

Environmental Politics, Resource Conflict and Youth Restiveness in Okpella.

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Abstract

The predominance of resource conflict threatens the peace, security and livelihood in the Okpella community in Edo State, Nigeria. While historical studies have examined the issue of resource control in Nigeria, this aspect of the environmental and social history of Okpella is understudied. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the nature of resource conflict and youth restiveness in Okpella. Underpinned by the Frustration-Aggression theory and based on the historical analysis of oral interviews and the extant literature, it concludes that youth restiveness in the Okpella community is influenced by frustration over unemployment and poverty. The paper calls for policy engagement with youth empowerment.

Keywords: Environmental Exploitation, Mineral Exploration, Mining, Poverty, Violent Conflict, Youth Restiveness.

Introduction

This paper examines the nature of resource conflict and youth restiveness in Okpella. Okpella is one of the three main towns that make up the Etsako East Local Government Area of Edo State in Nigeria. The people of Okpella Kingdom are noted for their natural mineral resources, which include limestone, calcium, and granite. Okpella community is endowed with mineral resources such as limestone, granite, and caolin among others. The mineral resources have attracted the quarrying companies to engage in large-scale industrial stone crushing. Indigenous and artisanal stone crushers have increased over the



years, and their activities have become viable business ventures for many. In the face of an economic meltdown during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70), stone crushing became one of the major sources of income with many people engaging in it.

In 1987, women in Okpella Community decided to go into local mining, called *Ayegesi*. They together with their children engage in crushing granite and by exposing themselves to harsh, unhealthy, and unsafe working conditions. The profits some of them made were enough incentive, while the exercise was mainly subsistent for several others. There are attendant personal risks as well as environmental hazards in local mining and rock blasting in the Okpella community. The huge natural rock first has to be broken down into smaller manageable boulders, and this is done by drilling a hole underneath the rock, setting fire to it, and leaving it to burn for as much as three days. This softens the rock, and when it is molten enough, it explodes into smaller particles. Workers are to completely evacuate the rock blasting sites to avoid being struck by sharp flying rocks.¹

Youth Restiveness has been on the increase despite the various youth programmes and projects carried out by governments, multinational companies, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Okpella. These violent activities of youths protesting over marginalization and social inequality have affected the economy and security of lives and properties in Okpella community.² While historical studies have examined the issue of resource control in Nigeria, this aspect of the environmental and social history of Okpella is understudied. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the nature of resource conflict and youth restiveness in Okpella. The study adopts the historical method of data analysis based on the critical analysis of oral interviews conducted in the Okpella community and the extant literature.

Conceptual Clarifications

Youth restiveness emanates from the discontentment of youths with their society. This found expression in the agitation by youths in response to social inequality and its associated marginalization in accessing public goods. Here, the Frustration-aggression theory explains the evolution of conflicts as a product of enduring frustration arising from the dysfunctional social organization of society.³ As observed by Dollard et al. "the occurrence of aggressive behaviour always presupposes the existence of frustration and, contrariwise, that the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression".⁴ In this context, the frustration of youths over issues of unemployment and poverty caused by social inequality results in violent protests over lack of social mobility. In Okpella, the lack of access to

¹ Interview, High Chief F.A. Abu, Village Head, Okpella, 19/1/2023.

² Interview, N.B. Saale, Okpella Community Ogute-Oke, Okpella 10/02/2023 .

³ J. Dollard, N.E. Miller, L.W. Doob, O.H. Mowrer, and R.R. Sears. *Frustration and Aggression*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939; J.W. Atkinson and R.C. Atkinson. *Fundamentals of Psychology*. New York, NY: Wiley Press, 1975.

⁴ Dollard et al. *Frustration and Aggression*, p. 1.

environmental wealth and the prevalence of high-level unemployment stimulate frustration among the youths.

Aggression is often targeted towards the source of the frustration in retaliation. This can be seen as a justified aggression. In cases where aggression is extended to actors who do not play any role in obstructing the goals of the aggrieved, the aggression is misplaced and not justifiable.⁵ The phenomenon of youth restiveness became rampant in the Nigerian Niger Delta region following a series of oil spillages and environmental degradation in the late twentieth century. Youth restiveness has been classified into three dimensions – genuine agitation, self-seeking and criminality.⁶ At Okpella, the prolonged struggle with environmental degradation, unemployment and poverty has led to the violent contestation of power with implications for peace and development in the area. Youth restiveness stems from societal shifts brought about by collective behaviour. This is a sudden response by individuals to unclear and unstructured circumstances.⁷ Youth unemployment rates that are too high can lead to poverty and social exclusion, and young people typically react differently to these kinds of unfavourable circumstances. Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory of Deviance and Anomie is thought to be appropriate to explain youth restiveness in Okpella because it is one of the most widely used paradigms for interpreting deviant behaviours resulting from value consensus. According to R. Merton, aberrant behaviour stems from the culture and structure of the society.⁸ He stated that because individuals in society are put in distinct positions in the social system based on their class, they do not have the same potential to realize common values. This condition can cause unrest. According to Merton, the social and cultural framework exerts pressure for socially deviant conduct upon those variably positioned in that structure.⁹

The core concepts of Merton's theory are based on the assumption that deviation or youth restiveness stems from a mismatch between cultural/success goals and institutionalized means/methods. For example, members of the Okpella community share and agree on key cultural goals, notably the objective of success (i.e. cultural goals), for which they all strive, and these goals are assessed in terms of money and material things. However, the Okpella community, like any other social group, has established and accepted methods (i.e. institutionalized means) of achieving these culturally defined goals. In Okpella, acceptable paths to achievement include decent education, hard work, talent, dedication, and ambition. Unfortunately, accomplishment is highly valued but the established methods of gaining success are given little or no consideration. As a result, the Okpella youth embrace cultural aspirations for

⁵ J. Breuer and M. Elson. Frustration-Aggression Theory. In P. Sturmey (Ed.), *The Wiley Handbook of Violence and Aggression* (pp. 1-12). Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119057574.whbva040>.

⁶ K.B.O. Ejumudo. Youth restiveness in the Niger Delta: A critical discourse. *SAGE Open*, 4(2), 2014, 2158244014526719.

⁷ R.A. Fatah, R.A. Recognize Max Weber's Social Action Theory in Individual Social Transformation. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Approach Research and Science*, 2: 659-666, 2024, 10.59653/ijmars.v2i02.681.

⁸ R.K. Merton. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press, 1968.

⁹ M. Haralambos and M. Holborn, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*. Harper Collins Publishers Limited, 2013.

success but lack institutionalized mechanisms of obtaining success, thus they reject the game's rules and strive for achievement by any available means. The scenario resembles a game of cards, with certain Okpella youths abandoning the rules in order to win. As soon as a category of Okpella youngsters responds to the uncomfortable and unwanted state of lack of access to opportunities and social marginalization in their supposed fatherland, the rules cease to work, and a situation of normlessness known as youth restiveness occurs.

According to Merton's theory, anomie is characterized by an overemphasis on cultural success objectives and a lack of focus on culturally approved ways of obtaining success, which frequently leads to norm breakdowns. As a result, each Okpella citizen would respond to anomie in different ways depending on their position in the social structure. Merton proposed that young people may respond in five ways: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion.¹⁰ The first and most usual response is conformity. The youth conform to both cultural goals and the normative methods of achieving them. As a result, they seek achievement through established avenues. The second option is innovation. This group acknowledges cultural ideals but rejects the normal ways of obtaining achievement, instead improvising and turning to (innovative) deviant means. The third possible reaction is ritualism, in which the youths may renounce widely held success objectives but retain normative methods because they have been heavily socialized to comply with societal norms. The fourth response is for individual youths who reject both the achievement objectives and the institutionalized mean, feeling dejected and accepting their failure. Finally, rebellion refers to people who reject both successful objectives and established means in favour of new goals and methods.

Therefore, youth restiveness in Okpella is indicative of the fact that some of the youths select the second option (innovation). That is, they accepted the cultural or success goals but did not possess the institutionalized or the normative means to achieve or attain these goals due to their position in the social structure. They therefore improvise whatever available means to achieve the success goals of their community.

Lime-Stone Mining and Cement Production in Nigeria: A Historical Overview

Limestone, a sedimentary rock primarily composed of calcium carbonate, plays a critical role in various industries including construction.¹¹ Archaeological evidence found ancient burial sites made of limestone and fossil coral outcroppings in Africa.¹² In Nigeria, the history of limestone mining is intertwined with the country's economic development and industrialization efforts. Limestone mining in Nigeria dates back to pre-colonial times when indigenous communities utilized limestone for local construction. However,

¹⁰ Haralambos, and Holborn, *Sociology*.

¹¹ F. Tegethoff, J.R. Wolfgang and E. Kroker, (eds). *Calcium carbonate: from the Cretaceous period into the 21st century*. Springer Science and Business Media, 2001.

¹² S.M. Kusimba, S.B. Kusimba, and D.K. Wright. "The development and collapse of precolonial ethnic mosaics in Tsavo, Kenya." *Journal of African Archaeology* 3, no. 2 (2005): 243-265.

significant commercial exploitation began during the colonial era, particularly in the early 20th century.¹³ The British colonial government recognized the potential of Nigeria's mineral resources and initiated mining activities to support infrastructure development.¹⁴ Limestone was mined primarily for local use in the production of cement, which became increasingly important as urbanization progressed. Cement production in Nigeria dates back to the early 20th century, with the establishment of a small-scale production facility by a British company in the 1950s.

The post-independence era in the 1960s marked a significant shift as the Nigerian government prioritized infrastructure development to support economic growth. The establishment of the Nigerian cement industry marked a pivotal moment in limestone mining. In 1962, the first cement plant, the Nigerian Cement Company, was founded in the country, relying heavily on locally sourced limestone.¹⁵ This development spurred demand for limestone, leading to the expansion of mining operations across various regions.

The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) disrupted industrial activities, but the need for reconstruction led to an increased demand for cement. In the 1970s, the government initiated several projects aimed at boosting cement production. Key among these was the establishment of an indigenous state-run Cement Company. The industrial indigenization policy was in line with the Nigeria Enterprises Promotion Decrees of 1972 and 1977.¹⁶ The 1980s saw the introduction of the Nigerian Industrial Revolution Plan, which further encouraged local production. However, the sector faced numerous challenges, including inconsistent energy supply, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to raw materials. These issues led to a reliance on imported cement, which strained the national economy. The 1990s brought about significant economic reforms, including the liberalization of the cement market. This shift opened the door for private sector participation, leading to the emergence of various companies. Notably, the Dangote Group entered the cement industry, eventually becoming one of the largest producers in Africa. Narrating the impact of government policy of indigenization on the rise of new actors in the Nigerian cement manufacturing sector, A. Akinyoade and C. Uche noted:

In Nigeria, the class of African business elites was greatly boosted when the government of General Yakubu Gowon, encouraged by the country's emergent oil wealth, embarked on the indigenisation policy in 1972. This indigenisation exercise resulted in either the forced takeover or shared ownership of several foreign businesses by Nigerians. In 1977, as already mentioned, the Obasanjo administration further expanded the scope of businesses requiring mandatory

¹³ E.K. Faluyi. The importance of mining to Nigeria's economy in colonial times. *Lagos Notes and Records*, 8(1), 1999, 187-211; S. J. Mallo. The Nigerian mining sector: An overview. *Cont. J. Appl. Sci.*, 7(1), 2012, 34-45.

¹⁴ National Archives Ibadan, N.A.I. Annual Report on the Mines Department, 1931.

¹⁵ M. Murtala. "The Emergence of Manufacturing Industry in Nigeria (1955)." *Journal of Advances in Social Science and Humanities* 5, no. 6 (2019): 807-823.

¹⁶ P. Collins. "The political economy of indigenization: The case of the Nigerian enterprises promotion decree." *African Review* 4, no. 4 (1974): 491-508.

participation of Nigerians as part- or sole owners. This government policy therefore enabled the emerging class of African business elites.¹⁷

The privatization of state-owned enterprises and the encouragement of foreign investment contributed to a resurgence in cement production. In this era, new technologies were adopted, improving the efficiency and quality of cement production. The establishment of modern plants, such as Dangote Cement's flagship facility in Obajana and BUA's cement factories enabled the country to increase its production capacity significantly. The Nigerian Mining Act of 2007 and its associated policies emphasize local sourcing of materials for infrastructure projects and bolstered the limestone mining sector, encouraging both small-scale and large-scale cement manufacturing.¹⁸ In the early twenty-first century, Nigeria had transitioned from being a net importer of cement to a net exporter. However, the unethical extractive structures that undermine environmental sustainability breed local discontent and social conflicts and call for inclusive environmental governance.

Stone-Mining, Cement Production and Socio-ecological Conflicts in Okpella

Environmental politics encompasses the intricate interplay between political institutions, environmental policies, and the various stakeholders involved in managing natural resources. As globalization intensifies and human demand for resources grows, conflicts over environmental issues and resource management have escalated. These conflicts often arise from competing interests, differing values, and the urgent need to address environmental degradation while ensuring sustainable resource use.

Resource conflicts typically arise over material and ideology when multiple parties vie for control over limited natural resources, such as water, minerals, land, and forests. Material conflicts are driven by tangible needs and competition for resources, while ideological conflicts reflect deeper cultural, social, and ethical divides concerning resource management and environmental stewardship. A salient example is the conflict over solid mineral extraction and environmental degradation in Okpella, Edo State. In Okpella, environmental politics involves a diverse array of actors, including stone mining companies, government, and local communities. These actors bring unique perspectives and interests, complicating the governance of natural resources. While the government prioritizes economic growth, private investors focus on profit and the community seeks social justice. The dynamics of these interactions are influenced by political structures and power relations. In Nigeria, the policy on solid mineral governance marginalizes communities in decision-making processes, leading to policies that favour powerful interests. This imbalance has exacerbated resource conflicts, as disenfranchised groups resist external pressures to exploit their land for stone mining.

¹⁷ A. Akinyoade and C. Uche. Development built on crony capitalism? The case of Dangote Cement, *Business History*, 2017, DOI: 10.1080/00076791.2017.1341492.

¹⁸ The Nigerian Government. Mineral and Mining Act 2007. Available at <https://www.a-mla.org/en/country/pdf/3>.

Climate change has emerged as a critical factor exacerbating this resource conflict. As weather patterns become increasingly unpredictable, the availability of essential resources like water and arable land is compromised due to pollution caused by mining sites. This instability often leads to heightened competition among various users, resulting in tensions and violence. In Okpella, changing rainfall patterns have intensified conflicts over the decline in arable land and youth unemployment. Communal conflicts are driven by dimensions of relations among the Stone-Mining and cement-production community in Okpella. Communal conflicts are usually triggered by disagreements between community factions. The issues in contention may include land ownership petty contracts and compensation for damages. This often arose from rivalry between local elites who cooperate with investors such as the cement companies to exploit the environment through limestone mining. This is a capture of community resources by a few people in society.¹⁹ This manipulation of the larger society by the elites and mining companies often leads to violent conflicts in Okpella.²⁰ As observed by residents, the community conflicts are usually an offshoot of several factors such as cement dust and the associated ecological devastation; delays in the clean-up of areas impacted by cement dust, payment of inadequate compensation for damaged crops, breach of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and patronage of community leaders. The agricultural productivity in Okpella is poor due to its rocky terrain and lack of irrigation technology. The climate of the area is characterized by extreme dryness thereby reducing crop yields. The harsh climatic environment could have stemmed from mining activity and environmental pollution. This is complicated by the lack of a river in the community. The deleterious environmental impact of mining in various villages undermines agricultural productivity in Okpella.²¹

The environmental politics arising from this circumstance have led to the structuring of community employment opportunities. As noted by Barrister John Okodo, the CEO of the Community Development Association (CDA), jobs designated for young people are shared between 60% to the community and 40% to the business. This appears as a move by the cement companies to compensate the youths of the community in the face of high-rate unemployment levels. However, there are reports that the CDA committee conspired with the company's top employees to seize job slots, which led to a crisis between the youths and community leaders at Okpella. Buttressing the foregoing, Abdulmalik, Okpella youth coordinator, noted that the lack of employment opportunities and the marginalization of youths by village chiefs and mining companies led to the violent conflicts at Okpella.²² This shows that resource extraction by the dominant powers in society undermines the interests of the youth with implications for social harmony.

However, Mr. Richard Gidado, the general manager of a mining company noted that hiring decisions were made in the past before the community established a committee called the Community Development Association". This committee

¹⁹ Interview, Mr. F. Eshiojie, resident, Okpella community, 10/1/2023.

²⁰ Interview, Mr. F. Eshiojie, resident, Okpella community, 10/1/2023.

²¹ Interview, J. O Okodo, resident, Okpella community, 27/1/2023.

²² Interview, Mr. Abdulmalik Aliu, youth leader, Okpella community, 24/4/2023.

was established to communicate any information or events that are taking place in the business to the community. The community slot, the scholarship, and many other things are to be within the committee's control.²³ However, rising agitations about the social responsibilities undertaken by the major mining companies in the area (BUA and Dangote) are facilitated by conspiracy theories that the employment slots meant for the youths are being sold. Thus, the youth are demanding to know why they are not benefiting from the recent BUA/Dangote Scholarships, which was intended to be given to those with fewer privileges but was also stolen by the Community Development Association (CDA). The youth's restiveness over natural resource exploitation also stems from environmental degradation as a result of limestone exploration. These mining activities have led to the destruction of existing farmland without payment of compensation to the affected farmers.²⁴ Local respondents pointed out that as a result of the high concentration of dust particles in the atmosphere, people have a problem with vision. The dusty atmosphere has led to respiratory challenges among the population. Moreover, the Okpella community suffers from heavy traffic jams and truck gridlock making the environment noisy and stifling the supply chain network.²⁵ These socioeconomic challenges have led to ecosocial crisis and social conflict in the community. There has been a recurrence of youth restiveness and insecurity in Okpella since 2013. Although the Okpella region accounts for a substantial revenue accrued to the Edo state treasury, there has been a trend of marginalization of residents as the populace languishes in abject poverty.²⁶ Despite the substantial contribution of the town to the socio-economic development of Edo State, local infrastructure is deplorable. In this circumstance, the youths from Okpella do not largely benefit from the presence of transnational corporations, especially the cement companies (BUA and Dangote) operating in their communities. According to a resident, "very few people from the Okpella community work in the companies".²⁷ This situation marked by the high rate of unemployment in the town stimulates enduring youth restiveness in Okpella.

Youth restiveness in Okpella often paralyzes economic activities and the regional logistics chain since the town is located at a major node of the national transportation network. While the youths often engage the mining companies violently, the strategy adopted in curbing the crisis is reactive rather than proactive as the government deploys the military and police to stem youth violent protests.²⁸ Residents alleged that government intervention through development commissions and ad-hoc committees is meaningless as such policies serve as an avenue for corruption at the expense of the people. Consequently, the structure of injustice and neglect in Okpella has forced the local youths into violent activities leading to loss of lives and property.

²³ Interview, Mr Gabriel Eshio, Okpella community. 24/4/2023.

²⁴ Interview, Alh. Mohammed Mohammed, Formal Iddo Youth Leader, Okpella, 24/4/2023.

²⁵ Interview, High Chief F.A. Abu, Village Head, Okpella, 19/1/2023.

²⁶ Interview, Barr. Malik Mamud Afegbua, Afegbua Royal palace, Awuyemi Okpella. 29/01/2023.

²⁷ Interview, Alh. Mohammed Mohammed, Formal Iddo Youth Leader, Okpella, 24/4/2023.

²⁸ Interview, Chief Abdullahi Isah Kadiri, Okpella 10/2/2023.

Some of the violent and criminal activities engaged by the youths include kidnapping and armed robbery with cement companies and travellers as primary targets. In the face of these onslaughts, the community clamoured for resource ownership and control. Unfortunately, there are local rumours that unemployed youths in Okpella have been recruited as political thugs by politicians who use them as foot soldiers to intimidate political opponents and rig elections. Indeed, the 2011 and 2015 general elections, were allegedly characterized by massive violence and electoral fraud perpetrated by youths in Okpella and its environs. Government intervention through entrepreneurial loans and infrastructural development could stimulate the establishment of small and medium enterprises by the youths thereby stemming the crisis of unemployment and insecurity at Okpella.

Young people often bear the brunt of economic disenfranchisement, leading to a sense of hopelessness and frustration. When resources are mismanaged or monopolized by a select few, young populations may view this as a direct attack on their future. For instance, in Okpella, youths have been at the forefront of movements demanding equitable distribution of wealth generated from their environment. By involving youths and local populations in decision-making processes, policies can be better aligned with the needs and rights of those most affected by resource management decisions. In addition, treaties and agreements that promote sustainable resource management and environmental protection can help mitigate conflicts. This is in line with the Paris Agreement which underscores the need for global collaboration to address global environmental change and resource-related conflicts. This is important as the Paris Agreement emphasizes climate-related capacity-building for developing countries under the mentorship of developed countries.²⁹ Integrating environmental considerations into economic planning, governments can create incentives for conservation and sustainable resource use, reducing the likelihood of conflicts arising from resource scarcity. By fostering inclusive governance, promoting international cooperation, and embracing sustainable development practices, it is possible to navigate the complexities of environmental politics and work towards equitable and peaceful resolutions to resource conflicts and planetary health.

Conclusion

This article examines the nature of resource conflicts and youth restiveness at Okpella. The study reveals the impact of solid mineral exploration on the Okpella environment and the changing livelihood of the people. It reveals the strategic relevance of the town in the state's economy and how the State government earns huge revenue through the taxation of mining companies operating in the town. Solid mineral exploration and its associated environmental consequences including soil damage, and water and air pollution encroach on the fundamental human rights of the Okpella community. In the face of high unemployment level among the youths, local responses to youth unemployment have been reportedly coercive and destructive as many youths have been arrested while others hired as political thugs. The high

²⁹ United Nations. Paris Agreement, 2015. Available at https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf.

unemployment level and poverty have led to youth's restiveness and criminality further disrupting economic logistics and stimulating insecurity. Policy intervention targeting environmental protection, participatory governance, infrastructural development and youth empowerment is sacrosanct to mediate peace in the area.

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