CHALLENGES OF TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONSS IN COFLICT RESOLUTION: A STUDY OF EBIRALAND

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Abstract

This study examined the challenges of traditional rulers in conflict resolution in Ebiraland. Traditional rulers have historically played important roles in conflict resolution and maintaining peace in Nigerian societies. Despite their relevance, the continueddecline in the influence of the traditional institutions in Ebiraland raises questionsabout their continuedability to resolve conflict among the people. The study aimed to identify and examine the challenges confronting Ebira traditional institutions in conflict resolution. The study was anchored on the Conflict Management Theory and it adopted a qualitative research design. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through interviews with traditional rulers, community leaders, academics, journalists, historians, and members of the community, while secondary data were sourced from textbooks, journal articles, and other relevant materials. The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings from the study revealed that traditional rulers contribute significantly to mediation, reconciliation, and maintenance of social harmony in Ebiraland. However, the study also found that political interference, declining respect for traditional authority, constitutional limitations, and religious divisions were the major challenges affecting their effectiveness in conflict resolution. The study concluded that despite these challenges, traditional rulers remain relevant in grassroots peacebuilding and communal development. The study also supports previous studies that found that traditional institutions face challenges in their quest to resolve conflict. The study recommended greater government support, constitutional recognition, and stronger collaboration between traditional institutions and security agencies to enhance conflict resolution and sustainable peace in Ebiraland.

Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human society. The existence of limited resources and the need for these resources by different people for diverse reasons and uses have created a situation inwhichintense competition exist. This has given room for misunderstandings, chaos,

violence and fights amongthe parties involved. Arising from the differences in interests, values, beliefs, and competition over resources, a lot is put at stake and the peace of the human raceisjeopardised The absence of peace has led to the loss of lives properties and the destruction of valuable infrastructure, a situation that threatens the development of every society (Nweke, 2019). The existence of conflict in its various forms and its resultant effects creates undesirable impacts.Hence, Ahmadu and Ayuba (2020) opined that the resolution of conflict and peacebuilding efforts should be taken with utmost importance to prevent the escalation of conflict which has been described inevitable by several studies (see Nweke, 2019, Asuku, (2021) and Sani & Olaniyi, 2023).

In many African societies, before the emergence of modern governmental institutions, traditional rulers played significant roles in maintaining peace, settling disputes, and preserving social harmony within their communities. Particularly, traditional institutions in Nigeria have continued to serve as custodians of culture, mediators in communal disputes, and symbols of unity despite the increasing influence of modern political and judicial systems. Their closeness to the people, understanding of local customs, as well as moral authority often place them in a strategic position to manage conflicts effectively at the grassroots level.

A good example of the importance of traditional institutions in conflict resolution at the grassroot is the case of Ebiraland in the present day Kogi State, Nigeria. Hussein (2006) noted that traditional rulers in Ebiraland have contributed to grassroot conflict resolution. The Ebira traditional institution, headed by the Ohinoyi of Ebiraland and supported by other traditional institutions such as the Ohi, the Ohindase among several others have long served as important channels through which the traditional court of the Ebira people resolved conflict. Conflicts relating to land, chieftaincy, family disagreements, political tensions, and communal violence have been effectively resolved by traditional courts heads by the Ohinoyi and other traditional institutions in Ebiraland (Husseini, 2006). These successes have been achieved through the use of indigenous methods such as dialogue, reconciliation, oath-taking, and community consultation.

However, despite their relevance, traditional rulers in Ebiraland face numerous challenges in carrying out their conflict resolution responsibilities effectively (Garba, et al., 2018). Factors such as the rise in partisan politics, declining respect for traditional authority, youth restiveness, modernization, government interference among others have weakened the powers and influence of traditional institutions. In some cases, conflicts involving political interests and armed groups have surpassed the capacity of traditional rulers to control.Furthermore, the rise of unemployment, poverty, social inequality, and the proliferation of small arms have contributed to recurring tensions and violence within parts of Ebiraland. The emergence of modern courts and security agencies has also created overlapping responsibilities, sometimes leading to conflicts between traditional and state mechanisms of conflict management (Sani, 2009). These developments raise important questions regarding the relevance, effectiveness, and challenges of traditional rulers in contemporary conflict resolution processes. This study extended the previous studies of scholars such as a Nweke (2019), Orji (20022), Garba et al (2018) among others who examined the place of traditional institutions in conflict resolution by considering the challenges these traditional institutions face in their quest to resolve conflict

with a particular focus on Ebiraland in kogi State, Nigeria

Statement of the Research Problem.

The continues fall in the influence of the traditional institutions in Ebiraland raises the big question on their continuous ability to resolve conflict among the people as the days go by. Traditional institutions have been recorgnised as institutions that have helped in the resolution of conflict especially at the grassroot level. However, these institutions are fast losing their relevance due to a number of factors such as the introduction of modern structures law courts, absence of legal backings when they declare judgments among others. Despite the efforts of the Kogi State government to improve their authority through the continuous recognitions given to them such as the staff of office they are officially given by the state government, their influence has continued to dwindle. This raises concern as his new development might affect their conflict resolution influence in future. Studies have considered the roles of conflict resolution in divers parts of Nigeria but there is little contribution on the challenges facing the traditional institutions of Ebiraland in conflict resolution creating a gap in literature. This study filled this gap by examining the challenges confronting traditional institutions in Ebiraland as it relates to conflict resolution. The study's objectives were:

i. To examine the challenges facing traditional institutions in conflict resolution in Ebiraland

ii. To profer solutions to these challenges

Literature Review.

Conceptual Review

Traditional institutions

Indigenous systems of governance and social structures built on custom and traditions are traditional institutions. Heads of these institutions serve as the custodian of culture, values and communal norms. Eke (1975) stated that these institutions make up an important part of the Africa Society and Mamdani (1996) argued that traditional authorities remain significant actors in local governance and administration. Boahen (1987) noted that traditional institutions are instrumental in the preservation of cultural heritage, promoting social order, and resolving disputes within communities. Ikime (1980) maintained that traditional institutions continue to serve as intermediaries between the government and the people, particularly in matters of community development and conflict resolution. Therefore, traditional institutions can be understood as customary leadership structures that exercise social, cultural, and political influence within communities which contributes to governance, peacebuilding, and the preservation of indigenous values.

Conflict

Conflict defines a situation in which there exist a clash of interests. It is described by many scholars as a natural and inevitable aspect of human interaction. Coser (1956) defined conflict as a struggle over values, status, power, and scarce resources in which the objectives of opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals. Similarly, Boulding (1962) views conflict as a situation of competition in which parties are aware of the incompatibility of their future positions and seek to occupy mutually

exclusive positions. Buttressing these arguments, Burton (1990) argued that conflict often emerges when fundamental human needs are denied or threatened. While conflict is frequently associated with violence and instability, it can also serve as a catalyst for social change and development when properly managed (Coser, 1956). In this study, conflict refers to disagreements, disputes, or struggles between individuals or groups arising from incompatible interests that threatens peaceful coexistence within a community.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution refers to the process of addressing disputes through peaceful means in a manner that satisfies the interests of the parties involved. It involves the use of dialogue, negotiation, mediation, arbitration, reconciliation, and other non-violent mechanisms to resolve differences and restore harmonious relationships. According to Burton (1990), conflict resolution seeks to identify and address the root causes of conflict rather than merely managing its symptoms. Buttressing Burton (1990) Moore (2014) views conflict resolution as a structured process through which disputing parties reach mutually acceptable solutions. Galtung (1996) also argued that effective conflict resolution has the tendency promote sustainable peace through the transformation of hostile relationships into cooperative ones. In many African societies, traditional institutions play a significant role in conflict resolution (Nweke, 2019). In this study, conflict resolution refers to the peaceful methods and mechanisms employed to settle disputes, reconcile opposing parties, and maintain stability and social cohesion within a community.

Empirical Review

Abdulsalam et al. (2020) made a significant contribution by demonstrating the importance of traditional rulers in the resolution of conflict in Nigeria. The study further highlighted major challenges such as political interference, lack of constitutional recognition, and inadequate funding. However, the study focused broadly on the roles of traditional rulers across Nigeria without examining how these challenges specifically affect particular traditional institutions. Moreover, the study did not provide an in-depth analysis of the experiences of traditional rulers in specific cultural settings such as Ebiraland. This creates a gap which the present study filled through the investigation of the challenges confronting Ebira traditional institutions in their quest to resolve conflict with their sociocultural setting.

Orji (2022) equally provided valuable insights into the the subject matter but with a direct focus on South Eastern Nigeria. The study concentrated on issues around land and communal disputes. Orji (2022) established that the proximity of traditional rulers to the people enhances trust and acceptance of their decisions. However, the geographical focus of the study limits the generalizability of its findings to other regions of Nigeria. In addition, Orji (2022) concentrated more on the roles of traditional rulers than on the challenges affecting their effectiveness. Therefore, the present study extended the discussion by focusing specifically on the challenges facing Ebira traditional institutions in conflict resolution.

Nweke (2019) examined the role of traditional institutions in managing conflicts with a focus on Niger Delta region Nweke (2019) found that these institutions contributed significantly to peacebuilding in the region. Nweke (2019) highlighted the interaction

between traditional institutions, government agencies, and militant groups. Nevertheless, its focus on oil-producing communities presents a context that differs considerably from the socio-cultural realities of Ebiraland. Furthermore, Nweke (2019) did not sufficiently explore the internal institutional challenges confronting traditional rulers. The present study addressed this gap by examining the challenges experienced by Ebira traditional institutions in conflict management.

Wilfred (2015) examined the role of traditional rulers in the rehabilitation of ex-convicts in Nigeria. Wilfred (2015) found that traditional institutions promoted social reintegration, and community acceptance. Wired (2015) demonstrated the capacity of traditional rulers to foster social harmony and reduce tensions arising from social exclusion. However, the study focused primarily on rehabilitation and reintegration rather than conflict resolution. Consequently, it provided limited insight into the challenges traditional institutions face in managing communal disputes and conflicts. The present study addressed this gap by specifically examining the challenges confronting Ebira traditional institutions in conflict resolution.

Garba et al. (2018) examined the contribution of traditional institutions to national integration and sustainable development in Nigeria. The study found that traditional rulers promote communal values, social justice, and peaceful coexistence while serving as intermediaries between government and local communities. Although the study provides valuable insights into the developmental roles of traditional institutions, its primary focus was national integration rather than conflict resolution. Furthermore, the study did not investigate how challenges such as ethnic politics and declining respect for traditional authority affect conflict management efforts. The present study extends the discussion by focusing specifically on the challenges facing Ebira traditional institutions in resolving conflicts.

Mowo et al. (2013) explored the importance of traditional institutions in managing natural resources in East Africa and found that customary laws and indigenous governance systems were effective in preventing conflicts over land and water resources. The study is valuable because it demonstrates the effectiveness of indigenous institutions in conflict prevention. However, the study was conducted outside Nigeria and within the context of natural resource management. Therefore, its findings may not be directly applicable to the Nigerian environment, particularly Ebiraland. The present study seeks to provide a more localized understanding of the challenges confronting traditional institutions in conflict resolution.

Gobattoni et al. (2015) Concentrated on Central Italy and examined the role of traditional activities and institutions in promoting sustainable rural development. Gobattoni et al (2015) found that traditional community structures enhanced social cohesion and reduced conflicts through collective participation and local governance mechanisms. While the study highlights the significance of traditional institutions in maintaining social stability, it was conducted in a European setting with socio-cultural realities different from those of Nigeria. Moreover, conflict resolution was not the central focus of the study. Consequently, there is a need for research that specifically investigates traditional institutions within the Nigerian context, particularly the Ebira traditional institution.

Olawoyin (2023) investigated the traditional administrative system and community development in Nigeria. Olawoyin (2023) just

like Gobattoni et al. (2015) found that traditional rulers contributed significantly to conflict resolution, and peaceful coexistence. Olawoyin (2023) also identified the erosion of traditional values, lack of constitutional powers, and competition from modern political structures as major challenges facing traditional institutions. Despite these contributions, Olawoyin (2022) adopted a broad national outlook and did not provide an in-depth examination of how these challenges specifically affect traditional institutions in different cultural settings. Furthermore, the Ebira traditional institution was not considered. This study therefore fills this gap by focusing specifically on the challenges of Ebira traditional institutions in conflict resolution.

The reviewed literature generally demonstrates that traditional institutions remain important actors in conflict resolution. Most of the studies, including Abdulsalam et al. (2020), Orji (2022), Nweke (2019), Sani and Olaniyi (2023), and Olawoyin (2023), consistently found that traditional rulers play significant roles in the maintenance of peace within local communities. This consensus suggests that traditional institutions possess cultural legitimacy and social acceptance, which often enable them to resolve disputes more effectively than formal state institutions at the grassroots level.

A critical examination of the literature reveals that many of the studies focused broadly on the role of traditional rulers in conflict resolution without paying adequate attention to the specific challenges confronting traditional institutions in carrying out these responsibilities. While Abdulsalam et al. (2020), Sani and Olaniyi (2023), and Olawoyin (2023) identified challenges such as political interference, constitutional limitations, and inadequate funding, these issues were treated as secondary findings rather than the central focus of investigation. Consequently, there is limited scholarly understanding of how these challenges specifically affect the effectiveness of traditional institutions in conflict resolution.

The literature also indicates a geographical concentration of studies. Orji (2022) focused on South Eastern Nigeria, while Nweke (2019) concentrated on the Niger Delta region. Similarly, Shiyanbade and Ajuwon (2017) examined Ede Town in Osun State. Although these studies provide valuable regional insights, their findings may not adequately reflect the realities of other ethnic groups and traditional systems in Nigeria. The Ebira traditional institution, with its unique historical and cultural structures, remains largely underexplored within the existing body of literature. Furthermore, some of the reviewed studies, such as Wilfred (2015), Mowo et al. (2013), and Gobattoni et al. (2015), examined traditional institutions in contexts that extend beyond conflict resolution, including ex-convict rehabilitation, natural resource management, and rural development. While these studies demonstrate the broader relevance of traditional institutions in social governance, they do not specifically address the dynamics of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. Their applicability to the present study is therefore limited.

From the foregoing, a clear gap exists in the literature. Although previous studies have established the importance of traditional institutions in promoting peace and resolving disputes, little attention has been devoted to examining the specific challenges confronting Ebira traditional institutions in conflict resolution. Most existing studies are either geographically removed from Ebiraland or focus broadly on the roles of traditional rulers rather than the obstacles affecting their effectiveness. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by investigating the challenges of Ebira traditional

institutions in conflict resolution, thereby contributing to knowledge on indigenous governance and peacebuilding in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework: Conflict Management Theory

This study is anchored on the Conflict Management theory which explains that conflict is an unavoidable aspect of human interaction. This theory draws heavily from the works of several scholars. One of its key contributors is Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann, who developed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Their model identifies five main approaches to conflict handling, namely competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. These demonstrate that conflict response varies depending on the situation being handled. Another important contributor is Mary Parker Follett, who emphasized that conflict should not be suppressed but integrated through cooperative problem-solving (Follett, 1925), arguing that that constructive engagement leads to better outcomes. Similarly, Louis Pondy conceptualized conflict as a process that develops through stages (Pondy, 1967). His work highlighted that conflict evolves over time and must be managed at different stages.

The theory is based on several key assumptions. First, it assumes that conflict is inevitable in all human; second, it posits that conflict is not inherently negative; third, it assumes that different conflict situations require different management strategies, and no single approach is universally effective; fourth, it assumes further that effective conflict management depends on the availability of competent institutions and appropriate mechanisms for resolution; fftth, it recognizes that poorly managed conflict can escalate into violence and disrupt social stability and finally, it acknowledges that both formal institutions, such as courts, and courts, and informal institutions, such as traditional authorities, play important roles in managing conflict within societies.

The theory has been criticized on several grounds. Some arguments against this theory are that it is more descriptive than predictive. Andrew (1995) discussed a situation that implies that conflict management does not fit into a neat linear sequence as Pondy (1967) presents showing clearly a sharp criticism that suggests that the theory is only descriptive. It has also been criticized for focusing heavily on interpersonal and organizational settings, making it less effective in explaining complex communal, ethnic, or structural conflicts. In addition, the theory tends to emphasize the management of conflict rather than its full resolution or transformation, thereby limiting its scope. Despite these limitations, the theory remains highly relevant to this study on the challenges of Ebira traditional institutions in conflict resolution. It provides a clear framework for understanding the different methods employed by traditional rulers in managing disputes within their communities. It also supports the understanding that conflict is not necessarily eliminated but managed in ways that preserve social order and stability. The theory is therefore adopted for this study because it best explains the practical role of Ebira traditional institutions in managing conflict rather than assuming that conflict can be completely eradicated.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the challenges of traditional rulers in conflict resolution in Ebiraland. The qualitative approach is suitable because it provides an in-depth understanding of the roles

and experiences of traditional rulers in maintaining peace within the community. Data for the study are obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are collected through semi-structured interviews with traditional rulers, community leaders, historians, journalists, academics, and members of the community who possess knowledge of conflict resolution in Ebiraland. A purposive sampling technique is used in selecting respondents relevant to the study.

Secondary data are sourced from textbooks, journal articles, newspapers, dissertations, and other relevant published materials on traditional institutions and conflict resolution. The data collected are analyzed using thematic methods by organizing responses according to the objectives of the study. Ethical considerations such as informed consent and confidentiality are also observed during the research process.

4.1 Challenges of Traditional Institutions in conflict resolution in Ebiraland

Findings from the interviews conducted in the course of the study presented four major challenges confronting the Ebira traditional institutions in it attempts to resolve conflict within the various Ebira communities in the present day modern setting. Responses from HRH Bello Stephen the Ohindase of Okengwe made it clear that a major challenge is political interference that has become the order of the day (S. Bello, Personal communication, 23rd January, 2024). He further noted that Politicians often attempt to influence traditional rulers for personal or political interests, thereby reducing their neutrality in settling disputes. In some cases, traditional rulers are pressured to support certain political groups or candidates, which affects public trust in their judgments. This situation weakens their ability to mediate fairly during communal or political conflicts.Also another interviewee also opined that political interference has been a problem affecting the effectiveness of the judgments of the traditional institutions in Ebiraland (F. Musa, personal communication, 11th June, 2025). This clearly confirms the findings of Abdulsalam et al. (2020) who opined that political interference has significantly undermined the independence and effectiveness of traditional institutions in Nigeria.

Another challenge that was revealed in the course of the study was the fall in the regard for traditional institutions. Alfred, a journalist opined that the advent of modernization and western education have contributed to a decline in respect for traditional rulers, especially among the younger generation (G. Alfred, personal communication, 6th May, 2025). Enero an academic opined further that many youths now view traditional institutions as outdated and less relevant in modern governance (T. Enero, personal communication, 4th June, 2025). As a result, some individuals ignore the decisions and directives of traditional rulers during conflicts (T. Enero, personal communication, 4th June, 2025). This decline in traditional values weakens the authority of traditional rulers in maintaining peace and social order. This confirms the findings of Orji (2022) who observed that the erosion of cultural values and modernization have negatively affected the influence of traditional rulers in conflict resolution.

Constitutional and Legal Limitations was also pointed out as a major challenge. John stated that the traditional institutions lacked constitutional backing hence their judgements no longer stood as it used to be (Y. John, personal communication, 6th April, 2026). Only the judgement passed in the court are considered valid under the law. This boils down to the fact that traditional rulers in Nigeria operate with limited constitutional powers. Although they are

recognized as custodians of culture and tradition, they are not officially empowered to enforce laws or punish offenders in the same way as formal courts and security agencies. This limitation affects their ability to effectively implement decisions reached during conflict resolution processes. This conforms to Sani and Olaniyi (2023) who noted that the lack of constitutional recognition remains one of the greatest obstacles affecting the performance of traditional institutions in Nigeria.

Religious differences and social divisions were also discovered as a pose serious challenge to traditional rulers in conflict resolution in Ebiraland. Ebira people are divided into Christians, Muslims and a few still worship in the African traditional way (E. Malik, personal communication 7th February, 2026). In contemporary society, conflicts are sometimes influenced by religious sentiments and ethnic loyalties, making it difficult for traditional rulers to maintain neutrality and gain the trust of all parties involved. These divisions have affected the social fabric and peace of Ebiraland because, it often create tension within communities and reduce cooperation during peace negotiations. Garba et al. (2018) maintained that ethnic and religious divisions have greatly affected the ability of traditional institutions to promote unity and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria and the study in Ebiraland confirms this assertion. As a result, the of Ebiraland often have disputes due to religious intolerance.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study revealed that Ebira traditional institutions face diverse challenges in the conflict resolution process. The diverse interviews conducted showed that the major challenges confronting the traditional institutions in Ebiraland were political interference, constitutional and legal limitations, reduced regard for the traditional institutions due to the existence of modern structures and religious and social divisions. These findings strongly conforms to the findings of past studies such as Abdulsalam et al (2022), Orji (2022), Garba et al (2018) and Sani and Olaniyi (2023). It also supports the conflict management theory which emphasizes legitimacy, neutrality, authority and acceptance for conflict to be properly managed. The absence of these factors in Ebiraland have served as hinderances to conflict resolution in Ebira communities. The implies that traditional institutions in Ebiraland are having difficulties in effective conflict resolution because legitimacy, neutrality authority and general acceptance are not entirely present. This study therefore affirms and strongly support the findings of past studies on the fact that traditional institutions play crucial role in conflict resolutions but challenges such as political interference among others stand on their way to success.

Conclusion

The study revealed that political interference, declining respect for traditional authority, constitutional limitations, and religious divisions have reduced the effectiveness of traditional rulers in resolving conflicts. These challenges have weakened traditional institutions and limited their ability to maintain lasting peace in Ebiraland. The findings of this study strongly conform to the findings of past scholars and it further upholds the conflict management theory. Despite these problems, traditional rulers remain relevant in promoting communal harmony and conflict resolution. Therefore, strengthening traditional institutions would enhance peacebuilding and sustainable development in Ebiraland.

Recommendations

i. The government should provide constitutional recognition and greater support to traditional rulers to strengthen their role in conflict resolution and community peacebuilding.

ii. Traditional rulers should remain neutral in political matters to maintain public trust and confidence in their judgments during conflicts.

iii. There should be increased collaboration between traditional institutions, security agencies, and local government authorities in addressing communal conflicts and insecurity.

iv. Community leaders and traditional rulers should organize enlightenment programmes aimed at promoting respect for traditional values and peaceful coexistence among youths.

v. The government should address unemployment and poverty among youths in Ebiraland to reduce violence, criminal activities, and youth restiveness.

vi. Religious and community leaders should encourage tolerance, unity, and dialogue among different groups in order to reduce social and religious tensions within the community.

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