

TRADITIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS FOR COMMUNAL PEACE-BUILDING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper is centred on traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution and management for communal peace-building in Nigeria. The abandonment of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) embodied in the traditional model/methods of conflict resolution and management for orthodox or foreign models of conflict resolution has been responsible for the lingering and sometimes intractable communal conflicts all over Nigeria, with devastating socio-economic consequences. The paper argued that the salience of traditional conflict resolution and management models is underscored by its cultural and spiritual underpinnings in a multi-religious and multi-cultural society like Nigeria. Thus, the sacredness of, and deep reverence for, the supernatural, ancestors, elders, divination, family/communal shrines, oaths among others are fundamental to the success of any conflict resolution and peace-building efforts in Nigeria. The paper explored the concepts of conflict resolution and conflict management as well as response to conflict situations and conflict management by conflicted parties. Typology and nature of some communal conflicts in Nigeria are examined. Some traditional or indigenous conflict resolution methods are examined in the concluding section. The paper utilized relevant secondary sources of data for its analysis.

Keywords: Conflict resolution, Conflict management, Alternative dispute resolution, Traditional methods, Communal, Supernatural.

Introduction

Conflicts arise from the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals or groups in defined social and physical environments. According to Otite (2000:1), changes in the social environment such as contestable access to new political positions or perceptions of new resources arising from development in the physical environment, are fertile grounds for conflicts involving individuals and groups, who are interested in using the new resources to achieve their goals. The past ten to fifteen years were characterized by the occurrence of some of the most violent conflicts among several ethnic and religious communities in different regions and states of Nigeria. According to Best (2004:28-30), hardly was any region spared some of these conflicts, even though the conflict differed either in prevalence and intensity, or their protracted or non-protracted nature. In the far north, for instance conflicts of religious nature, continued to break out at locations like Kano, Katsina, Zaria and Kaduna, among other places. In the southwest, there were violent communal conflicts at Sagamu, Lagos, Ife-Modakeke, etc. The Aguleri/Umuleri conflicts were most noticeable in the south east. Land and oil-induced conflicts among groups of the Niger Delta, especially in Warri and neighbouring communities also increased in scope and intensity. These conflicts were sometimes very destructive and negatively impacted institutions, individuals, groups and societies. Not even the transition from military rule to democratic governance in 1999, with the

accompanying assumption that democracy provides alternatives to violent methods of conflict transformation, could slow down the intensity and prevalence of such conflicts.

In general, social history and thought, the idea of conflict enjoys a high degree of attention and interests. The reason for this interest is multifaceted. In the first instance, the occurrence of conflict in human societies seems pervasive. It is an unhidden phenomenon and is found in almost every nook and cranny of the world. In the second instance, interest on the idea of conflict is explainable in the light of the fact that human progress is attached to the minimal occurrence of this pervasive and prevalent phenomenon. Third, it is even believed that the exploration and control of nature and natural resources for human development are not possible without the exertion and break-out of some form of conflict or the other. The rationale behind conflict over such natural resources is of compelling importance and critical interest for intellectual analysis (Idowu, 2005:28-35). Fourth, the interest in the idea of conflict by scholars over the ages, interestingly, has been used as an index in the demarcation and categorization of the world.

The paper addresses some basic perennial and cardinal questions such as what is conflict, what are the peculiar characteristics of conflict, how do conflicted parties respond to conflict situations, what are the consequences of conflict? Arising from the destructive nature of communal conflicts and their wider socio-economic and security implications for the nation, groups and individuals, the paper also examines some traditional methods of conflict resolution and management.

Conflict Resolution

All societies have a framework of laid-down conventions and rules by which conflicts are resolved or managed. Such societies also have a body of rules that define and qualify people's relationships with each other and the state. These rules and regulations form the law of the land. But in those societies where there may not be a written constitution, the basic set of standards in which the individual member has been socialized from youth to conform to and from which other standards in the culture derive, become the framework of conflict management and regulation.

Miller (2003:79) sees conflict resolution as a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems distinct from management or transformation of conflict. According to Mitchell (1993:58), conflict resolution is essentially aimed at intervention to change or facilitate the course of a conflict. Other problem solving techniques are known generally as problem solving workshops, "interactive problem-solving", "third party consultation", or "collaborative analytical problem-solving". Although conflict resolution has been part of human experience for centuries, Burton (1993:32-34) rather argued that the concept is comparatively new in academic discourse. He drew attention to the term "dispute" which some scholars interchange with conflict. For him, "settlement refers to negotiated or agitated outcomes of disputes, while resolution refers to outcomes of a conflict situation. We thus have "dispute settlement" and "conflict resolution". However, dispute and conflict operate on the same principles and although they may refer to different conditions and scope of social relationships they may, like the concepts of settlement and resolution, be used interchangeably. Miall et al (2015:86-88) indicate that by conflict resolution, it is expected that the deep-rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved and behaviour is no longer violent, nor are attitudes hostile any longer while the structure of the conflict has been changed. Mitchel and Banks (1996:63-65) used conflict resolution to refer to:

- ❖ an outcome in which the issues in an existing conflict are satisfactorily dealt with through a solution that is mutually acceptable to the parties, self-sustaining in the long run and productive of a new, positive relationship between parties that were previously hostile adversaries; and
- ❖ Any process or procedure by which such an outcome is achieved.

Conflict resolution in plural societies like Nigeria can be quite complex, principally because of the determinate effects of culture and language symbolism. Hence, as Avruch and Black (1993:102); Albert (2001:16) rightly pointed out it is quite dangerous to relegate culture to the background in conflict resolution. Although culture is a marker of social differences, it should not be regarded as an obstacle to conflict resolution in multi-ethnic/multi-cultural societies. Perceiving conflicts through divergent cultural lenses is natural. People interpret social action and social reality through their indigenous conceptions and knowledge. Understanding the local indigenous theories of conflicts is essential to their solution. Culture also determines information processing, as well as the use of metaphors and language in the bargaining and debating process. It is by paying attention to the intricate culture questions that even those apparently irresolvable conflicts can be broken down. The cultural question can muddle up and compound conflicts and make them appear impossible to resolve (Otite and Albert, 1999).

In general, these scholars stressed that conflict resolution provides an opportunity to interact with the parties concerned, with the hope of at least reducing the scope, intensity and effects of conflicts. During formal and informal meetings, conflict resolution exercises, permit a reassessment of views and claims as a basis for finding option to crises and to divergent points of view. Those who organize conflict resolution exercises or workshops usually constitute the third party in a triangular arrangement and consist of traditional rulers, modern sector leaders, outstanding opinion leaders and experienced key members of the public, capable of producing new ideas and reconciliative conditions and actions.

Conflict Management

Conflict Management according to Best (2005:59) and Burton (1990), is the process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through a number of measures and by working with and through the parties involved in the conflict. This term, they further stated is sometimes used synonymously with "conflict regulation" and covers the entire area of handling conflicts positively at different stages, including those efforts made to prevent conflict, by being proactive. It encompasses conflict limitation, containment and litigation. Conflict management may be perceived as a wider concept involving conflict resolution and transformation when necessitated and it is more of a long-term arrangement involving institutionalized provisions and regulative procedures for dealing with conflicts whenever they occur (Otite and Albert, 1999:2). People must learn to manage conflicts productively otherwise the risks to society and its development are overwhelming. In some respects, the concepts of conflict resolution, conflict transformation and conflict management overlap both in content and in practice.

In their "short course on conflict management", for instance, Hocker (1998:49-52) identified some idea for dealing with conflicts. These included clarification of communication and checking of perceptions which in turn involve the following: expressing strong feelings appropriately, remaining rational, asking questions, maintaining a spirit of give and take, avoiding harmful statements, asking directly what is going on, telling others one's opinion, looking for flexible "shades of gray" solutions, recognizing the power of initiating a cooperative move, identifying conflict patterns and engaging in negotiations of agreements and settlements. Appropriate communication skills and channels are crucial in conflict

management. The term "conflict management" is perhaps an admission of the reality that conflict is inevitable but that not all conflicts can always be resolved; therefore, what practitioners can do is to manage and regulate them. The response to conflicts by conflicted parties is examined next.

Response to Conflicts

Avoiding style, whistle-blowing, accommodation style, compromising, joint problem-solving, third party decision making, etc are some of the measures adopted in responding to conflicts generally. However, people respond to community conflicts in four distinct ways:

- Avoidance
- Confrontation
- Third-party decision making and
- Joint problem-solving.

Avoidance means a situation where a group alleging injustice or discrimination is literally ignored or denied recognition by those being accused and those who have the capacity for helping to redress the injustice done to the group. According to Slocum and Hellriegel (2011:118), avoidance style refers to unassertive and uncooperative behaviours. A person uses this style to stay away from conflict, ignore disagreements or remain neutral. The avoidance approach reflects an aversion to tension and frustration and may involve a decision to let a conflict work itself out. Avoidance, as Wilmot and Hocker (1998:28) observed, is characterized by "denial of the conflict, equivocation, changing and avoiding topics, being non-committal and joking rather than dealing with the conflict at hand". This kind of response to a conflict situation, compounds problems as the party that is "avoided" will later seek other means of getting listened to. Such people usually resort to violence. Writing on the disadvantages of avoidance, Wilmot and Hocker (1998) noted that it "allows conflict to simmer and heat up unnecessarily rather than providing an avenue for improving it".

Confrontation or forcing: This style refers to assertive and uncooperative behaviours and represents a win-lose approach to conflict. Those who use the confrontation approach, try to achieve their own goals without concern for others. The more a group is ignored, "avoided" or "denied" attention, the more it becomes confrontational (issuing threats, getting verbally aggressive, resorting to litigation or even physical violence) with a view to getting a win-lose outcome. This style includes aspect of coercive power and dominance. As Slocum and Hellriegel (2011:56) rightly asserted, it may help a person achieve individual goals, but like avoidance, forcing tends to result in unfavourable evaluations by others.

Third-party decision making styles: "third-party decision-making" takes place when third parties acting on behalf of the larger society (e.g., a court of law) hand down mandatory terms of resolving the conflict. This strategy works best for resolving community conflicts in societies where the rule of law is upheld and has not broken down as is the case in parts of the developing world like Nigeria.

Joint problem-solving: It refers to the situation in which parties to a conflict either by themselves or through the assistance of a third party, find solutions to their disputes in a cordial environment. Problem-solving procedure, according to Otite and Albert (1999:3-4), is non-judgmental and highly participatory in character. It promotes cooperation between antagonists who jointly analyse the structure of the conflict and carefully work out strategies for reconciling with each other. The dominant question in a problem-solving setting is: "How can the parties to a conflict peacefully work together in the community they both own and share with one

another? How do the groups develop rational empathy? Or to be more specific, how do the two cultures merge into the production of "third cultures". This approach is popularly considered to be the best method of dealing with conflict, as its outcomes are usually self-supporting in the sense that it is advantageous to all parties in the dispute (Albert, 2001:6). A typology of some communal and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria is examined in the preceding section.

Typology and Nature of Some Communal Conflicts in Nigeria

Ife/Modakeke Communal Conflicts: The Ife/Modakeke Conflict was similar to the communal conflict between the Tiv and Jukun in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria which erupted over landlordism. The feud has made the peaceful relationship, harmonious interaction and inter-marriages formerly existing between the two groups, practically impossible. According to Otite and Albert (1999:142), the conflict has been detached from its original cause to become its own self-energising cause, its own *raison d'être* and its own self-empowered and self-fulfilling cycle. There was the use of sophisticated weaponry in this conflict which disrupted social life, created human fatalities and a refugee situation.

Aguleri/Umuleri Conflict: Aguleri and Umuleri are neighbouring communities in Igbo ethnic group, located in Anambra in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. These two communities that had farmed side by side and had common access to the Otuocha land even before the colonial masters came, are now arch enemies to each other. Their enmity stems from the fact that both of them lay claim to the Otuocha land which the Supreme Court in 1984 ruled that neither the Aguleri nor Umuleri have been able to establish that they are exclusive owner of the said land (<http://www.conflict-prevention.net/page.php?>)

According to Eke (1999:1), the Otuocha land dispute between these two communities clearly illustrates the role of the Europeans in creating and intensifying land disputes. To Him, it is a case of grant and counter-sale, sale and counter-sale to the Europeans land that had historically been used by the two communities in common without problem. In 1995, the clash between these two communities witnessed large scale destruction of public and private properties- schools, banks, post offices, town halls, churches, houses, including people were killed.

Warri Inter-Ethnic Wars (Ijo/Itsekiri): Three different ethnic groups occupy Warri- these are: the Urhobos, the Itsekiris and the Ijos. These communities intermarry and co-exist. Though no one could lay claim to the land, there has been mutual suspicion as each tries to protect itself from the tendency of others to dominate. Ethnic and communal wars were stirred with the creation of local government councils in 1996.

In Warri, the Warri South West Local Government Council was created. The Federal Government White Paper shows that the headquarters of the new local government council was to be located at Ogidigben, an Itsekiri town (p.3). But the then military governor of Delta State, Col. David Dungs, announced Ogbe-Ijoh as the headquarters of the new council. The Ijos felt and concluded that it was the Olu of Warri, Ogiame Atuwatse II, who used his influence to relocate the new council headquarters (p.3). This relocation created tension which later degenerated into serious conflict. Since then, the war has been erupting over matters that ordinarily should not have caused war with the disruption of socio-economic life and insecurity. This ethnic and communal conflict like others has constituted threat to national security. Some traditional methods of conflict resolution are examined next.

Some Traditional Mechanisms for Conflict Resolution and Management

It is not a misplaced statement emanating from the sad experiences of Nigerian societies today, to say that the abandonment of utility laden alternative dispute resolution (ADR) such as

traditional methods of bargaining and conflict resolution for foreign models, is largely responsible for the multiplicity of avoidable (violent) conflicts all over the country (Nwolise, 2005:38-42). According to him, a mere land dispute between two families or communities leads to murder and destruction of hundreds of houses and killing of several people today: whereas in the traditional setting, the systems put in place to monitor, prevent, manage and resolve conflicts would have readily prevented such wanton damage.

Each people, race or identity group had (and have) their own ways of doing things, especially as these concern conflict management and resolution. While in Europe, for example, the police are an agency of crime detection, several Nigerian societies relied on oath-taking and divination in pre-colonial times. As rightly observed by Nwolise, these methods still thrive today in some areas on a very limited scale alongside police torture and skull breaking in the name of interrogation and confession extraction. Also, while the Western model places emphasis on commissions of inquiries, constitution and adjudicatory system like the courts presided over by lawyers and judges, the traditional model utilises council of elders, King's court, intervention of the supernatural forces, divination, shrines and oath-taking among others for dispute settlement and justice dispensation.

a) The Elders' Council

The symbolism of authoritative decisions associated with elders' cultural trusteeship and customary practices, has sustained conflict resolution and management in Nigerian societies. The constitution of King-in-Council or of village or town councils and their legitimacy of interventions in conflict situations are well-known in Nigeria, especially in the rural areas. The elders, according to Otite and Albert (1999:4), may not have physical power to enforce decisions but they rely on leaders of the various age-grades or youth associations to bring about and monitor peace on the basis of the negotiated terms in particular conflicts, or of the known institutionalized forms of conflict management. Kings and chiefs of various designations and status, practise their indigenous cultures admirably in resolving, managing and transforming conflicts within and between their domains. Yet, those who disagree with the verdict of these functionaries proceed freely to settle their conflicts in the modern westernized ways, for example, the courts.

Town councils are also agents of conflict prevention, resolution, transformation or management within and between their communities. The basis for this mode of intervention is the people's surviving confidence, trust and reliance on culture as a means of rallying and mobilizing people to behave in patterned ways, a condition which can thus be used to handle conflict problems at the ethnic or inter-ethnic levels.

b) Intervention of the supernatural forces

Nigeria is represented by a diversity of cultural and religious practices. This diversity affects the approaches to dispute and conflict resolution in the traditional setting. Generally, the approach would tend to differ from the Western alternative resolution in several respects. Even then, this approach in Africa itself, this approach may also differ from one culture to another. These traditional religious practices and beliefs are still strong even among practitioners of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria. The world of the ancestors is an extension of the world of the living and the supernatural beings are part of the Nigerian systems of thought. Ancestors, progenitors, royal and non-royal, like other deities and shrines, are believed to impose decisive and rightful verdicts in controversial issues of conflict within and between communities.

In the words of Otite and Albert, when kolanuts, drinks, food etc are shared and prayers said to settle disputants in land, farm and feuding conflicts, participants from all the parties involved regard such disputes and conflicts to be finally settled with divine sanction. Such conflict settlement terms are generally accepted and obeyed for fear of negative sanctions, such as deaths or affliction with bad and incurable diseases from the spirit world.

c) Shrines/Oath-taking

Shrines and oath-taking are vital tools for social control in Nigeria, especially in conformity with simple rules, order and mobilization towards development. Although traditional mode of worship may differ from one community to the other, it helped to maintain peace and order. Besides setting socially approved values and norms which the people had to comply with, such total compliance provided a common forum for understanding each other, thereby ushering in peace and unity. Considering the importance attached to the shrine in traditional societies, meetings are usually held in front of them as signs of honest commitment to resolutions so passed.

Oath-taking is closely associated with traditional religion (whereby people are made to swear to the divinities/cult of ancestors) as a means of compliance with resolutions and exoneration from allegations. Through oath-taking before these shrines scattered all over the communities in Nigeria, people come out in their true nature and comply with the prevailing norms and values. For instance, the traditional formula which led to the peaceful resolution of the Aguleri-Umuleri-Umuoba-Anam war, involved oath-taking, declaration of "No more war" peace treaty and the performance of a cleansing ritual called Iko mme. The oath which is binding on every indigene of the participating communities, was taken to the effect that the contracting parties accept peace and there would be no more war and bloodshed amongst and between the five communities. Violators of this oath would face the wrath of the deities present and the ancestors, who in the presence of God constitute the source of moral sanctions and peace guarantors (Nwolise, 2005:57-59).

d) Divination

Besides the power of the rites of passage and rites of intensification to reinforce group solidarity, all societies go through times of conflict or crisis when the fragile social bonds seem to break apart. Wars, illness or natural disaster may threaten the ability of group members to interact with each other. At these times, it may become necessary to identify the sources of tensions and restore order. Divination is a process of gaining secret knowledge about the past, present or future by calling on the aid of spirits or by looking for supernatural signs (Eriwwo 1991:13). Divination is also used both for diagnosis of social conflict and social control. Through divination, therefore, social tensions and anxiety over seemingly unpreventable conflicts are deflected away from the group by attributing the danger to supernatural agents.

Conclusion

From the foregoing we have been able to highlight the fact that there are various approaches to the peaceful resolutions and transformation of conflict situation in Nigeria. However, while the government and interested parties may apply some of these traditional methods, they also increasingly employ the western methods or models of conflict resolution, which apparently have failed to address communal conflict, hence their persistence.

It has, however, been argued that the abandonment of utility laden traditional methods of bargaining and conflict resolution for the foreign models, is largely responsible for the multiplicity of avoidable (violent) conflicts all over Nigeria. Before the coming of the Europeans to Africa, Africans had their peculiar methods of monitoring, preventing, managing and resolving conflicts. As Nwolise (2005) rightly noted, they also had their peculiar ways and manners of effecting peace-making, peace-building and confidence building. Those very peculiar and effective methods have today been adulterated and in many areas, wiped out by the forces of colonialism, including religious psycho-war forces. Dialogue among and between disputants is today replaced by fighting and the mediatory role of elders and other more customarily sanctioned institutions like age-grades highly revered in societies, are replaced in

several cases with police action, military "peace-keeping" operations and endless court proceedings which do not inspire confidence and trust among disputants.

As the paper reveals, the intractable nature of ethnic and communal conflicts with their potential for violence, insecurity, loss of lives and property, disruption of socio-economic activities, strained intra and inter community relation imposes the imperative to embrace home-grown and time-tested methods of conflict resolution and management for peace building in Nigeria. The admonition of the former President of South Africa, Mr. Thabo Mbeki while on a working visit to Nigeria, is very instructive on the issue. While lamenting the conflict situation in Africa and the failure of contemporary methods which are essentially Eurocentric to resolve them, Mbeki pleaded that Africa should adopt new ways of conflict management and resolution which would be more effective and efficient than what is now operated as inherited from the European colonial masters.

No matter how modest it might be, this paper wishes to join the voices and efforts of African peoples, both at home and abroad, in demanding that Africa's leaders including those in Nigeria fund in-depth researches into Africa's traditional methods of conflict monitoring, prevention, management and resolution, as well as of peace-making, peace-building and confidence-building. Relevant aspects of these methods should be adopted and incorporated in our modern frameworks and mechanisms for a more peaceful, orderly, lawful and harmonious society, which can support and act as catalyst to the overall development of Nigeria in the 21st century.

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