



Research Paper

Traditional Rulers and Conflict Management in Okrika Local Government Area, Rivers State, 2012-2022

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ABSTRACT

The study assesses the strategies adopted in traditional ruler's conflict management in the Okrika Local Government Area of Rivers State, 2012-2022. Traditional rulers are popular symbols of tradition, culture, and custom, and their preservation and helps ensure the growth and development of communities through well-structured communication systems. The study found that; conflict may arise due to competition for scarce resources, cultural differences, competition and historical rivalries between different communities and competing claims, land grabbing, encroachment, or disagreements over land allocation and compensation. As such, the study recommended amongst others that; traditional rulers have to make an extra attempt to resolve conflicts at the neighbourhood level, this manner of conflicts will no longer expand and lead to state insecurity. Traditional rulers should also strive to be impartial in their judgments as much as possible.

Keywords: Area, Conflict, Conflict Management, Local Government, Traditional Rulers

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I. INTRODUCTION

Wars and conflicts share one thing in common: violence and destruction of lives and property, as well as the eco-system, which includes people, material resources, resource organizations, education, political will, hope, and beliefs. Conflict has a high cost, creating pain and poverty, hurting economic progress, and depriving people of fundamental necessities (Eze & Ogbuagu 2020). As we have seen, most conflicts occur in countries that are undergoing significant political, economic, and democratic transitions. In these countries, the right to accurate information and free expression is critical for transparent and responsible administration, constructive communication, reduced threat perception, and the development of more stable and durable political and economic systems (Adeyemi & Akintayo, 2019).

The traditional institutions and non-participatory roles of traditional rulers in the current administration, as opposed to their roles in managing and resolving conflicts in pre-colonial Nigeria, are one of the major reasons for the rise in juvenile delinquencies among youths in many communities, towns, and cities. This trend renders conventional rulers and their institutions useless while also posing a threat to the nation's peace, security, and stability. The government and other stakeholders, while developing international and regional organizations to cope with international conflict management, have overlooked local conflict resolution alternatives. This has resulted in foreign meddling, particularly in countries that rely heavily on foreign aid, with the misunderstanding that just as conflict is inherent in a culture, so is a method for resolving it. Some of the conflicts that have occurred in Okrika Local Government Area include chieftaincy squabbles among numerous families, inter-communal confrontations with neighbouring communities, land disputes, and environmental and resource agitations caused by oil spillage and pollution. The undervaluation of traditional authority in mediation has

contributed to the emergence of protracted conflict in many communities, towns, and cities. The causes of conflict in Okrika include boundary adjustment and land encroachment. Resource control agitations, land agitations, historical rivalries, land use degree and land grabbing, elections, and hereditary chieftaincy stools. The effects are hunger, death, destruction of lives and properties, wars, and environmental degradation. Solutions include dialogue, mediation, community elder's forum, collaboration, and efforts in reconciliation. As a result, this research focuses on traditional rulers and conflict resolution tactics in Rivers State's Okrika Local Government Area from 2012 to 2022.

The paper aims to assess the strategies adopted in traditional ruler's conflict management in the Okrika Local Government Area of Rivers State, 2012-2022. The specific objectives of this study will include to:

1. determine the causes of conflict in Okrika Local Government Area of Rivers State.
2. evaluate strategies adopted by traditional rulers in conflict management in Okrika Local Government Area of Rivers State.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural relativism is an ethical theory proposed by Franz Boas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that asserts that all moral standards and values are culturally created and must be understood within the context of a specific culture (Rachels & Rachels, 2019). Franz Boas, an early anthropologist, introduced the concept of cultural relativism in 1887, but it was not given a name until Alain Locke defined it in 1924. It emphasized the premise that diverse cultures have their own distinct sets of beliefs, norms, and values and that these cultural frameworks should be accepted and understood without imposing external judgements or standards.

According to James (2022), the concept of cultural relativism first evolved in anthropology in the early twentieth century, especially via the work of scientists such as Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict. They claimed that cultures should be researched and evaluated on their terms, rather than against a universal moral or civilizational standard. Cultural relativism contradicts the notion of moral absolutism, which holds that there are universal, objective moral rules that apply to all people and cultures (Kukathas, 2021). Instead, it implies that moral judgements and ethical standards are subjective and vary between cultures. Cultural relativism theory holds that what is ethically right or wrong, good or terrible, varies by culture.

By taking a cultural relativist approach, academics and stakeholders can acquire a better understanding of how traditional rulers negotiate problems based on their cultural ideas and behaviours. It helps to prevent ethnocentrism, the inclination to regard one's own culture as superior and encourages a more objective and unbiased assessment of traditional rulers' contributions to dispute resolution. Cultural relativism promotes conversation and understanding among diverse civilizations.

This perspective encourages participation and collaboration among researchers, policymakers, and traditional rulers when evaluating their responsibilities in conflict resolution. It enables the exchange of knowledge and experiences, resulting in a more complete understanding of the techniques and strategies used by traditional rulers in conflict resolution. Furthermore, cultural relativism recognizes that cultures change and adapt over time. When evaluating traditional rulers, it is possible to look at how traditional procedures have been altered to handle contemporary challenges. This understanding contributes to determining the efficacy and usefulness of traditional conflict resolution approaches in the current situation. The following are the fundamental assumptions of cultural relativism: Morality is culturally unique; ethical norms are derived from society; ethical decisions are relative to the context in which they are formed.

Cultural relativism acknowledges that cultural norms and values are firmly embedded in cultures, shaping people's behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs (Appiah, 2020). It contends that recognizing and appreciating cultural variety is critical for promoting tolerance, mutual understanding, and peaceful cohabitation among diverse cultures and societies. Cultural relativism proponents contend that imposing one's cultural norms on others can result in ethnocentrism, cultural imperialism, and the suppression of cultural variety. They argue for a perspective that recognizes and values cultural variations, encouraging conversation and understanding rather than enforcing a single moral paradigm.

However, cultural relativism is not without criticism. Some claim that it can lead to moral relativism, in which any behaviour can be justified in the context of a certain culture, even if it contradicts fundamental human rights or ideals (Rachels & Rachels, 2021). Others argued that cultural relativism stifles social growth and human rights endeavours by accepting potentially harmful or discriminatory practices. Despite arguments and criticisms, cultural relativism remains relevant in subjects such as anthropology, sociology, and ethics. It prompts researchers, policymakers, and individuals to critically examine their own cultural biases and

assumptions, fostering a more nuanced understanding of diverse cultural perspectives and promoting cross-cultural dialogue and cooperation (James, 2022).

Cultural relativism is essential to this research because it emphasizes the necessity of understanding conflicts within their cultural contexts. In the context of evaluating traditional rulers' involvement in dispute resolution, cultural relativism promotes an understanding of other communities' cultural diversity and customs. Traditional rulers in the Okrika Local Government Area frequently derive authority and influence from cultural norms, beliefs, and practices. Cultural relativism acknowledges that what is deemed suitable or effective conflict resolution tactics in one culture may differ in another. It highlighted the need to avoid imposing external judgments or standards and instead analyze the roles of traditional rulers within their cultural framework.

TRADITIONAL RULERS AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

Traditional rulers have been an important part of Nigeria's governing structure for generations, even predating the British colonial era (Amodu, 2019a). They were recognized as custodians of culture and tradition, with authority over governance, justice, and dispute resolution. The traditional rulers' role in conflict resolution was based on their extensive knowledge of their communities, their ability to mediate disagreements, and their authority to enforce rulings. Traditional rulers had an important role in Nigerian conflict resolution before colonialism. Disputes were frequently settled by traditional techniques such as arbitration, mediation, and reconciliation.

Traditional rulers would organize community meetings, hear both sides of the argument, and make decisions based on customary law and tradition (Oladipo & Oluwafemi, 2022). These choices were widely supported by both parties and implemented by traditional rulers.

During the colonial era, the British established a centralized governance system that undermined traditional monarchs' authority (Eze & Onuoha, 2019). However, traditional rulers continued to play an important role in conflict resolution, particularly at the village level. They were recognized as government representatives who were in charge of maintaining law and order in their areas. Traditional rulers also took part in the administration of justice, and the colonial authority recognized their courts and legal systems. Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the influence of traditional rulers in government was further reduced with the implementation of a Western-style democratic system (Amodu, 2019a). Nonetheless, traditional rulers continued to play an important role in conflict resolution, particularly in rural areas where their authority was still respected. They were responsible for resolving disagreements between individuals, families, and communities, and their rulings were frequently recognized and enforced.

In recent years, there has been a revived acknowledgment of the role of traditional rulers in conflict resolution in Nigeria. The federal government recognizes the role of traditional rulers in ensuring peace and security, particularly in areas threatened by insurgency and ethnic conflict. To encourage peace-building and conflict resolution, the government formed a National Council of Traditional Rulers to advise on national matters (Oyedele, 2019). According to Ige & Adekola (2021), traditional rulers have played an important part in conflict resolution throughout Nigeria's history. Nigeria is a varied country with over 250 ethnic groups, and traditional rulers have played an important role in keeping peace and settling internal and intergroup conflicts.

The 1990s war between the Tiv and Jukun ethnic groups in Nigeria's middle belt region exemplifies traditional rulers' role in conflict resolution. Traditional rulers from both tribes played an important part in settling the dispute by initiating peace negotiations, acting as mediators, and creating a forum for conversation between the two groups. The traditional rulers used their power and authority to bring the warring sides to the negotiating table, resulting in a peace deal that ended the fighting.

Another example is the role of Kano's Emir, Muhammadu Sanusi II, in resolving post-election violence in Kano State in 2015 (Okunloye & Olokooba 2017). Violence ensued following the release of election results, with supporters of the losing party attacking those of the winning party. The Emir of Kano, the people's traditional ruler and spiritual leader, intervened and called for calm. He also formed a committee to look into the causes of the violence and propose solutions. The committee's recommendations, which included compensation for victims and reconciliation between the two parties, were carried out, resulting in the restoration of peace.

In addition to settling conflicts, Nigerian traditional rulers have taken preventative measures to manage violence. For example, Alhaji Shehu Idris, the Emir of Zazzau, has been praised for preventing a potential conflict between farmers and herders in his territory (Eze & Ogbuagu, 2020). He started a conversation between

the two groups, promoted peaceful coexistence, and supported the use of modern farming technologies to reduce conflicts over grazing pastures. Traditional rulers in Nigeria have a rich history of conflict resolution, spanning from minor disputes to massive ethnic battles. Traditional rulers have used their power, influence, and understanding of their people to promote conversation, mediation, and reconciliation. Their efforts have significantly contributed to maintaining peace and stability in Nigeria.

CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN OKRIKA

Okrika is an island in Rivers State, Nigeria that serves as the capital of the same-named local government area. The town is located on an island called South or Port Harcourt, making it a suburb of the much larger city. The average elevation in Okrika is 452 meters. It is located 35 miles (56 kilometers) upstream from the Bight of Bonny on Okrika Island in the northern part of the Bonny River. The settlement may be reached by vessels with a draft of 29 feet (9 meters) or less. Formerly an Ijo (Ijaw) fishing town in the mangrove swamps of the eastern Niger River (Delta). In the early 17th century, the Okrika kingdom engaged in active slave trade. Okrika's significant exports include refined petroleum products. The town has significant local commerce in fish (which is rapidly declining owing to pollution of the rivers and land from crude oil activities), oil palm produce, locally processed salt, and plants.

According to the 2006 census, the population of the Wakirike Local Government Area in Rivers State, Nigeria, was 222,026. An estimated 145,000 Okrika natives live abroad in the world, with the majority residing in the United Kingdom. The clans of Okrika are Kirike, Ogoloma, Ogu, Bolo, Ogbogbo, Ibaka, Ele, and Abuloma.

Ethnic and Political Differences: Okrika is a multi-ethnic village with various political connections, and disputes have erupted between groups with disparate ethnic and political origins. For example, the Adagbabiri and Egbema villages in Okrika have clashed over political leadership and resource management. Amodu (2019b) discovered that political and ethnic disparities were important predictors of conflict in the area.

Resource Control: Conflicts have also erupted in Okrika owing to rivalry for scarce resources such as land, water, and oil. According to Ibrahim & Mohammed (2019), conflicts in Okrika were about the control and distribution of oil resources. The study discovered that oil firms have frequently been accused of failing to sufficiently compensate host communities, resulting in tension and violence.

Historical Injustices: Conflicts in Okrika are also linked to past injustices and marginalization. According to Amodu (2019b), the Okrika wars are the result of historical injustices and marginalization by the Nigerian government and other ethnic groups. For example, concerns about resource management and revenue allocation by the Federal Government have resulted in many individuals having an incorrect view of the Federal Government.

Political Interference: Conflicts in Okrika have sometimes been associated with political meddling and manipulation. According to Oladipo & Oluwafemi (2022), political interference by politicians and political parties exacerbated local tensions. In conclusion, the reasons for conflict in Okrika are diverse and multifaceted, and they frequently overlap. Ethnic and political disagreements, resource control, historical injustices, and political involvement have all been highlighted as major causes of violence in Okrika.

CHALLENGES HINDERING CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN OKRIKA

Okrika is a local government area in Rivers State, Nigeria, that has experienced several conflicts in recent years. According to Olaniyi & Adegbite (2022), there are various barriers to dispute resolution in Okrika, including:

Ethnic and religious differences: Okrika is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community, with ethnic and religious divisions playing a key role in local tensions. These disparities might foster a mindset of "us vs. them," resulting in violent conflict. Amodu (2019b) stated that ethnic and religious divisions were the primary sources of conflict in Nigeria and that these differences were frequently exploited by political elites for their gain. This can foster a mindset of "us vs. them," resulting in violent confrontation.

Political Instability: Political instability and power struggles have also fuelled clashes in Okrika. Political leaders can use violence and intimidation to obtain power or protect their interests, causing tensions and conflict. According to Ekeh & Uguala (2020), political instability and inadequate governance institutions are important drivers of conflict in Nigeria, and political leaders frequently resort to violence and intimidation to win power or protect themselves.

Youth Unemployment: Youth unemployment is a major issue in Okrika, and it has been connected to the rise of criminal gangs and the spread of small arms and light weapons (Udochukwu & Egwuatu, 2023). These gangs may engage in violent combat with one another or with law authorities, causing unrest and instability.

Weak Governance Structures: Okrika's governance mechanisms are poor, with ineffective leadership and accountability. This might foster a sense of impunity among those who participate in violent and criminal behaviour, making conflict resolution harder. Olaniyi & Adegbite (2022) claimed that inadequate governance institutions, corruption, and a lack of accountability were primary drivers of conflict in Nigeria, creating a sense of impunity for those who engage in violence and criminal activity, making conflict resolution difficult.

Limited Access to Justice: Access to justice in Okrika is limited, particularly for the poor and marginalized. This can fuel feelings of injustice and resentment, leading to the formation of vigilante groups and other types of violence. Ige & Adekola (2020) discovered that restricted access to justice was a key cause of conflict in Nigeria, contributing to the rise of vigilante groups and other types of violence.

Historical Grievances: Historical grievances, such as land disputes and unresolved battles, can also fuel strife in Okrika. These complaints may fuel feelings of injustice and animosity, leading to violent confrontation. Azazi & Ojogbue (2019) discovered in their study that historical grievances were a primary driver of violence in Nigeria, creating a sense of unfairness and animosity, which led to violent conflict.

STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY TRADITIONAL RULERS IN CONFLICTION MANAGEMENT IN OKRIKA

Olabisi & Agboola (2019) in his study highlighted the following as the roles of traditional rulers in conflict management in Okrika

Traditional Rulers as Peace Advocates: Traditional rulers in Okrika are frequently portrayed as peace champions who promote peaceful cohabitation and avoid bloodshed. They use their position as spiritual leaders to spread peace messages, promote communication, and discourage potentially conflicting activities.

Conflict Prevention: Traditional Okrika monarchs also have a preventative role in conflict resolution. They use their understanding of their communities to identify possible conflicts and take action to keep them from escalating. Traditional rulers frequently organize peace meetings and workshops to teach their subjects about conflict prevention and resolution.

Traditional Justice Systems: Traditional rulers in Okrika have their justice systems based on customary law and traditions. They employ these techniques to settle conflicts between individuals and communities. Traditional justice systems are frequently more accessible and economical to local communities than formal judicial systems.

Okrika's traditional rulers employ customary law to handle problems: Customary law is founded on the people's conventions and traditions, and it is seen as a fair and just method of dispute resolution. Traditional rulers employ customary law to make binding decisions for the parties involved.

Collaboration with Government Agencies: Okrika's traditional rulers work with government agencies such as the police and local governments to keep the peace and handle issues. They collaborate with various organizations to resolve security concerns and ensure that justice is served in cases requiring official adjudication.

IMPACT OF THE STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY THE TRADITIONAL RULERS IN MANAGING CONFLICT IN OKRIKA

Intra-communal peace: Through discussion among competing communities, traditional rulers have maintained intra-communal peace, particularly with the age-old divisions of Koniju and Tuboniju, which have resulted in segregation and factionalism. Traditional rulers have successfully managed conflicting circumstances in the numerous Okrika clans of Kirike, Ogoloma, Ogu, Bolo, Ogbogbo, Ibaka, Ele, Isaka, and Abuloma through the use of mediation strategies and communication.

Inter-communal peace: Courson (2016) said that the introduction of oil and the construction of the refinery worsened ethnic tensions between the Okrika and Eleme tribes. The Traditional Rulers have contributed to the de-escalation of intercommunal disputes with the Eleme people through various peace advocacy and enlightenment efforts among Okrika's many clans. This has resulted in beneficial efforts, as tensions between the two populations are now effectively controlled.

Political Stability: Traditional rulers have helped Okrika's political stability by employing a negotiation technique in which various political organizations and factions are invited to talk and dialogue on peaceful conflict settlement.

Traditional Justice Systems: Traditional rulers in Okrika have settled land disputes, chieftaincy tussles, and violations of people's rights through conventions and traditions. For example, widows whose rights have been abused by relatives and in-laws can approach the Council of Chiefs for justice.

II. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The paper examined the roles of traditional rulers in conflict resolution in Okrika's local government area of Rivers State, Nigeria. According to the study, conflicts include fury, rifts, and misunderstandings, as well as domestic and marketplace brawls, skirmishes, and wars. These types of confrontations are widespread and occur in traditional communities. Furthermore, the essence of dispute resolution and conflict management in traditional Nigerian states encompasses getting rid of the root causes of the battle, reconciling the conflicting events genuinely, keeping and re-establishing peace, and making every person concerned within the resolved battle happy and at peace with every difference again, and this required getting at reality; setting the proper milieu for societal manufacturing and improvement.

The findings provide light on the roles and benefits of including traditional rulers in conflict resolution in the Okrika Local Government Area of Rivers State. Traditional rulers in this region play an important role in reconciling and integrating opposing parties, resolving communication breakdowns, and promoting peaceful coexistence among people from all origins. They also help to develop consensus among the community. Traditional rulers use a variety of management approaches to resolve issues, including mediation, negotiation, reconciliation, and adjudication. The politicization of the chieftaincy stool, the influence of foreign religious influences, and partisan behaviour among traditional rulers all pose barriers to successful conflict management. These issues make it difficult for traditional dispute resolution mechanisms to work properly.

Engaging traditional rulers in dispute resolution has various advantages, including the potential to create community cohesiveness and reconciliation due to their considerable experience, which provides them with good mediation and arbitration abilities. Furthermore, their thorough awareness of the community's history, customs, and traditions improves their ability to manage conflict. In conclusion, the study emphasizes the critical roles that traditional rulers play in conflict resolution, the problems they face, and the benefits they gain from their involvement in Rivers State's Okrika LGA.

From the findings of the paper, the following recommendations are imperative; they are:

1. Traditional rulers should focus on resolving conflicts at the neighbourhood level to prevent them from spreading and causing state insecurity.
2. Traditional rulers should aim for impartial judgements. This will offer their followers a feeling of belonging, make them feel at ease, and help them understand the importance of reporting to the traditional ruler in the event of a problem.
3. Traditional rulers should establish closer relationships with their subjects to prevent conflicts from escalating. This will also encourage subjects to report conflicts to the ruler for peaceful resolution.
4. Encourage traditional rulers to participate in conflict resolution inclusively and equitably. Ensure that women, youth, marginalized groups, and various stakeholders take an active role in decision-making. Emphasise gender-sensitive techniques and address power inequalities to ensure that all members of the community can benefit from conflict management initiatives.
5. Traditional rulers in Okrika use management practices such as mediation, negotiation, reconciliation, and adjudication. By identifying these tactics, the study adds to our understanding of effective conflict resolution strategies and sheds light on the specific practices used by traditional rulers in the region.

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