

# Of Peace, War and Land Rights: the View from Nigeria

*by Gordon Abiama*

Land will ever remain the pivot on which human existence revolves, thus making it, including all natural resources and opportunities, common property. Society's neglect of this immutable fact has resulted in bloody conflicts, whether they be tribal, national or international.

From the Middle East, where we have the world's most explosive land problem today, to the communal conflicts in remote villages in deep Africa, the contention has been and will continue to be over access to land, its resources and opportunities.

Land tenure in West Africa, particularly in southern Nigeria, has its roots in priority settlement. The man who migrates with his family to a virgin land exhibits absolute right to lay claim to as much territory as he likes.

As time goes on, given the migratory nature of human beings, others join the early settlers in their primitive environment. The settlement then gradually evolves from a bush camp into a hamlet, then a village and eventually a big town where human interdependence becomes complex as a result of improvements. This early settler and his family, being social animals by nature, welcome with open arms other immigrants who come to join them in peaceful association.

The head of the family of the first settlers automatically becomes the chief of the village or town. At his death, his eldest son succeeds him. The continuation of this social arrangement — even as the family and population expands — means placing rulership in a particular lineage. The man who passes into such hereditary kingship begins to develop an exalted position, with corresponding privileges. He will be privileged, for example, to collect fees from those who wish to fish in the natural lakes, to use forest resources, or even to obtain plots of land for farming.

He also exercises the authority to impose sanctions on all who fail to adhere to his rules. One such sanction is the imposition of fines. Such fees are utilized not for the benefit of the whole community but to maintain the privileged status he and his cronies have inherited. Thus the tree of maldistribution begins to flourish.

Soon ill feelings begin to spring up among other family members in the community about such social arrangements. There will be those who may see the king or chief as being autocratic and greedy. The next step may be for the dissenters to convince other families to join in straightening up the young chief.

The chief, now feeling his position threatened, moves quickly to crush the impending rebellion by summoning his council and aides to alert them to the grim prospects of losing their privileges should the dissenters have their way.

At the end of their deliberations, the dissenters get branded as strangers, therefore tenants who should be banished from the community.

Prejudices and animosities heighten as the once peaceful community begins to break up into disconnected fragments resulting in an orgy of violence among the various families. Improvements cease as houses and communal facilities get destroyed. The mental powers that were once devoted to improving the living standard of the whole community are now expended in mutual bloodshed and destruction of wealth.

In such a community where fish, timber and palm oil production thrived, war has come to lessen their supply — thus increasing their value.

Such bloody communal clashes sadly are common features on our social landscape. Examples of such conflicts include the Ijaw-Ilaje war that has only recently subsided, the Iṛhobo-Itshekiri war, and the Ijaw-Itshekiri war, all in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. These conflicts have claimed thousands of lives and property worth billions. Bloody conflicts are by no means limited to the Niger Delta region; all sections of Nigeria have had their share of them.

All the clashes are traceable to agitations either for grazing rights, oil royalties or farm lands which are being monopolized by the so-called royal families. The authorities in such states end up dissipating time, energy and money in settling disputes instead of initiating and implementing policies that will bring development to the people.

Henry George pointed out in *Social Problems* how wars show evidence of great waste of productive capacity. Practical examples abound. George also noted in *The Science of Political Economy* that whatever increases the obstacles to the gratification of desire on the part of the consumers, thus compelling them to undergo more toil and trouble to obtain those things, increases their value. This theory is all-too-readily confirmed in Nigeria.

Warfare, as destructive and wasteful as it can be in any society, can also be a means by which a conquering tribe or nation can unite communities that have been separated by warfare, and internal peace preserved.

The peace thus attained by coercive force remains fragile as long as the program of social change fails to address the issue of equal distribution of the benefits and opportunities that come from land.

**M**ental powers that were once devoted to improving the community are now expended in mutual bloodshed and destruction.

GJ