THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS IN PEACE MAKING: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ESAN TRADITIONAL INSTITUTION

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Abstract
The declining role of traditional institutions in maintaining peace and harmony in Nigeria tends to have watered down the relevance of these institutions in community leadership, especially as it concerns conflict management. This has become a source of worry and hence necessitated this study on the role of traditional rulers in maintaining peace and harmony in Nigeria, with a focus on Esan traditional institutions. The study takes a look at peace making in traditional African institutions and how a culture of peace and harmony could be maintained by them. The study further recommends that traditional institutions be repositioned to assume their roles and responsibilities, in partnership with formal legal institutions of the state, in the management of conflicts in the rural communities.

Keywords: Traditional, Institutions, Peace, Harmony, Conflict, Management.
1.1 Introduction

In pre-colonial Africa, traditional institutions formed the nucleus of governance and justice. For centuries before the advent of British rule, governance in different parts of present-day Nigeria was synonymous with traditional institutions and their rulers. Local administration generally centered on the traditional ruler who was considered the repository of religious, legislative, executive and judicial functions, with a few exceptions, for example, in the south-eastern Nigeria amongst Ibo communities (Afigbo, 2002).

A traditional ruler is defined differently by many authors depending on time and circumstances. In the pre-colonial era a traditional ruler is defined as a person who by virtue of his ancestral position occupies the throne or stool of an area and has been appointed to it in accordance with the customs and traditions of that area (Cookey, 2010). The traditional ruler as defined above has absolute executive, legislative as well as judicial powers. Examples of such rulers under this definition are Emirs in Northern Nigeria such as Emirs of Bauchi, Kano, Zaria, Adamawa, Ilorin, Gombe, Etsu Nupe and Shehu of Borno. In Western Nigeria are the Alaafins of Oyo, Ooni of Ife, Oba of Benin, Onogie of Uromi. The Emirs and the Alaafins 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 rule was based on small communities being headed by a purely democratic process and not necessarily hereditary (Afigbo, 2002; Cookey, 2010).

It is imperative to note that there are numerous conflicts besetting most communities in Nigeria. Some of these conflicts are inter-community, intra-community, religious, ethnic and other forms of social conflicts. The traditional institutions need to redefine their role in governance, conflict prevention, management and resolution in Nigeria with a view to ensuring that the peace and harmony exist at the grassroots levels. It is in the light of the above, that this study aims to appraise the role of traditional rulers in maintaining peace and harmony in Nigeria, with a special focus on Esan traditional institutions.

2.3 Conflict in African Societies: An Overview

Conflict takes various forms and dimensions in African societies; it is significant to note that conflict is difficult to define from the perspective of the Africans. Consequently, conflicts are in the magnitude of rage, rift, misunderstanding, family and market brawls, skirmishes and wars, public insurrections and assaults, it also includes chieftaincy and boundary disputes (Olaoba, 2005).

Conflict as an element of social interaction has been defined in various dimensions. Fisher et al. (2000), argued that, a conflict situation emerges when two or more parties could not agree on an issue. Conflict is a particular relationship between states or rival factions within a state which implies subjective hostilities or tension manifested in subversive economic or military hostilities (Quincy, 1971). With regards to various issues in dealing with conflict, it is important to bear in mind not just overt, physical violence, but also the sometimes subtly disguised forms of structural and cultural violence (Adam, 2011). The parties to such conflict may not necessary be the government or nation-states. In an incompatible stage among nation- states, every part involved seeks to achieve certain objectives, such as additional or more secure territory, security, access to markets, prestige, alliances and the overthrow of an unfriendly government (Omotosho, 2004).
2.4 Types of Conflict

Conflict exists mainly in two forms. There are direct and indirect depending on their magnitude and manifestation. Direct conflict is the most outward, visible and easily identifiable sort of conflict. It is just like a direct physical confrontations or clashes between individuals. It could also be manifested in a form of war between nations or groups of different interests. On the other hand, indirect violence, which is synonymously referred to as structural violence, appears to be in a form of invisible and relatively unidentifiable societal structures. Such violence is built deep in to the social, economic and political structures of society.

2.5 Concept of Peacemaking

The concerns and contexts of peace and harmony are wide ranging. Peace encompasses every aspect of human existence. It is, therefore, important for us to understand peace from multiple perspectives. There is no single way to understand it. Peace is multifaceted and involves many dimensions. It is generally understood as absence of war whereas; it is more than just absence of war and physical violence. If people are not at war, it does not mean that they are peaceful. Even without being at war, death and destruction due to hatred, hunger and disease cannot be ruled out. Humiliation and hurt, too, cause pain, no less than physical violence. If all these conditions are prevalent, peace and harmony cannot exist.

Peacemaking is the term used to refer to the process of negotiating the resolution of a conflict between people, groups, or states. It goes beyond peacekeeping to actually deal with the issues that cause a conflict. In pre-colonial Esan, peacemaking and peacekeeping was blended and tied together in the various communities. Both aimed towards reconciliation and normalization of relations between ordinary people and those in authority.

Peacemaking, peace-building or peacekeeping to an average Esan person, is a process which recognizes that certain concrete effort and processes are required to be made by individuals, groups and communities for conflict to be reduced to a minimum level, and for a peaceable and harmonious society to be achieved. Peace thrives on justice, fairness, equity, trust, friendship, mutual respect, communication, a common aspiration and similar elements.

2.6 Tradition and Traditional Institutions

Africans, as any other people elsewhere, have their own philosophy of life. They have a distinct culture by which they see and interact among themselves. For instance, individualism is a philosophy of life in the West as communality is in Africa. Collective mode of living is a peculiar identification of Africans in general. In fact, this mode of living is a different version of life rather than connoting backwardness and/or primitiveness, which might be wrongly perceived by some westerners.

The communal life in Africa, on the other hand, has an implication in conflict and its resolution. The issues of security, peace and conversely conflict are communal matters in Africa, unlike in the West. Thus, the priority of African traditional institutions is to bring about collective social stability and harmony. They do not simply focus on the punitive measure nor do they merely settle conflict. They rather strive to bring about sustaining peace among the disputants thereby the prevalence of enmity and hatred within as well as across communities would permanently be vanished (Tsega, 2012).
However, in contemporary times, the traditional institutions have been relegated to the position of obscurity in matters of governance, peace and harmony, especially when compared to the enviable position they occupied during the pre and colonial era. As a matter of fact, the traditional institution does not enjoy constitutional recognition or responsibilities despite their seemingly crucial role in governance. According to Adeleke (2010), what is happening to the traditional institutions in contemporary Nigeria is just a manifestation of our inability to fashion out suitable political system that will reflect our social, economic and political realities as against the colonial and military imposed political structures of the colonial era and post-independence period respectively.

The concept of tradition like culture, are unwritten rules, norms and practices of a particular group of people which is accepted as their way of life and transmitted from one generation to the next. Tradition can also be defined as a long established and accepted customs, ideas, values, beliefs, principles, knowledge and usages handed over from one generation to the next.

Traditions are dynamic and not static with the capacity for internal transformation. In this regard, it has been stated that "traditions are relatively more enduring and resistant to change rather than simply permanent and unchanging” (Heywood, 2006). In relating this concept of tradition to conflict resolution, the search for traditional strategies of conflict management then looks for the past in the present-day social formations that can be applied to modern conflicts, and stresses the indigenous content.

Tradition weave together both social and political system of a collective entity. The social defines and directs how people of an ethnic group ought to live and relate, the political enforces adherence to traditional norms of a group by exercising authority to secure obedience from the people. A person linked to African tradition sees political power as often personalized and that leadership is permanent in the context of self-recruited oligarchy.

2.1 Historical Overview of Esan Land

Esan land (pronounced aysan) is one of the major ethnic groups in Edo state, south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. For academic purpose, Esan refers to the ethnic group that occupies central Edo state, a person or the people collectively from the Esan ethnic group. The language of these people which linguistically is of the Kwa subdivision of the Niger Congo language family is related to something of Esan origin e.g. Uro Esan, Esan language, Uto Esan, Esan land, Ògie Esan, Esan king, Akugbe Esan, Esan unity etc. The group belongs to the one of the largest ethnic groups that belongs to the Edo speaking people in Nigeria and in the diaspora. In her present connections with Benin, Esan land is regarded to belong to the minority areas of the Nigerian state.

2.9 The Structure of Traditional Institutions in Esan land

Esan is an Edo word, describing the people living in a land about eighty kilometers north East of Benin City. By this factor of nearness and the fact that they share a basic traditional foundation, they are regarded as neighbours to the Bini (Bradbury, 1973). The Chief law-enforcement Officer is the King, known as the Onojie.

Esan political structure is based on gerontocracy, which was a form of social organization in which a group of old men or a council of elders dominates decisions by exercising some form of control. In Esan, elders exercised a general control over the people. The laws that governed
Esan communities were based on the customs and traditions of the people, which the elders were the main repositories of power (Okojie, 2005).

2.10 Peacemaking Processes in Esan land

Peacemaking or any other peace to the people is the process of maintaining normal relations between people. It requires the reconciliation of differences, offering apology and forgiveness on past harm. The process of peacemaking as we earlier hinted began at the level of the individual household or family. Consequently, different communities had various conventions concerning individual behaviours to mitigate intra-human, inter-human and domestic conflicts (Babatunde, 1999). That of Esan is no exception, the conventions were backed by taboo which must be observed, regulated activities such as cohabitation, relationship between husband and wife, father and children, inheritance, adoption, justice, land tenure etc. As head of the family, a husband, (odafen) was expected to be at peace with himself. He was expected to have some peculiar behaviour worth emulating. Thus in real sense a peacekeeper, maker and builder. He was also held responsible for keeping the peace in his household and ensuring that its members related well with others in the compounds and wards in their village or town. The compound heads, Omijiogbe, king, Onojie and village heads, Odionwele had similar responsibilities in their respective domains. Also included were the titled chiefs, Ekhaemoi and the chief priest, Ihaza, Ohen. They guarded their communities’ laws and customs and applied appropriate sanctions against any breach. A breach of conventions was regarded as “a crime against the ancestral spirits and as a disturbance of individual or communal equilibrium”. Imposition of sanctions on individuals or a group of deviants was a justifiable means of restoring the pre-existing balance in the society and traditional device for crime prevention or deterrence of deviant behaviour.

2.11 Integration of Traditional and Modern Strategies for Maintaining Peace and Harmony

Studies largely indicate that violent conflicts can be managed effectively by the disputants themselves or by third parties (Myerson, 2009; Wall and Callister, 1995). Recognition of this fact would result in de-escalation of violence if the affected parties are allowed to take appropriate actions. Taking appropriate action is a function of access to an integrated package for conflict management.

There is a general capacity for people to manage violence, but distortion of their histories may render them weak and incapable of maintaining peace. The weak institutions, poverty, social inequalities, corruption, civil strife, violent conflicts and civil war are not original conditions but are rooted in specific historical contexts. In view of the above, the realm of social integration is very important in the analysis of conflict management strategies. An integration of useful complementary values will result in positive transformation, peace and harmony in a society.

The Nigerian government and traditional institutions can jointly consider and approve the appointment of mediators for conflict management. Studies on peace agreements have shown the primacy of mediation in the outcome of conflict management. It is argued that neutral mediators, who are engaged primarily because of their interest to end the war, will have incentives to hasten the reaching of an agreement to the expense of its quality. By contrast, biased mediators, seeking to protect their protégés, will take care to ensure that there are stipulations in an agreement guaranteeing the interest of ‘their’ side or use their particular access and leverage to make their side agree to costly concessions. Biased mediation processes are therefore more likely than neutral mediation processes to lead to elaborated
institutional arrangements that are generally considered conducive to democracy and durable peace, such as power sharing, third-party security guarantees, and justice provisions.

Mediation is a critical step in conflicts management, and the neutrality of a mediator may be difficult due to the likely influence of a power differential among parties to a conflict. This difficulty can be averted as adoption of some traditional logics of spirituality can contribute towards the success of the process.

4.2 Conclusion

Esan communities are part of Edo State traditional communities who are living in Midwest, Nigeria. They have established traditional institutions in these communities to realize indigenous knowledge for their social interaction. Their indigenous knowledge encompasses the skills, experiences applied by traditional rulers/institutions to maintain or improve their livelihood, manage conflicts and maintain peace and harmony. The main actors of these traditional institutions are traditional kings, family heads, age groups, cults, chiefs, cultural societies and village councils. Under the process of conflict management, maintenance of peace and harmony, their indigenous knowledge and practices are put to use with the aim of discovering the whole truth. The aim is to restore the relationship between the parties, reintegrate offenders back into the society while maintaining peace and harmony. Therefore, in traditional Esan societies, indigenous knowledge through traditional institutions play major role in conflict management besides other developmental initiatives.

In Esan communities, there are indigenous traditions for peace building which can teach us a lot about healing and reconciliation, and can create the basis for re-establishing peace, harmonious relationship and social solidarity. While traditional approaches and institutions provide us with many lessons we can incorporate into ongoing conflict management processes, it is important for us to also recognize that some traditions have not always promoted human rights. Therefore, what is required is to find a way to combine the best lessons that tradition has to offer with progressive modern norms and standards for the protection of human rights. Progressive cultural principles which promote human dignity and the well-being of the individual and society can provide valuable insights into how our local communities can be peacefully reconstructed by using its own indigenous value systems which emphasize promoting social solidarity.
REFERENCES


