



The Role of Traditional Institutions in Conflict Management in Khana Local Government Area (LGA), Rivers State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to analyze the traditional institutions and conflict management in Khana LGA in Rivers state. The central argument in the paper is that prior to the British colonial administration in Nigeria, traditional institutions played very significant roles in conflict management peace-building and resolution as they wielded very strong political influences in their domains. It contends that the advent of colonialism and post-colonial state in Nigeria politicized traditional institutions, hence weakened them in living up to their traditional responsibilities of conflict management and peace building. The paper affirms that this has resulted in the loss of respects for African values and traditional authority; accounting mainly for the decades of social conflicts in communities in Khana LGA. The paper further argued that rather than traditional institutions in Khana LGA involve relevant stakeholders in conflict management and peace-building, they are part of conflict boiling which has turned communities in the area into protracted social conflict. The paper also provides brief clarification of the key concepts and overview of the causes of conflict in Khana LGA. However materials for this paper were drawn mainly from primary sources and secondary sources internet local and international publications. The strategy of content analysis was used systematically to analyse the primary and secondary data in view of the historical cum contemporary nature of the paper. The paper recommends among other that: Government should stop the widespread upgrading, downgrading, and unnecessary creation of chieftaincy stool as a way of rewarding wealthy political allies that supported them, as a result causing conflicts in the communities. There should be urgent need for Rivers state government to strengthen the traditional institution of governance by quickly redefining their roles and modus operandi in the legal framework backing the traditional institutions.

Keywords: Traditional institutions, conflict, conflict management, Rivers state.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional institutions are still highly respected in many communities and have considerable political and economic influence. Although, they have no formal role in the democratic structure of governance, there is intense competition for royal seats among the finite pool of eligible dynasties. The institutions can also award honorary titles for positions in their "administrations" to wealthy businessmen, academia and politicians who have contributed immensely to the development of the society.

Traditional institutions have been in existence before the advent of the colonial masters in Khana, Local Government in particular and Nigeria in general. Khana, Local Government Area is part of

Rivers state that serves as the economic hub of Nigeria and has remained an interesting site in history with respect to development, business and commercial activities. Consequently any conflicts that occur in Khana, LGA in due course affect everybody in Rivers state. It is in connection that efforts were been made to resolve conflicts, injustice and deprivation, some of which predated the discovery of oil (Adejo, 2008). Again, traditional institutions at large preserve the customs and traditions of the people and then manage conflicts occurring among or between members of the community, using the instrumentality of laws and customs of the people.

In addition, their role is prominent in settling family conflict, cases of witchcraft, land disputes, religious disputes and community conflicts. Taking matters to the courts or to the security agencies like police will be more expensive and time consuming and can turn the community into a theatre of war, because most times there are greater chances that a fair judgment will not be reached (Blench, 2006). They play useful roles in mediating between the people and the state, enhancing national identity, resolving major conflicts and providing an institutional safety for inadequate state bureaucracies.

Put differently, in Khana, LGA, the traditional institutions are charged with legislative, executive, and judicial function. They make laws, execute them, interpret and apply fundamental laws, customs and traditions of the people for the running of the community. More so, the traditional institution has to do with reign of a monarch or a titled institution vested with the authority to lead a people in their affairs of life. They comprise chief-in-council, elders-in- council and title holders who may be appointed based on their contributions to the growth and development of their community or by hereditary. Traditional institution is very vital in bringing development closer to the rural people.

In recent times, there had been numerous crises, conflicts and insecurity, causing loss of lives and properties all over the Nigerian state in general and Rivers State in particular. In spite of the numerous roles of traditional institutions, in addition to the number of politically elected office holders in Rivers State, there are still obvious traces of unmanageable conflict in Rivers State, why? For example Hubbard (2010) observed that Ogoni land had witnessed unprecedented conflict and crises that had persistently disrupted the smooth operation of oil exploration and exploitation activities in the area; this led to local social unrest and eventually deteriorated into armed struggle. One out of many was the Yorla oil field in 1990 which claimed lives of prominent personalities in Khana Local government area of Rivers State, as a result of conflict between security agencies and the community (Naagbantom and Oruwari, 2006). Again, the conflict in Okwalle and Zaakpon communities in Khana, LGA claimed lives and crippled all socio-economic activities including oil exploration and exploitation in the community for years.

Traditional institutions such as the chiefs and elders who were supposed to mediate or resolve the conflicts in other to usher in peace among the contenders, eventually became engrossed in the conflict by supporting a particular group. The traditional institutions of governance which used to wield more influence in the pre-colonial era suddenly lost out, hence plunged Ogoni into years of conflicts. Traditional institutions which were supposed to be partners with the state government, federal, and oil multinationals in conflicts prevention, management, and resolution became victims of conflicts.

The causes of conflict between individuals, groups, organizations, and communities stems from a common thread which runs through them - notable differences. It might be difference in opinions, beliefs, perceptions, views, interest, needs, and goals. Given the Ogoni scenario, the very characteristics of her popular, geological landscape and type of leaderships abound with diversities which provide grounds for difference and hence possible conflicts. However, some identified causes of conflicts in Khana, LGA and Ogoni land are discussed below.

Prominent among the root causes of conflicts is the fact that the state is endowed with varying natural resources which are exploited for the development of Nigeria state at different period in time, with adverse noticeable consequences on the environment in which these resources are exploited. The lacks of commensurate control of the revenue yields from these resources by the producing communities have resulted in many conflicts. Most youth from different communities in Khana, LGA and Ogoni Land are languishing and wasting away in detention cells, (Onimajesin, 2011 in Yakubu et al, 2011) poverty is one cause of conflict.

On the other hand, Adefemi (2004) pointed out that the Eleme and Ogubolo/Okirika crises emanated as a result of claims over land ownership the territory occupied by Shell Petroleum Development

Company (SPDC) since 1956 and this created conflict between the friendly communities that lasted over the years till 4th day of October, 1999 when Rivers state government released "The Eleme Okirika/Ogu/Bolo crises Government White Paper". There had been several incidence of conflict also in the Ijaw speaking people in Rivers State.

Furthermore, Aaron (2001) also attributed the causes of conflict in Ogoni land in Rivers state on how Shell (SPDC) did what they know best to do by setting up one community against another in order to bring about confusion while production continues. He draws a clear reference to the crises between K-Dere community and B-Dere community occupying opposite location in Gokana Local Government Area, Rivers State. Again, the good people of Eleme almost have the same experience as a result of several situation of deplorable and devastating condition ranging from ecological, environmental, destruction of live, private property vandalization, absence of meaningful investment by companies and communal cooperation, unemployment due to the relocation of most company headquarters from the area of operation, abject poverty amongst others. All these had in turn resulted to social ills in the area. They include youth and enmity among conflicting communities (Nancy, 2000 and Ngofa, 1998)

It is glaring that extensive work have been done on causes of conflict in Khana, LGA as well as in Ogoni ethnic Nationality by previous researchers, this paper is designed to analyze and give in-depth insight on the traditional institutions and conflict management in Khana, LGA. The question here is: (i) How did these institutions suddenly abdicate from their traditional roles of resolving conflicts in their domains? (ii) Are these institutions still relevant in conflict resolution and management in our societies today? (iii) What roles and approaches should the traditional institutions play and evolve in preventing further escalation of conflicts in Khana, LGA?

Answers to the above questions are very critical, given the current drive towards the use of alternative dispute resolution mechanism in conflict management and peace-building in Khana, LGA as was the case during the pre-colonial era when they wielded stronger political authority and power in their domains as opposed to current global/conventional approaches to conflict.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

In social science, theoretical framework is used to show reality, it is used to bring out the relationship between the theory and the topic under study. Such theory is explicitly discussed here to show how valid and strong they are in dealing with the problem at hand. White and Clark (1990) conceived a theory as "a set of proposed explanations logically or systematically related to each other that seek to explain or predict a phenomenon"

It is in the light of the above, that this paper has adopted functional theory. In simple terms, functionalism derives from the English word, function. Generally, in sociology, function refers to the diagnosed objective consequence which a social phenomenon has for a wider system of which it is a part, functionalist theory has a long history in sociology. It is prominent in the work of August Comte (1798 - 1957) and Herbert Spencer (1820 - 1903), two of the founding fathers of the discipline. It was developed by Emile Durkheim (1858 - 1917) and redefined by Talcott Parsons (1902 - 1917) during the 1940s and 1950s. Functionalism is one of the dominant theories in sociology.

A functionalist views society as a system: that is, a set of interconnected parts which together form a whole. The basic unit of analysis is society (the people), and its various parts are understood primarily in terms of their relationship to the whole. The early functionalists often drew an analogy between society and an organism such as the human body. They argued that an understanding of its relationship to other organs and its contribution towards the maintenance of the organism will ensure normalcy on the society. In the same way, an understanding of any part of the society requires an analysis of its relationship to other parts and most importantly, its contribution to the maintenance of society. Continuing this analogy, functionalists argued that, just as organism has certain basic needs that must be satisfied if it is to survive, so society has basic needs that must be met if it is to continue to exist. Thus, social institutions such as the family and religion are analyzed as a part of the social system rather than as isolated units. They are understood with reference to the contribution they make to the system.

The theoretical underpinning adopted in this paper is relevant, holistic and broad, because it offers better explanations to the issues raised that Khana, LGA traditional institutions have not lived up to

their traditional responsibilities as a unit of the whole system or institutions that function with others to confront conflict, manage it and bring about peace building as was obtained in the pre-colonial societies. The failure to manage conflict has therefore seriously affected the entire unit of the state. There is no gainsaying that the traditional institutions of governance cannot function in isolation with the state governmental institutions to maintain peace and unity in their domain, and River state government if they must succeed, should work in synergy with traditional institutions to function effectively and bring sustainable development to bear in the society.

Conceptual Framework

Traditional Institution and Conflict Management

Traditional Institutions: A traditional institutions is defined differently by many authors depending on time and circumstances. In the pre-colonial era traditional institutions is defined as a person who by virtue of his ancestral position occupies the throne or stool of an area and whose throne has been in existence before the advent of the British in Nigeria. The traditional institutions as defined above have absolute executive, legislative, as well as judicial power. Examples of such institutions under this definition are Emire in the Northern Nigeria; in western Nigeria are the Alafins. Historically speaking, the Emirs and the Alafins had well-structured system of administration on how they governed their people. In Eastern Nigeria, the system of administration before the advent of the colonial institutions was based on small communities being headed by purely democratic process and not necessarily by hereditary.

Put differently, traditional institutions are political leaders with proven track records that are appointed and installed in line with the provisions of their native laws and customs (Orijji & Olali, 2010). The concept of traditional institutions has to do with the reign of the monarch or titled institutions vested with the authority to lead a people in their affairs of life. It is very vital in bringing development closer to the rural people. It has been in existence before the era of the colonial masters in Nigeria. It has been very important in terms of resistance against injustice and deprivation, some of which predated the discovery of oil. This can be traced to be the source of that led king Jaja of Opobo to resist the white domination of trade and politics at the time and he kept his subjects under the control of the constituted norms and values of the society.

The Concept of Conflict

The concept of conflict means different things to different people. For example, the Chinese see conflicts in a positive direction. In their language, conflicts mean 'an opportunity or danger' (Nweke 2003). It is the degree of response to conflicts that determines how it turns out. One's background attributes, perceptions, and environment, among other things, influence the degree of responses to conflicts. In his own definition, Ihejirika (2001) opines that what usually come to people's mind pictures when they hear of conflict is war, fighting, misunderstanding, arguments, anarchy, stress, crises, and aggression and so on between individuals, groups, communities, nation or state. He observes that people with negative connotations of conflicts tend to handle them in a destructive manner with negative effects. He advises that having positive mind-set to conflicts helps to manager them in a constructive manner with positive results such as dialogue, development Change, understanding, friendship, improved communication press, peace, love, and relationship building.

Local manifestations of conflicts in Nigeria abound which include but not limited to civil war (Biafran war). Others, especially in Rivers state communities include the insurgencies of 1990's in Ogoni land, Umuechem crises in 1990's, Rumuekpe communal conflicts, Adoni/Ogoin crises in 1999, Eleme/Okirika crises in 2003. What is important is how such conflicts can be managed to build peace bridges for continuous existence. That approach can only be achieved better if traditional institutions in Ogoni are strengthened to work in collaboration with other stakeholders. Conflict is as natural as the concept of peace contrary to the global or universal conception. Nigeria has particular ways of conceptualizing conflict. Traditional definition of conflict regards it as "a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals" (Oniigun Otitie & Albert, 2001). However, conflict may generally exist wherever or whenever incompatible activities occur and may result in "win-lose character". The resolution, transformation and management of conflict may also produce win-win situation.

Conflict Management

The concept of conflict management is the process of limiting or reducing the negative aspect of conflict while increasing its positive aspect (Rahim, 2011). It is also the principle that all conflicts cannot necessarily be resolved, but learning how to manage conflicts can decrease the odds non-productive escalation. Dalung (2013) asserted that conflicts management entails the long term management of intractable conflicts. He further explained that it is the variety of ways by which people handled grievances standing up for what they consider to be right and against what they consider to be wrong. Conflict management therefore involves acquiring skills related to conflict resolution, self-awareness about conflict modes, conflict communication skills, and establishing a structure for resolving conflict in the society. It is a process that embraces all articulated strategies, interventions and institutional mechanism in controlling the escalation of conflict in a community.

3. METHODOLOGY

The descriptive research design was used. The study adopted both primary and secondary sources. The primary data was the use of observation techniques and in-depth interview method while the secondary data were the use of published and unpublished papers as well as internet materials. The study selected Khana, LGA and selected some communities in the LGA such as: Zaakpon, Okwalle and Luawii communities through purposive sampling technique, due to their vulnerability to conflict. The study interviewed 5 respondents in each community totalling 15 respondents using snowball and purposive sampling techniques. Therefore, the content analysis was used to analyse the data generated through interview.

Results

Traditional institution and conflict management in Khana, LGA in Ogoni Land

The structure of the traditional institutions in Khana, Local Government Area is similar among communities in the area. The structures include the following:

1. Gbenemene (The King)
2. Mene Bua (2nd or 3rd class chief)
3. Mene Bue (Paramount Ruler)
4. King Maker (crown installer)
5. Council of Elders
6. Community Development Committees (CDC)
7. Elites or Opinion Leaders
8. Town Crier
9. Youth Leaders
10. Women Leaders

However, the structure of traditional leadership in Khana, LGA is targeted towards conflict resolution and maintenance of peace in the area. Today, the recognition of one, for example as Gbenemene of Babbe or Ken Khana -mention but a few, which gives the incumbent the right to superintend owner, to money "flowing" from Oil and Gas Company operating in his domain. This may also "drag" a neighboring community in a fray over the land where an oil well or flow station is located, thus, most times what used to be a natural exercised for selection of successors when there is a vacant chieftaincy stool has become a "fight to finish". Often times, the conflicts that engulf the entire village or communities in Rivers state is closely associated to the above conflict, youth now hijack the opportunity and turn the community into a theatre of war.

Method used by traditional institutions to settle conflicts in Khana, LGA in Ogoni land. The methods used by traditional institutions in conflict management in Khana, LGA in Ogoni land are listed below. These methods are used to settle conflict arising from land and boundary, intensified chieftaincy struggle in the villages and communities that always terminate in serious conflict among others. Mediation, adjudication, reconciliation, arbitration and negotiation. It also includes employing extra-judicial devices and usage of legal maxims to persuade or convince all disputants about the implication or otherwise of their behaviour.

Mediation: Mediation is an old method of conflict management surrounded by secrecy which has been used in Khana, LGA. It involves non-coercive intervention of the mediators(s), called third party either to reduce or go beyond or bring conflict to peaceful settlement. Olaoba (2005) described

mediation as a method of conflict management that had been so critical to traditional institutions. The mediators usually endeavor that peace and harmony reigned supreme in the community at whatever level of mediation. This is also usually couched with the dictum of no victor no vanquished as buttressed by the maxim (Isurmona, 2005).

That is, if we apportion blame to the guilty person, we must do the same to the other party in conflict. Mediators are sought from within the communities or environment of the parties concerned. Elders are respected as trustworthy mediators all over Nigeria, because of their circumstances and personalities, accordingly. These roles includes, pressurizing, making recommendations, giving assessment, conveying suggestions on behalf of the parties, emphasizing relevant norms and rules, envisaging the situation if agreement is not reach, or repeating of the agreement already attained (Bright-Brock Utre, 2001).

Adjudication: in Khana, LGA, the Zaakpon, Okwaole and Luawii communities uses adjudication conflict management strategy to settle disputes. This involves bringing all disputants in the conflict to a meeting usually in the chambers or compounds of family heads, quarter heads and palace court as the case may be. According to Olaoba (2005) dialogue was linked with adjudicatory processes in traditional.

Reconciliation: This was the most significant aspect of conflict management used in Khana, LGA in Zaakpon, Okwaole and Luawii communities. It is the end product of adjudication. After the disputants have been persuaded to end the dispute, peace was restored. This restoration of peace and harmony was always anchored on the principal of give a little and get a little. This idea buttressed the idea of the conflicting parties to give concessions. A feast was usually organized to confirm the readiness of the conflicting parties towards reaching points of compromise. At least as characteristic of traditional institutions in Ogoni land conflict management method is the use of arbitration. The reconciliation function is practiced by an authority figure that mediates between conflicting parties but is empowered to make blinding judgments. The purpose is not to render a judgment in law but to reconcile the conflicting parties and its norms. The relationship between the authority and the community is cushioned by community representative who advise authority (Williams, 2000).

Negotiation: Negotiation, "the secret is to harmonize the interests of the parties concerned". Thus, even when the conflict involves a member against his or her society, there is an emphasis on recuperation and reinsertion of errant member back into its place in society. The recovery of a dissident member can just as well be seen as the restoration of the harmony and integrity of the community, as the assertion of value consensus and social cohesion, so that the management of the conflict favours the concerns of both parties. In typical traditional community in Khana, LGA in Ogoni land, peace was negotiated, apology for wrongs done to individuals and the entire community was a feature of negotiated. Such apology must be channeled through an elder, compound head, and chiefs of high caliber in the society. It is done on the representative level or quasire presentation. As a matter of the fact, the above mentioned methods use by traditional institutions to settle conflict in Ogoni land has fail to succeed considering the conflicts that engulf the state in the recent past and till date. For example, the conflict in Khana, LGA in Ogoni, Gokana conflict, Eleme conflict, among others, non-sincerity of our traditional institutions in the present day administration as compared to their roles in managing and resolving conflict in pre-colonial era is linked to mainly the decades of social conflict that is manifesting itself in Khana land on a daily bases. Traditional institutions today are defending one cult group or the other in their domains, also participating actively in politics, which is against their core mandate. This development does not only render traditional institutions and her institutions irrelevant, but also creates threats to peace, lack of development, insecurity, and instability in the oil-rich state. As a result of the above ugly situation, people have preferred modern method of litigation settlement in law court instead of going to traditional institutions for conflict settlement.

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

Extrapolating from the interview conducted, observation and other relevant literatures the study relates the following findings. First, on issue of how the institutions suddenly abandon or abdicate from their traditional roles of resolving conflict in their domains, the findings shows that there was high level of political affiliation and alliance with political leaders in the area. Such involvement led to deficiencies or collapse of the institution as

most of them have been involved in one form of corrupt practices or another. Another reason was because most of the traditional leader's children and relatives were involved in cult activities. This silent their performance and led to break down of norms. Since their children are involved in such unscrupulous behavior it was difficult to prosecute them. Hence, others who were victims to such acts could not be prosecuted easily. These explain one of the reasons why they abdicate from their roles of resolving conflict. Being weak in controlling conflict led to increase in crime and other insecurity and at the long run they run from the community when conflict arises. Further the inadequate crowning or installing of the wrong leader due to politics of interest has contributed to their weakness. The leader is supposed to be exemplary but when it emerges illegally what do we expect from such person. There is a saying that who plays the piper dictates the tone, this is what happens as those who wish to assume position lobby for such position. This creates dissatisfaction and places conflict to some who feels insecure. Emeodu (2019) posited that when people are frustrated it leads to aggression and insecurity. He added that the presence of insecurity emanating through conflict affect or stagnate development. This explains the persistence of conflict in the communities under study. Further, disrespect to the traditional institution by the government of Rivers State has also demoralized the role of the traditional leaders in the area of the studies. They no longer wield power as they do overtime.

Having stated the above, one can ask if the institutions are still relevance in conflict resolution and management in our society today. Through observation and in-depth interview, the study indicated that they are less relevance as they have been able to resolve few issues among people in conflict in the communities, but the truth is that they have really diminished in their performance as compared to the kind of power and influence they had overtime that enabled them to control and manage conflict. The lost in power by the traditional institution have led the customary court to resolve issues especially marriage and land disputes. These two key conflicts is within their domain to manage and resolve conflict among contenders, but the people loss trust from their leaders and therefore take decision on how they desire to resolve conflict. The bottom line is that they have failed to leave up to their responsibility.

Finally, the traditional institutional still have some roles to play so as to control or resolve conflict in the area of study. The Indepth Interview reviewed that for the traditional institution to be able to play their expected roles effectively there exist some approaches that can help them to prevent further escalation of conflict in Khana, LGA. These includes respect to the traditional by the people and government. There is need for reorientation on the way to behave. They should be given enough security and pay them high. They should be diplomatic in addressing issues without favour regardless of how related they are with an earring member in the community. Prominent to this is that they should not side any politician and should not accept contract direct from the government to avoid being disrespected by the government.

CONCLUSION

The failure of traditional institutions in Khana, LGA to effectively manage conflict and peace-building in the state has raised inevitability of conflict in the oil-rich ethnic group. This discourse is essential for the fact that traditional institutions are the closest to the people, downplaying their role in governance of any society will amount to chaos. This is evident in the recent state of frequent electoral and post-electoral strife, and most especially persistence of widespread ethnic and civil conflicts experience in Khana, LGA in Ogoni land. The neglect of cultural norms and value embedded in traditional institutions in the modern day Nigeria democracy has in no small measure contributed to this. As a matter of fact, the colossal damage done to the traditional institutions of governance by both colonial and post-colonial Nigeria state is still affecting Khana LGA traditional institutions on the negative side. This is due largely on the fact that the traditional institutions who are saddled with the responsibilities of resolving conflicts and identifying the needs of their communities and work towards shaping the society are now fictionalizing, and interacting with the political class deeply buy so doing causing conflicts in the communities.

The primary role of traditional institutions is to promote peace, foster cohesion, and contribute to the political system of governance, provide leadership in ensuring that societies utilize the available land to increase agricultural output and enhance food security so as to alleviate the challenges of poverty, criminality, and underdevelopment in rural areas, unfortunately, today in Khana, LGA the traditional institutions are not committed in pursuing the above mentioned roles but embezzle funds map out for development of their various communities, as a result leading to break down of law and order in their various domain today.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i) Government should stop the widespread upgrading, downgrading and unnecessary creation of chieftaincy stool as a way of rewarding wealthy political allies that supported their election bid, as a result causing conflicts in the communities,
- ii) There should be urgent need for Rivers state government to strengthen the traditional institutions of governance by quickly redefining their roles and their modus operandi in the legal framework backing the traditional institutions.
- iii) The state law makers should enact a law that would completely detached the traditional institutions from the aprons of political class so that the institutions would regain their lost respects and values in a bid to wield the kind of influence they had during the pre-colonial era in conflict management and peace-building in their domains.
- iv) Demonstrating political will, the state government should muster the political will and courage to prosecute individuals and corporate organizations who perpetrate conflicts in their communities. This will serve as deterrence to all groups.
- v) Adequate funding of the traditional institutions by the government, if the traditional institutions must work with the government in peace-building they should be funded properly to function. The money Rivers state government waste in unprofitable amnesty programme should have been used in funding traditional institutions to maintain peace in their various domains.

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