TRADITIONAL METHODS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN OZALLA SOCIETY, OWAN-WEST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF EDO STATE BEFORE 1900

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Abstract.

Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon in every society. It is an offshoot of discontentment and disagreement between two persons, people, and a group of persons. That notwithstanding, one can have conflict within himself or herself or due to instinct to survive, or taking a vital decision that can shape his or her life. In this case, there is a proposing and opposing factor in one's life pursuit or endeavor. In the case of Ozalla community, just like any other African society, domestic conflict always occurs in the same family, between families, and among clans. The remote causes of all the endemic conflict are economic, socio-cultural, and political factors. Thus, in order to have peace and tranquillity, the traditional patterns of conflict resolution have been the ruling monarchical system, clans, family heads, and village heads. Thus, this paper seeks to examine the traditional pattern of conflict resolution in Ozalla community to achieve an enduring peaceful society from pre-colonial to the present. In order to achieve this great task this paper adopted the use of primary and secondary sources of information to bridge the gaps in historiography of Ozalla people. The impact of this study and its findings will create a peaceful environment for the Community and help other researchers on traditional methods of peace and conflict resolution can borrow leaves in order to enhance peace in their community.

Keywords: Ozalla Community, Traditional, Pattern, Conflict Resolution

Introduction

Ozalla clan is one of the two hundred and twenty-five clans that make up Edo state and among the eleven clans in *Owan*-West Local Government area of Edo state.[1]*Ozalla* is in *Owan*-West Local Government Area of Edo state. Itis a small village in Owan, though now made up of various quarters, which at the time, served as satellite camps around the village called *Ivbihere*. *Ozalla* village is circumscribed by the longitudes 5°60' east and 6° 00' east and latitudes 6° 36' North and 6° 65' North.[2] It is actually situated in the boundary between *Okpebho and Ovia*-West Local Government Area

of Edo state. It is the first place, one gets into*Owan*-West Local Government Area of Edo State from Benin via*Iruekpen*North of Edo State.

It is bordered on the North by *Ora*, on the East by *Evbidaudu*which is made up of *Esan* people that have traditional and linguistic ties with *Ozalla*. This study therefore examines activities of traditional institutions in the theatre of conflict resolution since pre-colonial era. It will unearth the traditional institutions for conflict resolution and the methods associated with them in *Ozalla*society. These included market union, marriage, oath taking, hunters' guilds, council of elders, *Oba (Ontare),* secret cult and ancestral cult.

In *Ozalla*society traditional conflict resolution is a strong mechanism for peace-making and had made very determined efforts to maintain peace and social harmony. When conflict arose, the restoration of peace did not only involve the direct parties, but also involved neighbours. These voluntary peace mediators and arbitrators such as the family heads, *Otuleha*, *Obyuan*and the *Oba (Ontare)* intervened, they were motivated by the indigenous concept and practice of being one's brother's keepers, and their general and collective strong natural desire for peace, orderliness, and social harmony in the society.[3]This is also peculiar to other African societies with the spirit of communal living. However, the traditional institution that had been saddled with the responsibility of peace-making among the *Ozalla*, employed certain methods for peace-making process. These are adjudication, arbitration, negotiation, mediation, cross-examination, reconciliation and the use of proverbs to create room for critical thinking or pondering over difficult cases, so as to untie them for peaceful settlement.

Patterns of Conflict Resolution in *Ozalla* Society

Prior to the advent of colonialism in Nigeria, Edo people had had their peculiar methods of monitoring, preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts. They also had their peculiar ways and manners of effecting peace-making, peace-building and confidence building. These peculiar and very effective methods have today, almost been obliterated and in some areas, wiped out by the forces of colonialism.

The result is ubiquitous violence, which promoted instability and retarded development. Dialogue between disputants is today replaced by fighting, and the mediating role of elders, and other

more peaceful institutions as age-grades, highly revered societies, and third-party neighbour (which are the methods of traditional conflict resolution in *Ozalla* community), have been replaced in several cases, with police action (teargas), military "peace-keeping" operations and prolong court proceedings.

According to Nwosile, "A society which neglects the instructive value of its past for its present and future, cannot be self-confident and self-reliant, and will therefore, lack internally generated dynamism and stability".[4] In the pre-literate Nigerian society, the process of peace-making began at the level of the individual and his household[4]. The underlying principles are that a man who is free from inner and domestic conflict is able, not only to behave in less aggressive manner, but also to relate well with his neighbours and the larger community.[5] Therefore, *Ozalla* society and different communities in pre-colonial Nigeria had varying conventions backed up by taboo, concerning individual's behaviour, so as to mitigate intra-human, inter human and domestic conflicts. The convention must be observed to regulate activities such as co-habitation, relationship between husband and wife, father and children, inheritance and the likes in *Ozalla* community. As head of the family, a husband is expected to be at peace with himself, household and neighbours around. He was also held responsible for keeping peace in his household and ensuring that its members related well with others in the compound and wards in the village or town. However, the gap to fill in this literature is how conflict can consume a community or society like *Ozalla*, this can be seen in the holocaust against the Jews in Germany and Japanese during the second world war. Traditional conflict resolution is a social phenomenon, it is always found whenever there are human beings such as *Ozalla*community. When conflict occurs, it leaves a better pull of the mouth of everyone that is concerned. This makes every normal human being to try as much as necessary, to avoid conflict thereby imbibing the culture of peace.

Clan/Village Heads

The compound head, as well as the village head or king *(Ontare)* had similar responsibilities in their respective domains. They guided the communities, laws and customs and applied appropriate sanctions against any breach. A breach of convention was regarded as a crime, a disturbance of individual or communal equilibrium.[6] Imposition of sanctions on individuals or a group of deviants was

justifiable means of restoring the pre-existing balance in the society and traditional device for crime prevention or deterrence of deviant behaviour.

The *Ozalla* people are part of the larger *Owan* group and therefore, subject to influence of all-natural causes of conflict with differences in perceptions, needs, values, power, desires, goals, opinions, and many other components of human interactions. According to A.M.Rabim, conflict inevitably arises from unequal distribution of desirables such as wealth, power, prestige and other goals.[7] Individuals and groups strive to maximize the interest and dominate the structured argument by various means, especially coercion, but men dislike internally being ordered around, thus they resist subjection. These are general theories about conflict. However, while this holds true for most human groups, the most common sources of conflict in *Ozalla* in the past and present are land dispute, family dispute, dispute over inheritance and commercial conflict.

Adjudication

Adjudication is the common way of peace-making processing in *Ozalla* society. It involves bringing all sides of the conflict to a meeting usually in the house of the family head, the *Otuleha* assembly and the *Oba's* court as the case may be. Here, it is necessary to stress that dialogue is linked with the adjudication process. According to Olaoba,[8] dialogue was linked with the adjudication processes in traditional conflict resolution. Fundamentally, reconciliation is the most significant aspect of peace-making process in *Ozalla*. It is the end product of adjudication. After the conflicting parties have been persuaded to end the conflict, peace is restored. This peace-making process is anchored on the principle of give-a-little, get-a-little. The principle buttresses the idea of conflicting parties to give concession. This was supported by I.W. Zartman who argued that the purpose is not to render a judgement in law, but to reconcile the conflicting parties and its norms. The relationship between the authority and the community is cushioned by community representives who advise authority.[9]

Mediation

Meditation is a method of peace-making process which has been so crucial to the traditional society like *Ozalla*. The mediators such as the Family head, Clan head, *Oba (Otuleha)* and so, usually ensure

that peace and harmony reigned supreme within the *Ozalla* community. The mediators also have the fear of the supernatural as a guiding principle for fair judgement and justice over conflict issues meditating on and there also the fear bad things happening to the man and his family in *Ozalla* society over bad judgement base on preferential treatment, biases and corruption. The process of mediation is always followed to the latter and with all sense of justice and fair play'.[10] The mediators normally use the medium of appeal to the parties of the conflict to give peace a chance in *Ozalla* community. Moreover, the parties of the conflict are often reminded of the code of conduct and ethical foundation of *Ozalla*society, should they annoy the ancestral spirit and cause havoc such death, illness, loss of family member on so.

Negotiation

Negotiation is another method used by the traditional institution in *Ozalla*society for peace making process. Apology for wrong done to individuals is a feature of negotiation in *Ozalla* community in Owanland. Such apology is channelled through the Family heads, Elders and Chiefs of high calibre in the *Ozalla* society. They play the role of a representative in the scene of peace-making process in family and in the community at large.[11] This representation stance usually stands the parties to the conflict on the same negotiating perspective in *Ozalla*community, this often leads to easing the entire process of peace-making in the society.

Cross Examination

Cross examination means weighing evidence in the cause of resolving a conflict. In *Ozalla* society it has a metaphoric sense of usage, which is replete in cross checking and corroborating facts and evidences through adequate questioning. The cross examiners have the responsibility of weighing evidences not only with a view to finding faults, but also fine-tuning the entire process in *Ozalla*society. It is therefore, an anathema to hear one side of the conflict. Consequently, undue favour to the disputants is seriously discouraged in *Ozalla* society, this was collaborated by Olaoba.[12]

Use of Proverbs

Proverbs are also used in the process of resolving conflict in *Ozalla* society. Proverbs have been considered as "wisdom lore" of the ages. Proverbs are characterised by the subtle expression, which give meaning and substance to a crucial point in a discourse[13]. This is

buttressed by the fact that difficult conflicts are simply handled through proverbs in *Ozalla* society. In a nutshell, proverbs are effectively used, when necessary, in the process of adjudication in *Ozalla*community before, during, after the Colonial era. The types of proverbs used depend largely on the nature of conflict in vogue.[13] The proper usage and application of proverbs in the peace-making process is a hallmark of traditional justice in *Ozalla* society.

Indeed, the *Ozalla* society elders, with their maturity and mental alertness as well as their patience and endurance are nibbled with wisdom in traditional conflict resolution in the community. Hence, the saying '*oya no kpoboranosen ode bawhieedionmaiba'*.[14] This means, "he who washes his hands clean eats with the elders". Thus, they use proverbs for handling appropriate cases such robbery, rape, adultery and so no. The elders, therefore, have answers to almost all the problems in the *Ozalla* society in relation to co-existence, mutual understanding and the development of *Ozalla.*[15] The power of persuasion and conviction is, therefore, an underlying feature derivable from proverbs by officers of the law.

Consequently, the family head, elders, the chiefs and the *Oba (Ontare)* are agencies which use proverbs in peace making process in *Ozalla*society. It is significant to note that some of these methods of peace-making process can be applied to contemporary society.

Types of Disputes

Land Dispute

According to C. Iruonagbe, land is an intrinsic part of people's lives and belief systems, a source of social power and self-worth.[16] The nature of environment usually contributes to the type of conflict in the society. The Benin homeland is located in the forest zone of Nigeria. The zone has a lot of resources to offer which also paves the way for economic buoyancy and population outburst, to the degree that has not quite long, fragmented the land. Land matters rank high among the *Ozalla* society. Conflict related to land often resulted when a member of a family chooses to occupy or sell family land without consulting other members of the family. Trouble starts as soon as the family hears the illegal occupation or selling of the land. The family land could be a farmland, the family members or their representatives would approach the illegal occupant or seller of the piece of land, asking for compensation or demanding that the

occupant should stop trespassing in the family land. Failure to do so would result in conflict.

FamilyDispute

Conflict may occur between co-wives within a household of the compound, the husband might favour one woman over the others, causing jealousy among them. These women might abuse each other verbally. In some cases, they may physically assault each other with the husband taking sides as he considers fit. Some women go to the extent of employing supernatural power to resolve the conflict related to their matrimonial homes. Other issues that often lead to conflict between spouses include infidelity by the woman and lack of care for women and children by the husband, and the decision of the man to take a new wife.[17] Also, conflicts are prevalent between husband and wife and any lead to divorce.

Lack of regard to norms and values of the society also causes conflict among individuals, groups of individuals, communities, and between different communities. In *Ozalla*, just like in the other towns that make up Benin, descent is traced by patrilineal lineage, and member *(ebi)* is usually united because they share common ancestry. It is as a member of lineage that the individual is identified and exists as a member of the community. Traditionally, the individual has strong dependence on the lineage. The lineage is organised such that its head *(Ontare)* is the closest to the ancestors by virtue of his age.[18] The individual is subject to the authority by his lineage. The origin of conflict and resolution is traceable to the reaction and counter reaction of individual family members, who live in the family compound. The problem of the family is the concern of all and sundry. Hence, the facilitator and enhancer of peace and harmony in the family is the family head. Thus, in the family court, the family head shoulders the responsibility of resolving conflicts among members of the family, who might have felt aggrieved, assaulted and humiliated on certain grounds. Normally, a meeting would be arranged in the chamber of the family head to investigate, validate and give verdict to disturbing issues.

The *Odion's* (The family head) authority depends largely on his own personality. He is not expected to exercise it except in consultation with the influential members of the compound. All the adults, the family head's brothers by the same mother and his senior wife would be called together and his eldest son has a right to be

consulted.[19] Cases that are usually given immediate attention to prevent any escalation into violence that can threaten the survival of the entire lineage are always given priority. Once the matter is resolved, emphasis is place on how good neighbour humps can be achieved and preserved.

According to E.J. Alagoa,[20] the principles and values that guide conflict resolution include:

1. Impartiality and neutrality, which are necessary in order to inspire confidence in the party in the dock.
2. Fairness and justice, which are needed to achieve lasting peace, truth as a very important tool.
3. Accommodation, tolerance, compromise and reconciliation, which avoid a winner takes all syndrome.
4. Moderation, measured action and response, which informed deliberate limitation of level of violence in African conflicts.
5. Separation in the face of obvious incompatibility or irreconcilable differences, separation of the conflicting parties took the form of migration by the offending party to atone for the irreparable damage against the victim party. These are methods for resolving conflict in traditional Africa, which also affect the institutions responsible for conflicts resolution in *Ozalla.*

Use of Case Studies in Dispensing Justice

Case Study (i)

A case involving co-wives over their husband's preference for one of the wives resulted into a conflict. The case was reported to the family head. The women and their husband *(Idowu)* were summoned to the court of the family head, while all the elders in the compound constituted the jury. The wives in the compound were solicited to enquire about the cause of conflict, and how it should be resolved. The women were unwilling to reveal what they knew but they only appealed to the family head and other elders to settle the dispute amicably. In the cause of mediating in the dispute, the men were also requested to contribute to the resolution of the conflict. However, a relative of the husband, Mr.*Oba*, stood up to narrate the story of how their father married more than seven wives without any problem. He wondered why the women in dispute should give his brother, Mr.*Idowu*, with only two wives, problems. His recommendation was that whichever of these women was not comfortable with polygamy

should be encouraged by the family head to seek divorce and allow new wives to be married into the family.

Thereafter, the family head said, 'if this was how dispute was resolved in the past, your mother would not have remained with your father long enough to have given birth to you'. The family head in his wisdom employed a maxim that says "if one wood is not good, you throw it away, the other firewood, is not good you also throw it away, you might need to complete the cooking with your finger. The family head was of the opinion that if co-wives did not quarrel with one another, how then would they show that they love the father of their children. The family head went on to assert that one does not get rid of woman just because she is quarrelsome. He concluded with the question "would you treat her like that if she were your mother or daughter?" The truth of it is that, eventually evil people have their own reward. After some discussion, the final verdict was given. The guilty woman and her husband were reproached but none of the disputants was left completely without blame. The head *(Odion)*, at the end of the case, implored the disputants to cooperate since there was nothing strange about human conflict.

Case Study (ii)

Conflict arose on how particular assets such as a piece of land and a house of Late Chief *Oba*, were to be shared. This kind of conflict is often found in polygamous homes. Late Chief *Oba* had secret wives unknown to his legitimate wives before his death. Some of the secret wives, Shade and Juliet, made trouble over how the properties were to be shared, to reinforce their claim to the property and paternity of the children after the death of Late Chief *Oba*. When the conflicts started among the women, the Family head, Chief *Imo*, summoned all the elders in the compound to a meeting. Attempts were made to establish the authenticity of any woman who claimed to have had a child with Late Chief *Oba*. Even within his family, there were some people who knew about the secret love affairs the deceased man had. People like Mr.*Adebayo*, his closest friend, Mr.*Ohi*, his brother, tried to establish the claim of the women as genuine. They were given the right to share in some parts of Late Chief *Oba*'s properties for their children. The Family head and the elders inthe compound went to the land to demarcate the boundary of each person's inheritance. Symbols such as trees and rocks were used to demarcate the boundaries.

Case Study (iii)

A land dispute between *Gabriel and Ohi*families was brought before the *Otuleha*, after the two family heads were unable to resolve the conflict amicably. Some hundred years ago, a man named *Gabriel* migrated with his family from Benin. As a stranger, he was well received and was given an area of land by the *Ohi*family to settle. As time went on, the *Gabriel* family grew rapidly and as a result of this, they occupied more land at *Ozalla*. Conflict started when the *Gabriel* family started selling more than the area of land allocated to them by the *Ohi* family. Both Families engaged each other in a serious conflict for a very long time. When the case was brought before the *Otuleha*, the *Ohi* and the *Gabriel* families were summoned and, in the process, they were cross-examined.

In order to establish the truth, the *Otuleha* went to the land and invited some elders as witnesses, who knew the genesis of how the *Gabriel* got to *Ozalla*. The elders relied on the oral history passed to them from their forefathers. Adjudicating in the conflict, it was to note that the land was shared between the two families; the *Ohi* were given sixty percent. The reason for giving part of the land to the *Gabriel* was that there had been inter-marriages between the two families and offspring of the *Gabriel* had to be taken care of, hence the need to give them part of the land. This buttresses the principle of give-a-little; get-a-little of traditional conflict resolution as against the winner takes them all, which could lead to an age long feud between the two Families.

Conclusion

The *Ozalla* people, like every other Edo group, rely on their traditional institutions for resolution of conflicts, which are still functioning. This work emphasised that conflict is a universal concept, which is an inevitable concomitance of human interaction. It has no end, except death part it from an individual. It starts from the individual to the community. Each community, however, evolved pattern of conflict resolution suitable for her. It is clear from unanimous oral tradition, that traditional institutions for conflict resolution in *Ozalla* society are anchored, not only on the value and significance of peace in the society, but also on the necessity to ensure that there is peaceful co-existence among the various groups that live in a community and their neighbours. This sort of premium

which is placed on peace and the essence of ensuring peaceful co-existence, stems from the realisation by the people about the negative results and allied adversity that usually follow the demise of peace in the society.

Approaches to traditional conflict resolution are diverse and enormous, such that it is almost difficult to find an end to conflict. That is why emphasis is placed on restitution and reconciliation to reach an agreement that would be acceptable to the parties in conflict. The tremendous increase in conflict and crime in urban society arises from a plethora of factors. The modality put in place to arrest the wave of crime is apparently inadequate the law enforcement agents are incapable of handling the situation and the law courts, which were introduced from a foreign culture, are continually congested. Indeed, lawyers and judges, who have been on 'holiday' with the cultural orientation, do not help the situation. The best and affordable alternative to approaching the situation would be by harmonising the modern methods with the indigenous models of getting the society going with peaceful initiatives. It will be unwise to ignore the wisdom of traditional practices, since there are some useful lessons to be learnt from the traditional wisdom.

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