andoni) political map. The Commission (Nasir) fixed Imo River as a natural boundary between Rivers State and Akwa Ibom State. With this arrangement, the Eastern Obolo Local Government Area now resides in Akwa Ibom State, while Western Obolo, now Andoni Local Government Area, is situated in Rivers State.

As Owonte (1980) puts it, the division of Obolo (Andoni) people into two different states has dismembered the population and thrown Andoni nation into perpetual obscurity. Today, the Obolo people are a minority tribe in both Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State.

Agubosi (1982) remarks that “the division of people of the same ethnic group into different states weakens ethnic solidarity, and coming together would not be as easy as it was, when they were under one regional government. The unity of Obolo is already jeopardized by the Nasir report, and today, the Obolo are minority in Rivers State and Akwa Ibom State. In the words of Hargreaves, (1963) Africans with virtually identical cultures and traditions now found themselves subjects to different laws. This statement applies to the Obolo people, who are now under different laws, different traditional rulers’ councils as well as different state capitals and so on.

Based on the negative impacts of Nasir report, the Obolo people alleged that Nasir did not adhere to the principles of boundary demarcation in the country as already mentioned above. The Eastern Obolo people in a memorandum titled, “Request for merger of Eastern Obolo Clan (Eastern Andoni) with Rivers State” cited the following cases: that the Biase Erei Clan and Itigidi Clan who were on the boundary between Imo and Cross River States were not split but allowed to remain in Cross River State, in spite of their geographical location on both banks of the Cross River and Imo River.

Another example was that of Itu Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State, which also saddles the Cross River at Oku Iboku area and the boundary between Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. This area is not drawn along the river, but on land beyond the river. This is because the area of Itu Local Government lying on the eastern bank of the Cross River, has always been administered from Itu town.

The Eastern Obolo mentioned the case of Quebec in Canada. In demarcating the administrative boundaries of the provinces of Canada, the province of

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Quebec stands out as a universal establishment of this same principle – that is, administrative. Because the French speaking people of Quebec live on both banks of the Great St. Lawrence River, the few towns on the Southern banks are not ceded to the English-speaking province in the South, but are all grouped under the provincial government of Quebec.

Similarly, the small area of Obolo (Eastern Obolo Clan) lying on the eastern bank of Imo River had always been administered from Ngo Town headquarters of the Obolo people (now headquarters of Andoni Local Government) in Rivers State. The question now is, if Nasir Commission rejected the use of river(s) as a natural boundary in the two instances mentioned above, why did it used Imo River in the case of Obolo?

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT

The Nasir commission report without doubt has had far-reaching socio-economic impact on the Obolo people. On the positive side; it has led to the development of towns and villages in Obolo (Andoni) in Rivers State and Akwa Ibom State. For instance, several towns and villages in Obolo have been linked to the national grid. In Eastern Obolo, they include: Okoroete the headquarters of Eastern Obolo Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State, Okoroiti, Iko Town, Okorombokho, Elile, Amadaka, Kampa, the Amazaba and Okoroinyong, while in Western Obolo (Andoni Local Government Area) in Rivers State, Asarama, Unyeada, Egendem and others have electricity.

Furthermore, Obolo (Andoni) that was regarded as water logged and riverine communities is now accessible from Port Harcourt (Rivers State capital) and Uyo, Akwa Ibom State capital, as a result of the numerous roads that link Obolo communities with her neighbours.

Moreso, with the revolution in telecommunication, Obolo communities enjoy services provided by Globacom, Airtel and MTN companies. Their masts are spread across the length and breadth of Obolo communities.

In the field of education, between 1976 and 2006, Obolo (Andoni) has fourteen (14) secondary schools, eleven (11) in Andoni in Rivers State and three (3) in Eastern Obolo in Akwa Ibom State. Also, there is an increase in the number of primary schools from about twenty to 69: 58 in Andoni in Rivers State and 11 in Eastern Obolo in Akwa Ibom State. (Mbikan 2014).

In the realm of health care, before the Nasir report, Obolo had no hospital but only three dispensaries. Between 1976 and 2006, Western Obolo in Rivers State had twenty-seven health centres and a cottage hospital at Unyengala, while Eastern Obolo in

Akwa Ibom State has one cottage hospital at Okoroete and six health centres (Mbikan2014).

Again, since recruitment into the armed forces, police, paramilitary, federal civil service and other establishments are based on quota, more Obolo people have been enlisted or employed. For example, in 2000, when the Federal Civil Service Commission conducted interviews, two people from Eastern Obolo in Akwa Ibom State and three from Western Obolo (Andoni) in Rivers State were taken. A total of five Obolo people were employed, which probably would not have been possible, if they (Obolo) were not divided and were in one state or one local government area.

On the other hand, Nasir report has altered the course of social and economic history of the Obolo people. The Imo River that was not a barrier before the Nasir report became a barrier, though not restricting the Obolo physically, but emotionally and psychologically. Before the report, the Obolo students had National Union of Andoni Students which was (NUAS), an umbrella body that speaks for the entire Obolo students; strong and was very vibrant. Now, the NUAS serve the Andoni students in Rivers State and belong to the National Union of Rivers State Students (NURSS) while the Eastern Obolo students in Akwa Ibom State formed the Eastern Obolo Students Union, which belong to the National Association of Akwa Ibom State Students (NAAKISS). This development does not augur well with the unity of the Obolo people.

Also, in 1988, the Akwa Ibom State Government recognized Ibibio as the only superior language of the people of the state, and in 1991, approved three vernacular languages namely: Ibibio, Annang and Oron for broadcast on the state television service excluding "Obolo" (the language of Eastern Obolo). Everybody knows that language is an important aspect of culture, and it is the people's badge of cultural identity. Akpan (1991) described the approval of Ibibio as a superior language in the State as a political, cultural and linguistic colonization of the minority ethnic groups by the majority – (Ibibio). It was also alleged that the Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Education rejected the introduction of Obolo language in the primary schools in Eastern Obolo; an attempt some described as capable of alienating future generation of Obolo people in Akwa Ibom State. It is instructive to point out that the Obolo language and Bible Translation Committee (OLBTC) succeeded in introducing Obolo language in primary schools in Western Obolo (Andoni) in Rivers State, and failed in Eastern Obolo in Akwa Ibom State, because the Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Education rejected it. The situation could lead to loss of Obolo language in future in Eastern Obolo (Andoni).

To worsen the negative social and economic

effects is the psychological trauma occasioned by the frequent border clashes especially in Eastern Obolo in Akwa Ibom State. Out of about eight boundary clashes recorded between Obolo people and her Ibibio neighbours in Mkpato Enin and Ikot Abasi, five occurred in Eastern Obolo in Akwa Ibom State, while one was recorded in Andoni in Rivers State. That of Eastern Obolo occurred in 1980/1991, 1992/93, 2006, 2008 and 2012, while Western Andoni in Rivers State was in 1991/92 (Mbikan, 2014). It may be correct to say that these crises would not have occurred frequently if the Obolo people were in one state. It is imperative to say that the issue of border clashes is not only peculiar to the Obolo people and her neighbours, but are also witnessed in other parts of the country and directly or indirectly may be linked to the wrong application of boundary principles guidelines by the various boundary commissions especially the Nasir commission.

CONCLUSION

The Nasir Boundary Adjustment Commission Report of 1976, had both positive and negative consequences on the Obolo people, though it has fostered development in Obolo as highlighted above. On the contrary, the Obolo unity has been affected. The demand for the various ethnic groups affected by the Nasir Report need to be re-addressed or looked into, to avoid further breakdown of law and order, especially now that the country is facing security challenges. Boundary commission(s) should avoid the use of river as a natural boundary to split an homogenous ethnic group like the case of the Obolo (Andoni) people in Akwa Ibom and Rivers States.

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