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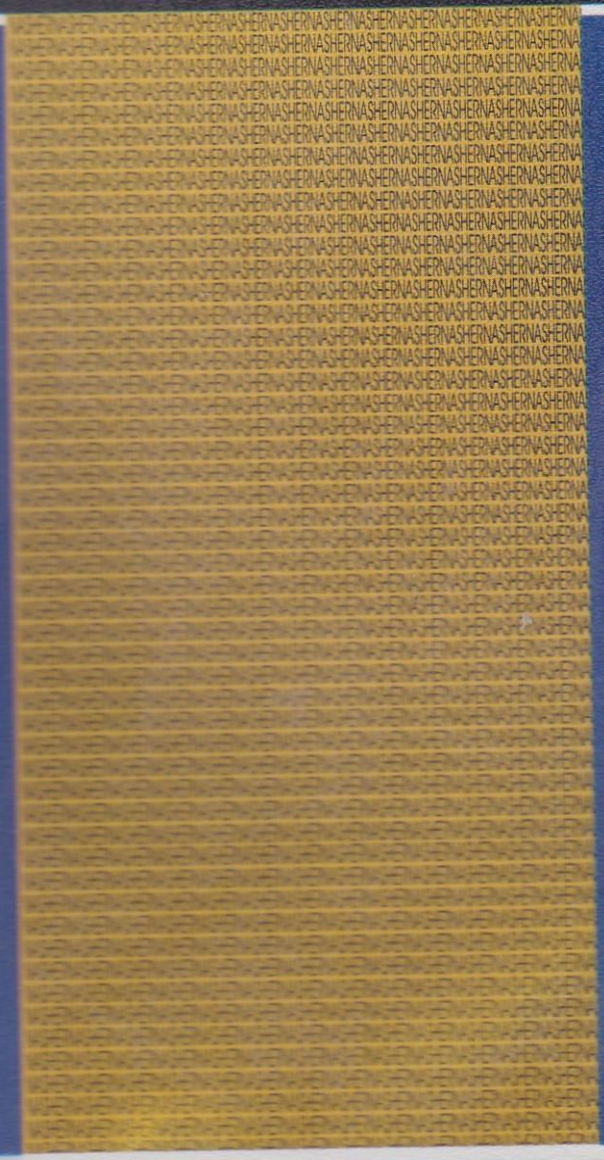

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The Role of Traditional Rulers in the Prevention and Management of Conflicts in Nigeria

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Abstract

One of the major problems facing Nigeria is incessant conflicts, which constitutes a threat not only to the corporate existence of the country but also a hindrance to development. In recent times, conflicts have not only taken a new dimension but has alsobecome rampant. Most of the conflicts which the country has witnseed were violent in nature and have so many lives. Also, properties worthvery large sums of money have been destroyed while many people were displaced. Consequently, the problem of conflicts has become a major concern not only to the government but also to the entire people of Nigeria. This paper therefore, examines the problem of conflicts in Nigeria with a view to identifying the roles of traditional rulers in preventing and managing them. In Nigeria, traditional rulers occupy a high socio-economic status and they are respected as such. It is recommended that the government should seek for the cooperation and determination of traditional rulers in conflicts prevention and management.

Introduction

Conflict has become one of the major social problems facing contemporary human societies be it developed or underdeveloped; as it is globally rampant. In some societiesdue to the existence of quality mechanisms for conflict prevention and management, there exists relative peace. But in others, conflicts have degenerated into serious menace because of the inability to effectively preventin and manage them.

The issue therefore, is not the existence of conflict rather the nature of the prevention and management strategies adopted by the society. Conflict cannot be absolutely avoided in anu human society. This is because wherever human beings are found living an organized way of life, there is bound to be competition, agitation and rivalry.

In Nigeria, the occurrence of conflicts has been worrisome. This is because since her independence in 1960, the country has witnessed several conflicts the consequences of which hae been devastating. The most pathetic among the consequencies are loss of lives and properties as well as the negative impact they have on development. There is therefore, a great concern on how to evolve effective means of preventing and managing conflicts in the country. The traditional rulers are usually used by the government in reaching the people and maintaining peace in different parts of the country. However, the constitution does not recognizes them as no specific roles are given to them in it. This paper therefore, examines the role of traditional rulers in conflicts prevention and management in Nigeria. It lays emphasis on communal conflicts.

Why and nature of conflicts in Nigeria

It is indeed no gainsaying that as long as the plural nature of Nigeria is not adequately considered and/or addressed in both the constitution and actual governance, conflicts shall be on the increase. That is, the culturally difersified nature of the country's constitution parts should not be jettisoned or wish away. It is necessary at this juncture, to take a closer look at this plural nature of Nigeria and its propelling influence on conflicts in the country. The first step is to understand the concept of pluralism. Wehmin, Mclntish, Turnbul and Ashby(2010) defined pluralism as "the existence of many different groups of people in one society –people of different races or different political or religious beliefs". Thus, Alubo (2008 p.1) observed:Nigeria's plural composition of over 370 ethnic groups is well known. Less recognized are the challenges this diverse composition poses to national integration, a sense of belonging and participation in decision-making.

From the above, it is obvious that nigeriais aplural society. Nigeria is made up of many distinct societies and cultures each with a peculiar history (Oluwabamide, 2007) . that is. Nigeria is culturallydiverse. Yet, the plurality of the country often makes it difficult for the ethnic groups to take common decisions. Consequently, conflict is rife most especially because individuals identify with and pay allegiance first and foremost to their ethnic groups.

Nigeria's plurality dates back to its inception as a country in 1914.the country is multi-cultural and by implications, it is a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic society. There are over 400 languages (Crozierand Blench, cited in Oluwabamide, 2007). Similarly, there are many ethnic groups in the country. Each ethnic group has her peculiar culture. The country is made up of three major ethnic groups and many other minority ethnic groups. The major ethnic groups are Ibo. Hausa, and Yoruba, while the minority ethnic groups include: Urhobo, Edo, Ibibio. Efik. Tiv. Igala, Ogoni, Ijaw, Nupe, Fulani, Kanuri, Gwari, etc. The colonialists identified 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Prior to the advent of the European colonialists, there existed many culturally distinct societies occupying the territory now know as Nigeria. The colonialists thereafter brought them together to form the country Nigeria. Thus, a culturally heterogenous country was created.

The cultural (or ethnic) plurality which was institutionalized into a nation state (Nigeria) in 1914 subsequently gave birth to conflicts. It has, since then made the country too cumbersome for respective governments (colonial, post-independence) to govern. Conflicts became rampant and increased greatly after independence. During military regimes force was used to manage them. But in civilian regimes conflicts often increased probably because the civilian governments use less force.

Plurality has made Nigeria a complex state. According to Otite (1999), Nigeria is a very complex country with the behaviour and relationship of individuals and groups determined by the imperatives of cultural symbols and strategic social institutions. Conflicts, which abound in the country are mostly derived from the divergent nature of the peoples of Nigeria.

Apart from cultural plurality, the heterogeneous nature of religion in Nigeria is also a factor which if properly handled; it would help reduce the incidence of conflict in the country. The issue of religious tolerance should be considered always, when planning for development or formulating policies. This is because issues bordening on religion are regarded as sensitive because conflicts can easily emanate from them if care is not taken. Consequently, the government is expected to consider the country's secular nature when taking decisions or formulating policies for the.

In Nigeria, religion differes from one culture to another. That is, the belief system of one society is structurally different from the other. Thus, at independence, there were as many religions as were ethnic groups. However, the number has increased today not only because of the expansion and networking of the two prominent foreign religions – Islam and Christianity – but also due to the introduction of many other unpopular foreign religions such as Eckankar, Grail Message, Hari Krishna, Amorc, etc.

Prior to the advent of any form of contact with the Arabs and the Europeans, the various societies in Nigeria were predominantly practitioners of traditional religion (Oluwabamide, 2007). By the time the two major foreign religions – Islam and Christianity – were introduced so many people (Nigerians) embraced them. Both are spreading very fast today. They influence the entire nation today.

The introduction and spread of the two main foreign religions has transformed the country into a secular state. These, together with other religions earlier mentioned, have made Nigeria a religiously heterogeneous country. Consequently, having realized that one of the sensitive issues that could tear the country apart was religion, at independence, nigeria's constitution makers entrenched the clause that Nigeria has no state religion in the constitution. This was also entrenched in all the subsequent constitutions.

Nigeria has witnessed quite a number of conflicts within its forty –nine years of existence as a nation state. These conflicts which range from domestic to international have created some negative impact on nation building and development. While the international conflicts are not common, the domestic ones are widespread. and domestic conflicts in Nigeria are communal conflicts.

Nnoli (2003) in Oluwabamide (2006) desribes communal conflicts as those in which the participants are communal groups. That is, any conflicts, which involves two groups each of its members share some common cultural traits. What is a communal group? Still, Nnoli describes a communal group as one in which primary identity prevails. In such a group membership is not attained but ascribed. In such agroup, the individual does not view himself as an individual but as a member of a group sharing certain things in common. The group determines the individual's involvement in life. He noted further that communal groups include the family, ethnic group, religious group and regional group. Such a group shares a common cultural history. The group upholds the principle of collectivity rather than individualism.

Ibeanu cited in Oluwabamide (2006) observes that communal groups may be defined on the basis of varying attributes, including ethnicity, religion, language and region of origin, race or historical experience. He notes that mobilization is very crucial in the creation of communal groups. This, according to him, is because it is only through mobilization that communal traits are transformed into communal feeling. It should be note however, that just as mobilization is crucial to the creation of communal groups, it is also crucial in the genesis of communal conflicts. Thus, Ibeanu (2003 p.59) observed: Many grievances do exist at both individual and family level, but it is the mobilizationof these grievances into a pan-communal grievance against other groups or the state that holds the key to communal conflicts.

Members of any communal group can easily mobilize themselves in order to express a common grievance. For example if any or few members of a communal group perceive unequal treatment of their group by the wider society and/or the state, they can easily mobilize majority if not all the members of the communal group against the unequal treatment, thus a conflict situation has arisen.

Ibeanu (2003) has identified three categories of communal conflicts in Nigeria. These are resource-based. identity-based and participation-based. Resources-based conflicts are end to be rampant in the Nigerian countryside. Development in Nigeria depends on resources which are mostly located in the countryside. hence, the country's economic growth centres around large scale agriculture and oil exploration in the rural areas. As a result of this, a number of rural people have been displaced from their lands. Oil exploration in the Niger Delta for example, has brought an untold hardship to the rural people of the are who were displaced (Akpan and Oluwabamide, 2008). Also, the people's health was impaired through environmental degradation. The consequences were the unprecedented rise in violent conflicts in many areas (especially the Niger Delta Region).

The second category of communal conflicts in Nigeria is what Ibeanu calls identity-based conflict. According to him, identity-based conflicts are those that emanate from contradictions of religious, ethnic and other communal identifies.

This category of conflicts is rampant in the northern part of Nigeria. Over there, there are large number of conflicts involving both religions and ethnicity. Identity-based conflicts are always among members of the same ethnic group living in the same state. For example, there have been conflicts such as between Achina and Nkpo, Adazi-Nnukwu and Ni, Amawbia and Awka and Aguleri and Umuleri in Anambra State (Ibeanu, 2003). Ibeanu remarked, that the ethnic identity of the communities is conflicts and whether or not they belong to the same administrative entities tend to affect the seriousness of the conflicts.

In Northern Nigeria, there has been intermittent conflict between the majority Hausa-Fulani and the minority ethno-religious people with whom the Hausa-Fulani cohabit. Thus, in the

Northern Nigeria, there is quite an array of ethnic and religious conflicts all of which are identity-based conflicts.

With regards to participation-based conflicts, Ibeanue notes that conflicts in this category have arisen from the process of state building. The structuring and restructuring of governments in Nigeria have resulted in a number of conflicts. Conflicts have arisen from the long-standing tension between federalism and militarism, centralization and decentralization, and democratization and totalitarianism. In this category are communal conflicts relating to partisan politics and politicking, creation of constituent units such as states and local government areas.

Consequences of Conflicts on Development

It is no gainsaying that conflicts often create very negative impacts, which are in most cases, devastating to the society and its stability (Oluwabamide, 2001). Usually, conflicts drive back the wheel of progress and development on how serious a conflict is and how effective and strategy for managing it is. The consequences of conflict in Nigeria have been very enormous.

Firstly, loss of lives. In virtually all the conflicts that have occurred in Nigeria, lives were lost. But the number of lives lost depends on the magnitude of each conflict. Though claims by warring communal groups may not be reliable, but it is essential to note that lives were often lost in communal conflicts. For example, in the Zango-Kataf conflict, the Kataf suffered considerable damages in terms of loss of lives. But according to Egwu, Salhi and Kure (2003), no one has been able to give the exact numbers of deaths. Because the two communities involved made claims and counter-claims, it became difficult to ascertain the number of loss suffered by individuals and groups. For example, the Cudjoe Commission reported that the Hausa Community lost 95 lives in the February 1992 violence and 96 claimed by the people. However, they lost a total of 1565 lives in the May 1992 carnage. This figure was given by the Reconciliation Committee of 1995. The lives lost in the Nigeria Civil War (1967-1970) were too many to mention. In fact, hundreds of thousands of lives were lost in that war especially among the people of the Eastern Nigeria. Similarly, many lives have been lost in the Sharia conflicts though not as many as the lives lost in the civil war. It should be noted however, that women and children were mostly killed in virtually all the conflicts.

Secondly, loss of property: The loss of property is a common consequence of conflicts. In Nigeria, (a country that is still struggling to develop). Property worth with several billions of Dollars have been lost to conflicts over the years. This is because, as earlier mentioned, the country has witnessed many communal conflicts during her fifty years of Independence. In most of the conflicts, houses were burnt, public utilities were either burnt or looted. The value of property destroyed during the Nigerian Civil war, could not be quantified, as it was quite enormous. In the life-Modakeke conflict, several houses and other properties whose monetary value could not be precisely ascertained were destroyed. Thirdly, population displacement: usually, to avoid being killed during violence, people leave their homes and seek for refuge elsewhere. Some would seek refuge in neighbouring communities within the same state or in other states. Still others would seek for refuge outside the country.

Communal conflicts have made many Nigerians to abandon their ancestral homes to seek for refuge elsewhere within the country. These displaced persons faced a great deal of difficulties especially while leaving their homes because of violence. They often left in a hurry and were therefore, uncoordinated. While rushing out of the war zone, these displaced persons often left behind most of their conveniences and valuable which could not be taken along because of the emergency nature of their departure.

During conflict situations, some children and women got missing. To carry the weak and able persons along often became very difficult. In some cases, displaced persons didn't even know their destinations. This was in most cases determined by how far the violence had spread. In the process of fleeing, many people risked violence from terrorist, enemy bombs and landmines, bandits, thieves and wild animals (Nnolin, 2003). Also, women risked being raped

similarly, children might be orphaned abducted, abandoned or accidentally separated from their parents during the emergency trip.

It is pertinent to note however, that in virtually all the violent conflicts which Nigeria has witnessed, people were displaced. These displaced people suffered from most of the problems just discussed and other displacement related problems. Even at their destinations internally displaced persons faced such problems as lack of protection especially from physical attacks and rape, etc.

The Role of Traditional Rulers

Through the years, the concern of government and the entire people of Nigeria has been o evolve laudable strategies for preventing and managing communal conflicts in the country. This is because the magnitude of losses from conflicts has been worrisome.

Who are traditional rulers? Traditional rulers in various Nigerian communities whose authority and functionality are derived from and prescribed by culture and tradition (Oluwabamimde, 2007). Their positions as rulers were established in the ancient times hence, they are regarded not only as political rulers but also as the custodian of culture. They are therefore, embodiment of the ancient and long-standing political institutions in Nigeria.

The term traditional presupposes something ancient, old and long-standing with relatively unchanging properties (Awofeso, 2006). Traditional rulers are embodiment of indigenous political institutions in Nigeria. He describes a number of views on who traditional rulers are, in the following words:

> One traditional chief from Biase Local Government of Cross River State in Nigeria, referred to traditional institution as "the home-made governance established from time immemorial (which) embraces the setting up of hierarchical power at the helm of affairs referred to as Oba, King, Obong, Eze or Onun". Orewa on the other hand, referred to traditional rulers as the "Emir, Oba, Obi or a paramount chief who, before the advent of colonial government in Nigeria had complete sovereignty over his territory and was not subject to any other higher authority within or outside his domain P. 161.

The above gives an insight into who traditional rulers are at least in the Nigerian context. However, it should be noted that, that the contemporary Nigeria society practices "modern" form of government which in the formal sense, does not share definite powers and constitutional functions to traditional rulers. Be that as it may, the actual success in governance still depends a great deal, on traditional rulers who enjoy natural allegiance and absolute respect from members of their various communities. They are therefore, strategically privileged to determine whether government's decision work or not at the grassroots.

Being the custodian of culture and also in full grip of the grassroots, traditional rulers have a great role to play not only in rural development but also in preventing usual hindrances to development such as conflicts.

1. Traditional rulers have important role to play in preventing and managing religious conflicts in Nigeria. In the Northern part of the country where many religious conflicts have been recorded, the traditional rulers who are considered key figures in their religions can by virtue of their positions, get reliable information on any emerging conflict before it becomes serious. Prominent religious and community leaders and youth's leaders often visit the traditional ruler's palace and always inform him on any situation that can lead to religious crises. The traditional ruler can quickly call leaders of various religious groups into his palace and reconcile them before any conflict can ensure that can lead to violence. If need be, he could inform security agents just to keep vigilance while he is making efforts to reconcile the groups concerned.
2. Traditional rulers are very adjudicators in conflicts involving two communities. Communal conflicts involving two communities have always been difficult to handle

except the traditional institutions show commitment to putting an end to them. In a region where there are many traditional rulers whose communities belong to the same tribe, it is often the determination of such rulers that can end crises. Take for instance, among the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria, any conflict between two communities would require efforts of traditional rulers in the entire Yoruba areas to create dialogue between the traditional rulers of the two communities concerned. Such dialogue would definitely end the crises. Furthermore, good relations among traditional rulers can help to prevent inter-community conflicts. In the case of conflict between two culturally difficult communities e.g. a Yoruba community and an Ijaw community, traditional rulers from the two cultural or ethnic groups and others can still make efforts to reconcile the communities involved in the conflict.

3. The traditional rulers are also very relevant and significant in preventing and managing resources-based conflict. Most of the resource-based conflicts in Nigeria were mainly the result of misunderstanding over resources located in the rural areas where most traditional rulers govern, reside and are very influential. Preventing and managing those conflicts therefore, requires mostly the determination and cooperation of traditional rulers. In the case of the Niger Delta conflicts which emanated mainly from the issue of oil revenue and how it is used for the development of the producing communities, the determination, cooperation and sincerity of traditional rulers can maintain peace and stability in the area. Youths who are often on rampage in the area often sponsored by some people who are ready to yield to any request for peace by their traditional rulers. The traditional rulers know these people but may not be reveal them in their activities due to the fact that what they are fighting for are of general to the entire community.
4. Traditional rulers are also helpful in preventing and managing conflict which are participation-based. These are conflicts which are as a result of competition over political positions. Since most elective positions are sourced for via the grassroots, traditional rulers who are practically in cotrnol of the people at the grassrootrs can influence their conducts during elections. They can always call their subjects seeking electrive positions to order to prevent violent conflicts. Where there is conflict, the traditional rulers are also in a better position to reconcile the parties in conflict.
5. Traditional rulers are empowered by customs to invoke supernatural powers to intervene in situations of persistent violent and reconcile their subjects who are involved. They posses the authority to invite traditional priests to invoke the wrath of supernatural forces on people behind any complex conflict. The intervention of the supernatural forces could paralyzed the activities of the parties to any protracted conflict who are adamant to any move for peace. In the normal situation the fear of the supernatural powers could make parties to any conflict to quickly have a rethink.
6. It has been observed that the most effective approach to conflict management is dialogue (Ekpa, 2006; Oluwabamide, 2011). Traditional rulers play a very important role in any move for peace involving dialogue. This is because dialogue is an inherent part of the African culture which is often adopted when there are conflicts. Traditional rulers dialogue to settle cases in their various domains. In fact, the traditional institution which the traditional rulers represent provides the most organized setting for dialoguing in resolving cises and conflicts.

Appraisal of Government's Recognition of the Roles of Tradtional Rulers

In virtually all the conflicts that Nigeria has witnessed, reconcillatory moves were often made by government after every violent conflict. Oftentimes, the government sets up commission of inquiry to investigate the causes of every conflict and advice appropriately on how to prevent future reoccurrence. Usually, traditional rulers are required to give evidence before such Commission when necessary. At other times, the government involved the parties to any conflict

in dialogue to reconcile them. In such cases, traditional rulers, charismatic leaders of communal groups are involved in organized talk between warring groups for the purpose of reconciliation. It is obsvious that traditional rulers are involved but not so much as allowing them to actually handle such dialogues.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Incessant conflicts have become one of the factors hindering development in resources. This is becaue each time it takes a violent dimension both human and material resources are lost and large numbers of people are displaced. Usually, after every violent conflict, government spends so much of money on reconcillation, rehabilitation and reconstruction processes. This is indeed inimical to development as the resources that would have been used for development are being used in managing the consequences of conflict.

In Nigeria the consequences of conflicts have so enormous that frantic efforts should be made to source for good suggestions and recommendations on how to prevent and manage communal conflicts in the country. Manamging the consequences of conflicts should therefore, become a major concern of the government. From the discussion so far in this paper, it is obvious that traditional rulers have very important roles to play in conflict prevention and management.

Government should therefore seek for the cooperation and determination of traditional rulers in conflict prevention and management. If the government actually shows some commitment, traditional rulers can be society's viable tool for conflict prevention and management. Government should engage them in conflict prevention and management but allow them to choose how to go about it. They should be made to see themselves as a major partner with government in her effort at conflict prevention and management. Furthermore, the government should initiate and encourage a collaboration between traditional rulers and religious leaders in conflict prevention and management.

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