

# The Concept and Nature of Warfare in the ‘Pagan Societies’ of North Central Nigeria from the Earliest Times to 1920

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## Abstract

In a time and day, when man is unleashing unusual animalistic tendencies with unbelievable manifestation of raw brutality and barbarism, it has become necessary to once again look back at the past and learn from the forebears how emotions, conflicts and disagreements were resolved. Recent evidence suggests that war is not an innate part of human nature, but rather behavior adopted more recently. Violence in early human communities was driven by personal conflicts rather than large scale battles. This paper argues that warfare among the societies of North Central Nigeria was governed by many conventions that did not permit wanton destruction of lives and property. It contends that warfare was non imperialist in nature neither did it support conquests. This paper concludes that the absence of centralized state structures in most of the societies of Central Nigeria supports this fact. The lesson we glean from the past is the importance of ethics, humanity and respect for human life. Lessons and values, this paper argues, that have been thrown to the dogs.

**Keywords:** Conflict; Convention; Ethics; Morality; Primitive Warfare; Rules of Engagement.

## 1. Introduction

The essence of this paper is to carefully look at the practice of warfare among the societies of what was referred to as the Pagan Division in today’s North Central Nigeria. As much as possible, this paper shall avoid unnecessary debates, academic and philosophical arguments and speculations that surround discourses of this nature except where it is absolutely unavoidable. Suffice to say there are different definitions of war.

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Accordingly, earlier theorists [1,2,3] have categorized or conceptualized war into two broad spectrums. Some see it as socio-political phenomenon while others insist that war is a judicial or legal phenomenon. The weaknesses of these two schools of thought lies in the fact that it is not possible in actual sense to set definitional boundaries around constantly fluid and changing concepts as war or in fact violence [4]. Some other anthropologists like [5,6] have pushed the debate further by distinguishing between war and warfare. While suggesting that warfare refers to the process or activity of battle, they in turn see war more as an institution or entire system. They argue however that war is not only about military activities. These theorists and those after them like [7,8] all followed in the tradition of Eurocentric scholarship that believed in racial superiority and the dismissal of non-state societies particularly in Africa and other parts of the developing world as primitive, nativistic, backward and without history. Most Europeans did not even believe that Africa and other parts of the so-called developing world had anything worth studying.

This paper seeks to remedy the knowledge gap that exists between invented European theories which are neither applicable nor free of euro centrism. Not only do these theories fail in their general application on most societies of the developing world; there is actually a disconnection between them and African or third world reality. This paper contends that the best examples of justice, fairness, equity or equality before the law, rule of law and government were to be found in the non-centralized societies. These societies that existed for many decades without written codes, without police, prisons or state apparatus such as rulers etc and maintained law and order, respect for life and ensured safety of the weak and the strong alike actually should have constituted special interests for investigation. It is the deficit noticed in prevailing understanding and conceptualization of the subject of this discourse that has necessitated this contribution.

The theorists mentioned above and the many others in the same orientation with them fail flat, or perhaps blinded by their superiority philosophies have not chosen to independently interrogate these so-called stateless societies to find out their dynamism and why they had fewer cases of internecine warfare, their attitudes towards defeat, procedures for conflict resolution and peace. In the first place, conflicts between these communities as with every other society had their causes and different approaches were adopted in resolving them.

## ***1.1 Conceptual Clarifications***

### ***1.1.1 Independent Republics***

The societies of the Pagan Division were highly democratic, open and egalitarian in nature. Each village or community was different and independent of the other in every respect. They had their farmlands, water sources and defined territories. They also had their affiliations, friends and foes. They responded to their challenges in their own ways, arranged their ceremonies and performed their rituals based at their convenience and timing. The political arrangement of these republics was based on consent, dialogue and gerontocracy. There were no kings nor rulers, no standing armies nor law enforcement agencies. Law and order was enforced based on the power of custom and tradition. Morality was a public matter and the sanctions for breach of its various codes were common knowledge to all. Good harvests, peace, sound and prosperous communities were believed to be dependent on the observance of the moral codes. Droughts, pestilences, poor harvests and death of young people

were blamed on breach of moral codes. The people had strong belief in the power and support of their ancestors to preserve and protect them from all harm if they maintained harmonious relationships with them through offerings, libations and occasional sacrifices during special occasions.

The family which was made up of descendants of a patriarch was considered big, with some of the members on the other side of the divine economy, some living and some yet unborn; it was regarded as the heart of the community. Next to the family was the village which consisted of compounds of the families or extended families, of a single clan or section of a clan. The clan was made up of different families who shared many things in common including a belief in common origin. Everyone knew that outside of this web of the family, village or clan he had very limited status and less protection from others who ordinarily would treat him with suspicion. Where he was recognised through whatever kinship connection, he was still largely a tolerated “outsider” and at worsts a nameless stranger [9].

Whereas the clan was an expression of common origins, the village was more of an expression of common needs [10]. It formed the natural grouping in the daily life of its inhabitants in their work and their recreational activities. The village was a base and center of any other association which claimed the individual as their member, such as play groups, age classes, religious cults etc [11].

The structure of these societies allowed for feuds or crisis which erupted from time to time. The crisis varied from community to community and the issues that were involved determined the extent or duration of such misunderstanding. Whatever the cause or nature of the conflicts, the individual offenders or the offended had the primary responsibility of ensuring that the situation did not escalate beyond necessary. The communities to which these belonged were in one way or the other involved in the management of the situations knowing fully well that they too could be dragged into the conflict resulting from the dispute [10].

Each of the forty clans had its distinct name, common idiosyncrasies, common sentiments, unique territory and its distinct expression of identity and nationalism. These clans were divided from one another by wide stretches of bush or farm lands and jealously guarded sources of water. These clans according to their mythical lineages included khien'zwe, Ken'gbo, Khegbe, Khenwa, Riche, Gbagi, Khenngan, Ncho, Gbugyar, Mochu, Ndownan, Khejah, Rinze, Njidda, Koko, Rhegan, Lalla, Nunku, Gbuwhon, Gbunje, Ntsakpe, Njoto, Njugban etc. Some of the clans were bigger than others. The size of a clan determined a couple of realities such its territory and its bargaining power and standing in the lineage shrine during religious rituals [12].

In [13] categorization of conflict applies among the communities of Akwanga area. As with all humans, conflicts can exist between family members, between members of the same community or village. Conflict can also exist between different communities and between different cultural groups. Just as stated already, the nature of the conflict determined the responses to it.

### ***1.1.2 Family and Intra-village conflicts***

There were different situations and circumstances that necessitated certain types of responses. When a man feels that he has suffered an injury especially from another, either of his family, village, clan or mythical lineage, he

could lodge his complaint to the elders of the community who were expected to take proactive measures to prevent any breakdown of law and order. However, if the aggrieved person felt the offence was solvable in a different way, especially if he felt insulted and humiliated and could not endure the disgrace or the shame, he had the right to engage the offender in a physical combat especially if the offender was not remorseful. He was expected to challenge the man who has wronged him into a duel. Most times the challenge must be accepted for fear of being regarded as fearful and cowardly. A man's discipline and courage were his best bet and immediate protection against any external aggression. This kind of fight, if it was with a member of the community, clan or member of the same mythical lineage was permitted within a framework or under certain clear conditions. The two fighters were allowed to use weapons such as sticks, stones, brute force etc. On no condition was an iron weapon allowed at this point. Any injury caused by a stick or stone was considered mild. The rules were clear; this was one of the conventions of warfare among the communities under study [12].

If because of anger and or extreme feelings of provocation any iron implement or weapon was used to inflict injury and there was evidence of blood, that fight would no longer be seen or tolerated as a duel between two people but as a serious community infringement that could lead to war between the clans if the duel was inter clannish in the first place. It is against this background that the role and relevance of elders in the communities can be appreciated. Anytime and everywhere there was an elder at any particular spot, he was seen as an arbiter. If there was provocation or breach of peace and an elder present from whichever side raised his right hand and says 'I forbid crisis here'; that would automatically douse the tension at that spot. The aggrieved person can only nurse his pain and look out for opportunity to get even with his offender but he has do it in such a way that the episode must never be connected or traced the previous one.

In spite of the rules of engagement, there were instances where such duels resulted in death. The person who caused the death was considered a murderer and had to pay for it. Depending on the circumstances and the posture of the family of the deceased, the murderer could be hunted down or forced to go on exile without pity even from his family and siblings. Such exiles were never visited because they were considered as those stained by human blood and therefore cursed. It was believed that anyone that visited such could inherit their curses. Where the family of the deceased refuse to accept settlements mediated by the elders of the community and the priests of the community's shrine, the murderer's family may be forced to pay fine apart from the personal burden that the murderer will carry for life as one stained by human blood.

Apart from personal conflicts that could hurt community cohesion, farm disputes could also create tensions within the family or village. Elders who knew the portions of the disputed land were usually called upon to intervene and quickly sanction the aggressor and settle the potential dispute. If this dispute is however involving different segments of the clan, a more effort was required to douse the tension and preserve the clan from splitting into shreds and becoming an object of scorn and laughter. Another area that could breach the peace of any community was the issue of paternity of children. Some villages were so large and the families distinct from each other to the extent that marriage was allowed among them.

Whenever the paternity of a child was in doubt, the men claiming the child and their families were quickly summoned to the village or community groove or shrine. The procedure for determining the paternity of the

child was known to all and sundry. It was known to the contestants and their families or supporters. The priests would meet; sit in silence for a long period in deep meditation, prayers and consultation. When all the signs indicate that they could proceed with the final stage, it was done in the presence of all assembled men. When the chief priest completes the prayers, the mother of the disputed child is invited to sit upon a particular stool or stone and a live chicken is placed on her head. As soon as the priest completes the recitation of a few scriptural texts and chanting of some specific mantras also repeated by the assembled guests, he would declare to the gods in the following words “ gods of my fathers, my ancestors served you faithfully, I inherited them and have served you also faithfully. We have this little dispute about this child; wise ones, is there anything difficult for you? If this child belongs to A let this chicken fly off as a sign [14] If the chicken flies off, the test is over and B knows that’s not his child. This was actually the cause of many conflicts among the societies of Akwanga area since the societal value was on women and children.

For purposes of self-defense, children were drilled from their youth to maintain military forms. It must be noted that every man was a soldier or warrior in the first place. He must be able to defend himself from external aggression and defend his community from every form of harm. They grew up trained by the adults on self-defence and need for bravery. The recitations about great heroes and heroines of the past fired them up to death defying militancy and nationalism. They were made to recite names of great heroes in their family lines and those of their community as an incentive. They watched decorated heroes during festivals with great pride and each child grew up desiring to accomplish feats of bravery and selflessness on behalf of their community. They were taught discipline and survival skills from early childhood, were taught warfare in various ways including the use of arrows, making of poisons for arrows and other secrets of survival during conflicts. They were trained to be stoical and Spartan in response to challenges. Every young boy was taught to be a man of few words and great endurance. These were inculcated in various ways and times including initiation rites during or when they were introduced to the gods of their land.

### ***1.2.3 Intra and inter Clan Feuds***

This paper set out from its introduction to avoid the varied and often confusing and misleading theories about primitive warfare. It will be proper however to note that [6]. References [10,15] have all conceptualized and defined feud in different ways. All of them see feud as hostility within or among intimate groups. Reference [16] blames legal historians for painting the picture that primitive societies were characterized by horrid and endless state of feuding which was anchored on vent for retaliation and revenge.

While avoiding the trap of romanticizing the past of these republican, open and democratic societies of Akwanga area, it is however a fact that the descriptive generalizations on primitive warfare as suggested by these scholars falls short of the historical reality of the communities. Conflict is endemic in human nature. Peoples everywhere, and in all eras have responded in various ways to challenges around them. The nature of the response however has always depended on the level of development of the society and other variables such as the force of culture and moral code of the society. Just as in modern times where we have people who teach that you turn the other cheek when hit on one, while others seek to kill ; and often kill massively but all justify their actions based on beliefs, philosophy or teachings of their faiths or societies. Some people value life and

would not take the life of even an insect; others have no regards for life, not even their own. To generalize responses to life therefore between such societies would not only be wrong but misleading and unfair.

This paper contends that the societies of Akwanga reacted differently to conflict, warfare, victory and defeat. Their wars were non conquest, no expansionist in nature; neither were they intended to inflict pain nor lose. All the attributes that defined the nature of warfare among these societies were products of their strong philosophy and religious codes. When there were breaches of the peace among the clans, there were different measures that were quickly put in place to ensure peaceful settlement. The people knew this, so unless it became absolutely necessary, were reluctant to start a fight with a neighboring village and were often willing to allow the elders and religious priests to intervene. In this way many intra and inter clan feuds were prevented. Even when a man killed a fellow social relation or a member of another community, a full blown crisis could be averted when the elders move speedily in dousing the tensions. The feuds were settled easily depending on the social milieu where the structural distance between the participants was short, but was a little more difficult when the distance was much and the cause of the feud had to do with death.

The role of traditional religion in militating against conflicts was so strong. The Rhin cult was the highest institution in the society. The Rhin priests were revered and their judgements were often considered as originating from God. They were therefore final and binding on individuals and whole communities.

As [10] rightly observed that a feud could not be tolerated within a village and it was impossible to maintain one for a long period between nearby villages (clan) It should be pointed out that not every problem could lead to a state of hostility among the societies of Akwanga. There were customary compensations for damages, adultery, loss of limbs and so forth. The elders and particularly the Rhin cult had power to adjudicate on such matters. It must be stressed however that for a dispute to be settled the elders or cult priests, not only was it necessary that both parties should want the matter amicably settled. No one could compel either party to accept a decision, and, indeed, a decision could not be reached unless there was unanimity, since the elders were not one sided but of both parties to the dispute. They kept communication lines opened and all options on the table, till everyone has had his say and a consensus reached. One of the major ingredients that made such interventions easy or difficult was the willingness of the parties directly involved.

The Rhin cult only intervened in extreme cases that had potential to breach the peace of a wider segment of relationship or affect religious ties. However being the voice of the ancestors, feared and respected, its decisions were often accepted unquestionably. This intervention was always only very necessary when war was about to start or had started. Once Rhin cult announced its decision, all hostilities must cease and promptly too. Usually the decisions must be binding on all parties because disobeying the cult meant incurring the wrath of the ancestors and therefore that of the community.

#### ***1.1.4 Methods of Warfare***

It is important at this point to consider the nature and method of warfare among the societies. We can state that the military history of the societies under study is very scanty. The reasons for the dearth of information are not

far-fetched. War was not documented beyond the activities of remembrances and hero worshippers who had the responsibility of inspiring young people to death defying militancy. Secondly oral tradition our major source of information before the 19th century, and particularly about war is especially prone to exaggeration and generally leaves so many questions unanswered and the historian is left more to guess work. However, war among these communities as elsewhere affected or dislodged people in one way or another. These conditions persisted probably from generation to generation since there was no emergent power with any conquering ability among the communities.

There were war leaders in every community or clan. They did not emerge as a result of inheritance or conquest; but as a result of demonstrated capacity, bravery, ability to inspire others and knowledge of the secrets of the ancestors as a result of frequent contacts, and patience in the place of meditation. He had to be one who had distinguished himself through bravery and the successful application of medico-traditional powers. It was his responsibility to fix times and venues for such engagements like war. If there was the need for war, the elders would meet; send a message to the opponent, informing them of their intention for war, the time and venue for the duel.

Under no circumstance was the opponent to be taken by surprise. Once negotiations fail, both sides would have concluded that war was inevitable. If the people of the offender are unhappy with his attitude or that of his family during the negotiations, they could chose not be dragged into war because of the insensitivity or arrogance of the offender in the matter. In this way, the community had a way of insisting on reconciliation. But if the considered the decision reasonable; they would throw their weight behind the family that was responsible for that situation.

Once it was certain that war was inevitable, the elders would dispatch a war herald to all the villages of the clan informing them of the failure of negotiations and why the warriors must fight to preserve the dignity and respect of their community so that others would not take them for granted in the future. Before the villagers retire to their beds, the herald suddenly appears standing on an ant-hill or on any tree in the center of the village conveying the message practically by carrying in his left hand his bow and a few arrows. Before any villager notices his presence, he cries loud with a long drawn shout *kon gwo te gyun* (let everybody keep quite). Immediately all human sounds cease within the houses around, and a great silence falls upon the village. After a pause the herald then announces *ne lolon kyu tsei mbre te late kon* (let men gather their carved arrows, tomorrow there will be war) [9].

The village is soon astir with bustle, for all knew that these simple words meant that preparations must at once begin for a battle. Before the official announcement, the war leader and the elders would have disappeared into the shrine and forest to ask for assistance from the ancestors, most of whom were great warriors of the past. They would also use the opportunity to attend to all necessary rituals related to war. The warriors attended to other important rites such as ritual baths, smearing of their arrows with new more potent magical potions and last minute discussions with their wives and grown up children.

Each army was made up of warriors from the particular clans. Wars could not be fought within the clans. There

may be conflicts and fights but only individuals or at worst families were permitted to get involve in these but must never use iron implements. Those fights were allowed but had their permitted levels. Often times, the elders were able to resolve such conflicts. The labelling of theories ‘of perpetual hostilities’ on primitive peoples cannot stand here [17,18].

There were conflicts but there were also longer periods of peace because of the conventions surrounding conflicts and the heavy cost of ‘bloodshed’. The battles were usually pitched battles. They were fought in open country with army arranged against army. When both sides were ready, last minute opportunity or window of reconciliation will be opened. If either side chose to call off hostilities, they would announce it there and announced also their terms. If it was acceptable to the other side they could reply there and then. If on the other hand they needed to consult their oracles, elders or consider carefully the conditions lay down by the other side, they could ask for a few days to attend to their rituals. Both sides would withdraw and allow for the period of consultation.

If during the consultations the terms were considered unacceptable, the other party would be duly informed of their determination to proceed with the war. On the day arranged, the battle lines would be drawn. Last minute opportunities for peace will be offered for the last time. As soon as they fail, the war leaders on both sides will exchange a few remarks stating their unwillingly for the war but since the other side is obstinate, they should not be blamed for whatever will happen. They would then exchange a few insults and return back to their positions. At that point the war could be considered started. Very little killing took place because of the great distance, the type of weapons involved, and the warriors ability to dodge arrows. The battle would formally cease that day through a formal announcement if one side had injured people and wanted to attend to them.

Each morning when there was to be fighting, the soldiers would gather and go to the venue en-masse for the day’s combat. The women remained behind to attend to domestic tasks and nurse the wounded. The warriors themselves did not fight daily during the period of warfare. During the break the two sides could reach a truce and announce a cease –fire and eventual suspension of hostilities. Apart from announcing a cease –fire, when it rained both sides stayed in their house and by mutual agreement, all combatants as sometime took a day or two off to rest, attend to their farms, or attend to ritual in connection with casualties.

From the forgoing, it is evident that the communities may have made every man a soldier but they had taken great care to fight only on terms that avoided direct or sustained conflict with each other. They admitted disengagements and sometimes even retreated. This was not only permissible but also reasonable responses to sustained resistance. The also made no fetish of hopeless courage. They also took careful material measures of the utility of violence [19].

It has however already been pointed out that no generalizations seem applicable to all the wars as far as casualties were concerned. For example, we discovered during the field research that sometimes between 1900 and 1901, as a result of a clash precipitated during a combine hunting expedition (Tu-Gbir),the Anjagwa and the Ken’zwe clans were said to have dropped all conventions and inflicted harm on each other far beyond that permitted by convention. Thus it is not right to idealise such primordial warfare because conventions and



exemptions can be discarded. Even when conventions are observed, they may have material effects undesired by those who suffer from them.

### ***1.1.5 Conventions and Primitive Warfare***

There were a couple of very strict conventions that regulated warfare among these societies and made conquest and in fact warfare itself unattractive. However it must be stated clearly that these conventions were strictly speaking in relation to the other Mada clans. Outside of gamut of understanding, the society's warriors could be ruthless with their enemies. As noted earlier, these communities had very sophisticated webs of relationships that cemented relationship and thus prevented the escalations of conflicts. There were several intra and inter clan marriages among the societies in this area. Part of the explanation had to do with the fact that incest taboo was considered the worst abomination any man could commit. To avoid the curse associated with that, people preferred to marry from other communities. The implication therefore was that social webs of relationships were developed across the area. No soldier wanted to be on the other side of a war involving his sisters children by virtue of their being members of another community that was at war with his.

Secondly, the religious cult played a prominent role in reducing conflict among the communities. As already noted, these republics had several social and spiritual webs that united them together which were not to be tempered with anyhow. If there was anxiety about any conflict and the parties failed to listen to the voice of reason by the elders cautioning and asking for restraint, the cult could go ahead to place a curse on anyone who wanted to disturb the peace of the communities. Sometimes, even in the heat of battle the priests of the religion from the mythical lineage could go the venue and place a curse on any one that would shot one more arrow [15].

Thirdly, the penalty associated with bloodshed was borne for life. If during such an exchange an opponent was killed by a poisoned arrow, the warrior who delivered that fertile arrow was immediately identified through the arrow. While other warriors returned home to their families after the cessation of hostilities, the warrior whose arrow killed the opponent would not be allowed to enter his village [13]. He was however permitted by the head of cults of the community to move into the grove or forest shrine usually located at some reasonable distance in the outskirts of the village for a one week period undergoing certain cleansing rituals. He was not to be visited by any member of his family and was not permitted to bath or change his cloths. He was also to feed sparingly on fruits and other available natural vegetables.

After a whole week of atonement and solitary confinement, the murderer was escorted home by shrine priests who walked in front of him quietly. At his residence, his cloths were removed from his body by them and returned back to the shrine for the final phase of atonement. Early in the morning the next day, the priests were to return to the back his house, invite him outside and have him seated under any tree and decorate his head with red feathers. He was supposed to remain seated under that tree for a long time. His family members were to greet him from afar and not to look too closely at him. His neighbours and age grade were also to visit him standing afar off avoiding looking straight into his face for fear of suffering migraine headaches [13].

The murderer was at no point seen as a hero or example. He would cease to be a civilian and could not be

trusted around places of disputes. He was also not permitted to walk across anyone's farm land for fear that he could bring a curse on the harvest. During social gatherings like marriages or festivals, he could not mingle freely with his age mates. He always had to distinguish himself as a murderer by wearing his red feathers around his head and sitting alone, far off from everyone else except he had someone in the same category with him. The killer was severely disrespected and despised to the extent that most of them ended up committing suicides. People avoided drinking or eating from his house for fear that some blood from his victim's body would have spilled on the food or water of his house. He was also to visit the village shrine once or twice every year to take a ritual bath and smear some concoction on his body to keep the spirit of his victim away.

## **2. Conclusion**

Warfare among the Pagan Societies of Akwanga Division was non imperialist, non-conquest but served the purposes of balancing of population, restoring and maintaining the dignity of each community or seeking redress from a wrong done against any community. It was usually the last resort because of the social and religious stigmatization associated with killing or shedding blood, even that of an enemy. Warfare also had a lot of conventions that made it almost impossible to be an aggressor and particularly to be a murderer. The Rhin cult also did not allow warfare to affect the several social ties that kept the fabric and soul of the communities together. War making was not a profession among the communities of Akwanga. It was not profitable for whatever reasons since the moral code of the society forbade any one seizing or taking by force anyone's land or property. Importantly too, no one wanted to incur the wrath of the gods by shedding the blood of another human irrespective of what such a one had done. Complaints of wrongs were to be reported to the priests of the communities for onward presentation to the gods. The gods were to take action anytime it was discovered that the complaint was true.

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