

Traditional Rulers and Conflict Resolution for Sustainable Development in Africa: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

The increasing rate of security challenges in the country particularly in the Northeast and Northwest geopolitical zones have been a source of concerns to Nigerian government and the international community. Nigeria has been faced with many security challenges especially since her return to democracy in 1999. Since 1999, the nation witnessed serious security challenges that has not only threatened her existence as a nation but has defied all solutions for its eradication including the efforts of the security agencies to tackle the problem. This ugly situation is fast becoming worrisome and perplexing not only to Nigerians but to the international community particularly the multi-national and trans-national companies. This calls for an urgent attention and collaboration of the traditional rulers in checking the rising tide of insecurity in Nigeria. As the rulers of various communities, and the custodian of the people's culture, they have a grip of the people at the grass root levels and therefore placed in a vantage position to prevail on their subjects for action against insecurity in their respective domain and by extension the nation at large. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the roles of the traditional rulers in the maintenance of security for an effective nation building. Finally, the paper x-rays the rationale behind the failure of the efforts of the traditional rulers in keeping the peace and ways of curtailing the unfortunate situation which rears its ugly heads in country. Primary and secondary sources were used in the collection, collation and interpretation of data.

Keywords: peace-building, traditional ruler, subjects, sustainable development, insecurity

Introduction

Nigeria is a large and populous West African nation with a complex history of pre-colonial polities, a colonial era characterised by multiple administrative strategies and a post-independence history of alternating military and civilian rule. Nigeria has a long history of riots and civil disturbances, going back at least to the Aba riots of 1929. During the colonial era, the usual response was military, although it occurred to the authorities that such disturbances must have an origin in legitimate grievances. Nigeria since independence in 1960 has witnessed various political crisis that brought about insecurity, destruction of

lives and properties as well as disruption of socio-economic life of the people (Igwubor, 2000). However, the crisis assumed a different dimension, becoming more sophisticated, more deadly, more militarised with a wider international terrorists connections. Generally, society was generally made up of human and material resources which could be harnessed to meet certain goals for the betterment of all the inhabitants, especially in the society and the world at large (Abdulqadir, 2016).

Hence, it is worth noting that the essential goals of any society can only be achieved when a broad range of material and human resources were effectively and efficiently utilised. In essence, it follows that the society was basically made up of different people with different beliefs, historical backgrounds, personality dispositions, interests, aspirations, needs and expectations. In other words, there are individual differences that may exist from person to person in any given society and Nigeria's communities are not exception (Ajayi & Buhari, 2014). Essentially, conflicts have been experienced in the Nigerian society for decades. In most societies, people harnessing their differences and the society's human resources in line with the targeted goals. In such a situation, conflict was bound to be a common social phenomenon in the societies. This implies that, conflict was a universally evident phenomenon that was related to any form of social interaction among people for a common goal. Conflict thus, refers to the struggles, disputes, disagreements, fights, wars, quarrels, frustrations and structural imperfections existing within, between and among individuals and groups in any given society (Ezenwoko & Osagie, 2014). Conflict can be regarded as organisational behaviour that can be related to power and politics (Ahmed, 2012).

It is disagreements resulting from human interaction as a result of the individuals and groups perceive issues differently on account of individual differences and competition for allocation of resources of the society. According to Nweke (2012), "conflict is a behaviour intended to obstruct the achievement of some other person's goals." This means that, conflict is on the incompatibility of goals and arises from opposing behaviours. It can be viewed at the individual, group or organisational level. Conflicts exist whenever an action by one party was perceived as preventing or interfering with the goals, needs or actions of another party. Conflict can arise over a multiple of organisational experiences such as incompatible goals, differences in the interpretation of facts, negative feelings differences of values and philosophies or disputes over shared resources (Orji, & Olali, 2010). In recent time, peace seems to have eluded the country in spite of the concerted efforts of various security agencies to curtail the ugly situation. We have gotten to a situation where agitators that genuinely employed the strategy of civil disobedience as a means to press for their demands to progressed to militancy, with sophisticated military weapons and now on the

level of terrorism with weapons of mass destruction and having connections with international terrorist organisation (Abdulqadir, 2016).

The situation as even taken a new shape which manifested itself in self-determination as expressed in IPOB and Sunday Ighogho's recent Yoruba self-determination move. This is a clear pointer to the fact that, the Nigeria government need to explore other means to lay to rest the insecurity situation in the country. One of the potent areas that needs to be used is the traditional rulers. The traditional rulers are traditionally, the head of their respective ethnic group, clan or community. They hold the highest executive authority in such communities and got to the position in accordance with the people's culture, custom and traditions which could be hereditary or other means within the confines of the lay down rules and regulations. Their office and power has been recognised by the government through the presentation of "staff of office," which is seen as the symbol of power and authority. The traditional rulers having been recognised by the government as the leader of their people, has been playing a great role in the management of the people and their affairs, these traditional rulers are respected, hold in high esteem and awed by their subjects. Therefore, their role in keeping the peace cannot be over emphasised as they manage people in their domain and resolve conflicts in the society in order to ensure that, there is peace and stability in the community. They do this with the assistance of their traditional ruling council (Council of elders) such as the Oyo-mesi in Oyo Empire and Uzama Council in Benin Kingdom.

The Place of Traditional Rulers in Preserving Peace

African traditional rulers especially in Nigeria, as the leaders of the people and custodian of customs and traditions of their respective domains culture are highly respected, awed and revered by the people within and outside their domain. Many of these communities adopted constitutional monarchical arrangement as demonstrated by Old Oyo Empire in the forest region of Nigeria while others adopted absolute monarchical system of government as the case were ruled with absolute constitutional arrangement as practiced in the Sokoto Caliphate in the Savannah region of the country. Their words are laws to the people and their advice and opinions on issues are respected and accepted by their subjects. These traditional rulers naturally command respect because they are seen as intermediaries between their subjects and the gods and the ancestors, and as such, cannot be disobeyed or disrespected. Breach of any of the laws binding on the subjects attracts severe consequences. In most cases, some of the palaces of these traditional rulers serve as final courts of appeal within the limit of their jurisdictions. Some of the traditional rulers employed the ser-

vices of traditional means of conflict resolution and sought for enduring peace in their respective kingdoms (Ajayi, & Buhari, 2014).

As such, there is the need therefore, for the government to partner and collaborate with them to resolve National crisis and conflicts that could escalate to the level of terrorism in Nigeria. The terrorists and militants belonged to an ethnic group that has a king. They listen to the traditional rulers because of the respect they have for them. The government need to back and encourage the traditional rulers to talk to their people to shelve violence, just as the government did in the oil rich Niger Delta recently through the Pan-Niger Delta Forum (PANDEF) which persuaded the Niger Delta militants to shelve and suspend all actions of militancy in the region which led to the relative peace in the area. This created stability and boosted economic activities in the region and increased the wealth of the nation. The traditional rulers can reach the people involved in terrorism and militancy in Nigeria and call them for dialogue and negotiation. The people have the confidence of the traditional rulers and would always confide in them. The government should empower and encourage the traditional rulers to open up the channel of communication with the people, especially the aggrieved ones to know their grievances and demands. The government would not have the capacity to do so because the people might have lost confidence on them. Nigeria has traditionally had a large number of traditional authorities and rulers who have played an important role in community coherence and traditional justice systems, especially in the North, Niger Delta and Middle Belt of the country. During the colonial era, the positions of existing authorities were recognised, and new chiefs were created to harmonise the system. Although this system has persisted until the present day, the rise of alternative poles of power, in particular the local and state governments, has tended to undermine the powers of such individuals or councils (Awofisayo, Imoukhedeme & Fukpene, 2021).

It has been observed that in parts of Nigeria, because traditional rulers' long establishment and the respect in which they are held makes them more effective in conflict resolution than 'official' mechanisms. They are also able to take pre-emptive action through their familiarity with the different sections of the community, where the government has been observed to be reactive. Some traditional rulers work extremely hard with little official recognition of their efforts. Not all rulers have equal respect or equal authority. In much of the south (with a few important exceptions), their posts are little more than ceremonial. The Hausa Emirates in the north retain significant authority and influence, but the role of traditional leaders in that region is relatively well documented and understood (Abdulqadir, 2016). Like the conventional ways of peace-making and managing conflicts, there is strong evidence that traditional rulers in Nige-

ria, though of varied culture and base, still remain strikingly relevant. Thus, in Nigeria, like in many other West Africa or even African states, the police officially assumed the role of security maintenance and general law enforcement functions that, the indigenous security system performed in the pre-colonial era. However, the security maintenance and the law enforcement systems carried out by the police are incapable of satisfying the security and law enforcement needs of the country. This is in addition to several other factors such as official police corruption, and insufficient number of police officers and personnel. The culture, norms and values of the traditional rulers would not allow them to behave in the way and manner the men of the foreign imposed police system are behaving. So, the society sees more relevance in them in peacemaking and managing conflicts than the police. The influence and control gained by Nigerian traditional rulers is evidently connected with the value systems of most of the ethnic groups of the areas within which the traditional rulers are based. The Emirs, for example, inherited the qualitative life, diplomacy and depth of loyalty from the personalities that established the emirates under the Sokoto caliphate. The leadership values were manifested in the Emirs' justice, ease, kindness, humility, modesty, abstinence, moderation, integrity, honesty and service to community (Albert, 2012). The process values, however, were manifested in consultation, advice, consent, obedience and privacy.

In precolonial Igbo society also, the elders' council had values and norms that made them influential. The maintenance of law, order and conflict management devolved on community institutions, groups and members. For example, a young men's age grade might be charged with the responsibility of security maintenance and general law enforcement. Considering these accomplishments made possible by the value systems in the past, one would be correct to say that they can still serve as guides in the present bid for local initiatives in peacemaking, peace-building and managing conflicts (Abubakar, 2010). It must be noted that, most people had lost confidence on their political leaders as a result of corruption, under-development, insecurity and ineffective leadership, but still hold their traditional rulers in high esteem. This can be seen on the honour and respect accorded to traditional institutions and rulers across the continent of Africa. The traditional rulers can negotiate or initiate the process of negotiation for the government in order to achieve peace for sustainable development in Nigeria. Traditional rulers promote peace, foster cohesion and contribute to the political system of governance. The aim of Government is to ensure that the people, regardless of tribe or language live harmoniously in an area. This creates political stability that enhances socio-political and economic development of the country. It ensures the safety of the people and their properties in an area and also held to attract investors. When there are investors, the

economy of an area is stimulated; jobs are created, leading to employment and eradication of youth restiveness. It is a truism that employment is an anti-dote to crimes, militancy and violent agitations. The traditional rulers in ensuring peaceful co-existence in their domain ensure that the security of the area is guaranteed. This is a major factor in nation building and national security. No responsible government play with its security, because security is the basic factor in the existence and survival of the society and the nation in general. Therefore as the traditional rulers promote peaceful co-existence, peace and security in their domains, they are playing a major role in the promotion of national security which is a factor in national development. There is the need for the government to encourage the traditional rulers in this respect in order to ensure an enduring peace and harmony in the society (Ezenwoko, & Osagie, 2014).

The society is dynamic and continues to change from time to time and it need peace and security in all ramifications to sustain developmental projects and good governance. Traditional rulers still remain a potent and major force of stability in moments of change. They can serve as intermediaries to ensure that change occur in an orderly and familiar way. In ensuring this, they display an impressive flexibility, adapting to measures that will help meet the needs of the people in order to ensure that there is peace, stability, progress and development in their area or community. They lead their people to adapt to change by publicly accepting the change in spite of the consequences and challenges. The government, to maintain an effective leadership and good governance, comes up with policies that will ensure its realisation. However, in the recent times, people and communities do rise against such policies. It is the duty of the traditional rulers to help disseminate information on government policies and explain its purpose to the people. This has been the practice since the colonial era, but this, to a larger extent has been neglected by the political leaders in recent times. The government needed the traditional rulers not only to explain her policies to the people, but also, help in implementing such policies so as to avoid frictions and conflicts between the people and government leading to instability. It should be noted that, just as the British imperial authority could not do without the chiefs and traditional rulers during the colonial period in implementing her policies, so will Nigeria cannot do without them, as they are a major force in enhancing peace, stability, integration and socio-economic advancement (Nweke, 2012). These traditional rulers remain a great force in the communities and by extension among their neighbours in ensuring peace and unity of the people both in their communities and environs which includes their immediate neighbours. They mediate on conflicts and crisis that arises from time to time, ensuring that amicable resolution of the crises are achieved as soon as such conflicts comes up. In the resolution of conflicts, the traditional

rulers ensured that crises are well managed so that normal social system is restored. The traditional rulers, by virtue of their status, are seen as the intermediary between the people and the gods and their ancestors. In some areas their office is considered “divine and sacrosanct.” They are therefore held in high esteem as they remain objective on issues and in conflict management as they answer to the gods for their actions. It is in search for impartial arbitrators that the traditional rulers were looked up to, for the adjudication of cases and resolution of conflicts (Orji & Olali, 2010). The traditional rulers have done this in the 1998 crisis between the Arogo-Ijaw and Ilaje in Ondo state in which the Agadagba of Arogo-Ijaw kingdom led the Ijaw chiefs and other eminent elders to intervene in the crisis which eventually restored normalcy in the region. Conversely, peace loving traditional rulers in Ilaje land were also ready to embrace peace and this made it easier for the government of Ondo State to intervene in the crisis. It must be noted that, the concerted efforts of the government and traditional rulers of the two kingdoms led to total peace in the region. The traditional rulers have continually intervened in the Niger Delta crisis, trying to find a permanent solution to the militancy which continued to disrupt the nation’s economic activities especially the oil and gas sector (Ayoyo, 2015).

Similarly in the Northern part of Nigeria, the traditional rulers has been doing their best in the resolution of the Boko Haram crisis that has rears its ugly head especially in the North East. Again their efforts are also felt in the farmers/herders crisis in the northern parts of Nigeria. In the Eastern part of Nigeria, on the land crisis between Aguleri-Umuleri, efforts of the traditional rulers in resolving the crisis was timely as their efforts formed an important factors in restoring normalcy in the disputed areas. This manner of intervention usually takes the form of trying to establish a truce of an understanding on the need by an appeal not to continue in the part of conflict. However, though the efforts of the traditional rulers may not resolve the conflicts totally or permanently, they none-the-less remain potent in the resolution of the crisis. They may be palliative that help to bring about restrain on the part of parties involved in the crisis as they are made not to go violent or engage in acts that may hinder the peace process. In this regard, people are restrained from using weapons of any kind as one cannot spill the blood of his brother or kinsman. The traditional rulers in ensuring the unity of the people and their neighbours, continue to ensure that there is peace and stability not only in their domain but also in his immediate neighbour and by extension Nigeria in general. To achieve an enduring peace, the government need to assign constitutional roles to the traditional rulers to oversee the security of lives and property in their respective domains. This is in a bid to address the incessant communal clashes and killing in some part of the country. The traditional rulers as advisers to the government through the state

council of chiefs are partners in progress with the government. The advisory role played by the traditional rulers is very important in nation building as they are grass root leaders. They are nearer to the people as they live among them. Their advice on security matters cannot be over looked as they present to the government first-hand information on security issues. As a result of the respect the people have for the traditional rulers, they divulge sensitive security information to them because of the implicit confidence they have on them. The traditional rulers on their part transmit such information to the government for necessary action. The traditional rulers through the representative of the Traditional Council of Chiefs are members of the Security Council in their respective states. Through this body they their contribution on security matters. Such contributions have helped in the maintenance of public order and preservation of peace in Nigeria. In recognising the roles of the traditional rulers in the maintenance of security at the local government areas, the Federal Government in its guidelines for local government reforms, provides for the establishment of police committee at the local Government areas in which the traditional rulers are represented. A section of the guidelines as published by the government printer, Kaduna, stated that “the committee is required to hold regular meetings to consider and make recommendations on all matters concerning the police and preservation of peace in the area.” The traditional rulers in the maintenance of security in their areas has setup local vigilante which is made up of able bodied men and local hunters in the area. They are funded by the community and in some cases they are on voluntary mission (Oyedele, 2007).

These local vigilante, police the locality, checking criminality in the area, preventing acts of lawlessness that could lead to breach of peace and instability. They also provide information to the security agencies on security matters. Through these means, the traditional rulers compliment the efforts of the government and the security agencies in the maintenance of national security to ensure stability, which is a *sine qua non* to nation building. They therefore, need to be encouraged and empowered to continue in this regard for sustainable development in Nigeria. Traditional rulers are bridge builders that could be used by the government to cement the existing relationship among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. The amalgamation of 1914 could not undo the North-South dichotomy in the country, but the coming together of our traditional rulers, especially the first class traditional rulers in the geo-political zones, such as the Sultan of Sokoto, the Emir of Kano, the Oba of Lagos, Ooni of Ife, Alaafin of Oyo, Oba of Benin, Obi of Onitsha and a host of others can do the magic and undo the North-South dichotomy. Their personal relationships and coming together with a common voice on national issues will help to reduce tension, hatred and suspicion among the peoples of Nigeria. The voice and opinion of

the traditional rulers is highly respected by the people because of their position in the society. Their coming together and collaboration will help in stabilising the unity; peace and security of the nation as their words can either make or mar the nation. The collaboration and partnership of the traditional rulers will guarantee the safety of other ethnic groups in their domain. It makes the foreigners feel at home as the king is seen as the father of all. The collaboration of the traditional rulers can ginger and speed up development of an area. The traditional rulers as the motivator of supply, demand and distribution and the generator of traditional wisdom, collectively can call on the government to establish infrastructures and ventures that can generate employment. They can also call on their subjects to invest at home to create employment for the people. Those who contributed to the development of their community are honoured with chieftaincy titles. The efforts of the entrepreneurs and industrialists galvanised into action by the traditional rulers will bring about economic benefits in the area. With economic buoyancy which will led to employment benefits, crime and criminality including kidnappings, hostage taking, assassinations, armed robberies, endless strikes and political violence either do not exist or reduced to the barest minimum (Wadama, 2013).

Reasons Traditional Rulers Failed to Preserve Peace in Nigeria

The traditional rulers in the country play a pivotal role in ensuring peace and security. However, the role of the traditional rulers in this regard is being frustrated by a number of factors which includes but not limited to lack of adequate funding of the traditional institutions. The traditional rulers have no security vote or any allocation for security. This hinders their efforts to effectively mobilise the people for action on security related issues. To worsen the already complicated situation, in most cases, the local vigilante they established for the maintenance of law and order in their respective domains is not remunerated or poorly paid. This limited the powers of the traditional rulers (Alagoa, 2001).

In the 1999 Constitution, there is no definite constitutional role for the traditional rulers in the country (Federal Republic of Nigeria, n.d) One of the fundamental questions to be answered is that, how do traditional rulers and their institutions operate without a constitutional backup for their actions? A thorough scrutiny of the Nigerian constitution since 1979 clearly shows that traditional authority has not been recognised therein. It is a known fact that, even if the state council of chiefs/traditional rulers is in the constitution, it's membership is prescribed by the state House of Assembly without a constitutional role and such council is supposed to act in advisory capacity to the state government, whenever requested to do so. In such situation, the government may accept or reject their advice (Abdulqadir, 2016).

The power of the traditional rulers in conflict resolution has seriously been undermined both in terms of authority and power. There is no constitutional provision for the enforcement of the resolution reached in arbitration. Since they have to operate in a context where their authority is limited by Federal, State and even Local Government authorities. Without the means of enforcing the decisions reached in the arbitration, the parties in conflicts may refuse to abide by the terms reached (Igwubor, 2000). Trailing behind the limited power and authority is the emergence of public court which undermined and curtailed the powers of the traditional rulers. These courts destroyed the use of our traditional conflict resolution mechanism because they encourage people to bypass traditional courts to go regular courts. In some cases, the traditional rulers neglect their primary role as conflict managers especially at the grass root level. Their inability to intervene at the earlier stage of crisis has led to the escalation of such crisis leading to a serious instability, chaos and huge damage to lives, properties and economic activities of their domain and the country at large (Alagoa, 2001).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Traditional rulers have put in place several mechanisms in peace building which have assisted in maintaining law and order in their respective domains. The roles of traditional rulers in conflict resolution includes reconciling and integrating both parties in conflicts, maintaining law and order in the communities, promoting the use of informal settlements, checks and balances in the society, managing improper communication and interaction breakdowns among their subjects, fostering communal solidarity and unity, engendering peaceful co-existence of people of different religious, ethnic and social background, dealing with pressures from external forces outside the community that results in breeding internal pressures as well as facilitating socio-cultural bridge reconstructions in post-conflict situation.

From the foregoing, it is therefore recommended that, traditional rulers should be encouraged to mediate in conflicts in society and should be educated and enlightened in modern and alternative dispute resolution that will enable them to facilitate and enhance resolution of conflict in the society. All traditional rulers should be mandated to resolve conflicts regardless of differences in age and marital status. It is equally important that, for the traditional rulers to play peace-building role effectively, there should be security allocation for the traditional institutions which will enable the institutions to mobilise the people for the maintenance of security. The government should give the traditional institutions constitutional recognition and backing for their actions. This will enable the decisions reached in arbitrations by traditional rulers imple-

mented by parties in conflicts. The traditional rulers should be partnered by the government and security agencies to obtain information on security matters in an area. Such information should be treated with uttermost secrecy and with dispatch. The traditional rulers should be allowed and encouraged to establish Security Council or committee in their domain with the collaboration with security agencies. Their area of focus can be set out by the government. When this is done, security issues in the country will be better handled both by the government and the traditional rulers who are at the grassroots level as the government cannot handle security alone as events of the recent time has shown.

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