

**ROLE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS IN CONFLICT
RESOLUTION IN THE TARABA NORTH SENATORIAL
DISTRICT OF TARABA STATE**

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ABSTRACT: This study examined the role of traditional rulers in conflict resolution within Taraba North Senatorial District, Nigeria. The research was guided by two objectives: to explore the mechanisms used by traditional rulers to resolve conflicts and to identify the challenges they encounter in doing so. Anchored in Stakeholder Theory, the study employed a qualitative descriptive case study design. Data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with 10 purposively selected participants, including first-, second, and third-class chiefs, as well as senior officials responsible for chieftaincy affairs. The findings revealed that traditional rulers rely on culturally rooted practices such as open compound hearings, layered reconciliation models, land walks to verify boundary claims, ritual reconciliation ceremonies, and symbolic restitution to maintain peace. Despite their continued relevance, the findings highlight numerous challenges undermining their effectiveness, including political interference, erosion of respect among younger generations, inadequate legal recognition, lack of training, and insufficient resources to enforce decisions. The study concludes that while traditional rulers remain indispensable stakeholders in community peacebuilding, their potential is significantly constrained by systemic and structural limitations. It recommends establishing a comprehensive legal framework to support traditional conflict resolution and implementing inclusive community engagement and capacity-building initiatives. By addressing these constraints, policymakers and practitioners can strengthen indigenous institutions and enhance sustainable conflict management in Taraba North and similar contexts.

Keywords: Traditional Rulers, Conflict Resolution, Taraba North, Taraba State, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Across Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, traditional rulers have for centuries occupied a central position in community life as custodians of culture, arbiters of disputes, and symbols of collective identity. Their authority transcends mere ceremonial functions, extending to critical roles in maintaining peace, regulating social relations, and preserving communal values. In many societies, including those in Taraba State, traditional institutions remain the first point of recourse for resolving conflicts, especially in rural areas where formal judicial systems are either inaccessible or perceived as less legitimate (Abdulsalam et al., 2020). Over time, traditional rulers have demonstrated their ability to mediate disputes in ways that are culturally acceptable, participatory, and restorative, often relying on negotiation, mediation, and customary arbitration to maintain harmony within their communities.

The breadth and diversity of the contemporary Conflict Resolution field are a consequence of its long history and the many sources of its present-day character. Its contemporary manifestation initially focused on stopping violence, but it has broadened greatly to incorporate building the conditions for peace, including post-violence reconciliation, enhancing justice, establishing conflict management systems, and many other issues. Certainly, calls and actions for alternatives to war and other violent conflict have a long history; major exemplary documents, starting from classical Grecian times, are available in Chatfield and Ilukhina (1994).

The time between the American and French revolutions and the First World War deserves noting before discussing the more proximate periods. The revolutions of the late 1770s established the importance of popular participation in governance and of fundamental human rights. Many intellectual leaders of the time, particularly in Europe and North America, discussed the processes and procedures for managing differences and avoiding tyranny. They include Voltaire (1694-1778), Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Adam Smith (1723-1790), Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), and James Madison (1751-1836). The moral and practical issues related to dealing with various kinds of conflicts were widely discussed, emphasising the importance of reasoning. For example, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) wrote about perpetual peace resulting from states being constitutional republics, and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) wrote about the value of liberty and the free discussion of ideas. But the path of progress was not smooth; wars and oppression were not abolished. Many explanations for these social ills and ways to overcome them were put forward, including the influential work of Karl Marx (1818-1883), which emphasised class conflict and its particular capitalist manifestation.

Taraba North Senatorial District, which encompasses Local Government Areas such as Jalingo, Lau, Yorro, Zing, and Karim Lamido, is home to a remarkable diversity of ethnic groups, including the Tiv, Jukun, Kuteb, Chamba, Mumuye, and Fulani. This ethnic heterogeneity, while enriching the social fabric of the area, has also contributed to persistent tensions and recurrent conflicts over access to land, political representation, chieftaincy succession, and scarce resources. Notably, the protracted Tiv–Jukun and Kuteb–Jukun conflicts, as well as the frequent clashes between farmers and herders, have led to the destruction of lives and property, the displacement of thousands of residents, and the erosion of trust between communities (Lucas, Ibrahim, & Adamu, 2024). These conflicts are often complex and multi-dimensional, rooted in historical grievances, competition for natural resources, and struggles for political dominance, thereby posing formidable challenges to peacebuilding efforts in the region.

Despite these challenges, traditional rulers in Taraba North, such as the Aku Uka of Wukari, Gara Donga, Kur Garbabi, and numerous district and village heads, have continued to play vital roles in managing and resolving conflicts within their domains. Their interventions typically involve convening meetings with disputing parties, facilitating dialogue and reconciliation, imposing culturally grounded sanctions where necessary, and mobilizing community support for peace agreements. These approaches are not only faster and less adversarial than formal litigation but also perceived as more legitimate by local populations who value the authority and moral standing of their traditional leaders (Leadership Nigeria, 2023). Moreover, traditional institutions often serve as critical channels for early warning and conflict prevention, as their leaders are closely connected to the grassroots and can detect emerging tensions before they escalate into violence.

However, in recent decades, the influence of traditional rulers in conflict resolution has been steadily eroded by a range of factors, including the expansion of modern legal and administrative systems, political interference in chieftaincy affairs, and the weakening of customary institutions due to urbanization and socio-economic change. In many instances, traditional rulers are consulted only after conflicts have escalated, rather than being integrated into proactive, institutionalized frameworks for conflict management (Academia.edu, 2024). This marginalization not only undermines their ability to act effectively but also deprives communities of trusted mechanisms for addressing grievances. Furthermore, the lack of formal recognition and support from government agencies limits the capacity of traditional rulers to enforce decisions and sustain peace agreements, often resulting in the recurrence of unresolved disputes and cycles of violence.

Recognizing these gaps, scholars and practitioners have increasingly called for the integration of traditional institutions into formal peacebuilding and governance structures. Empirical evidence suggests that when traditional rulers are empowered and supported, their involvement enhances community ownership of conflict resolution processes, builds trust among disputing parties, and produces culturally relevant solutions that are more likely to endure (Lucas et al., 2024). As Taraba North continues to grapple with persistent conflicts that undermine development and social cohesion, there is a compelling need to examine how traditional rulers contribute to peacebuilding, what challenges limit their effectiveness, and what strategies can be implemented to strengthen their role in promoting sustainable peace.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to investigate the role of traditional rulers in conflict resolution in Taraba North Senatorial District. It will explore the specific methods and practices they employ to manage disputes, assess the institutional and structural obstacles they encounter, and propose recommendations for enhancing their contributions to peace and stability in the region. By shedding light on these critical issues, the study seeks to inform policy decisions and advocate for a more inclusive approach to conflict management that leverages the strengths of both traditional and formal governance systems.

Statement of the Problem

Persistent communal and inter-ethnic conflicts remain one of the most serious obstacles to peace, social stability, and development in the Taraba North Senatorial District of Nigeria. The region is home to diverse ethnic groups, including the Tiv, Jukun, Kuteb, Chamba, Mumuye, and Fulani, whose relationships are frequently strained by disputes over farmland, grazing routes, political representation, and claims to traditional leadership. According to the Council on Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker, Taraba State recorded over 1,200 conflict-related fatalities between 2015 and 2022, with farmer-herder violence and communal clashes accounting for a significant share of the incidents (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022).

The humanitarian impact of these conflicts has been severe. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2020) reported that in 2020 alone, over 20,000 people were displaced across Taraba State, disrupting livelihoods, agriculture, and children's education. Many of these violent episodes are protracted, as they are rooted in historical grievances, identity struggles, and competition for scarce natural resources. The lack of effective early-warning systems and timely conflict prevention

measures further deepens insecurity and makes local communities more vulnerable to cycles of revenge attacks.

In response to these challenges, traditional rulers, village heads, district chiefs, and paramount leaders have historically played an essential role as mediators and peacebuilders. Through customary arbitration, negotiation, and community dialogue, they have been able to address conflicts in ways that are culturally acceptable, faster, and more trusted than formal courts (Adebayo, 2019). Research shows that in many communities, these institutions are perceived as the first and most effective line of defense against violence. For example, Adebayo (2019) found that over 60% of respondents in parts of Nigeria's North Central region—including Taraba- preferred traditional institutions for resolving disputes, citing familiarity and cultural legitimacy.

However, the influence and effectiveness of traditional rulers have declined in recent decades due to several interrelated factors. Political interference in the selection of chiefs has weakened their moral authority and eroded community trust. At the same time, modern legal and administrative systems have not provided adequate recognition or support for traditional institutions, limiting their capacity to enforce agreements or address structural causes of conflict. The National Bureau of Statistics (2021) has highlighted that many rural communities lack formal mediation centers and accessible courts, leaving traditional rulers to manage conflicts with little or no material support.

This disconnect between the high expectations placed on traditional leaders and the weak institutional backing they receive has contributed to unresolved disputes, repeated outbreaks of violence, and continued displacement. If these trends continue, Taraba North is likely to face further deterioration in social cohesion and economic progress. Therefore, this study is necessary to examine the specific roles of traditional rulers in conflict resolution in Taraba North Senatorial District, identify the challenges that undermine their contributions, and develop recommendations for strengthening their capacity to promote sustainable peace and stability in the region.

Objectives

The paper comes up with the following objectives specifically to:

- i. Examine the mechanisms adopted by traditional rulers in resolving conflict within their domain of the Taraba North Senatorial district.
- ii. Identify challenges facing traditional rulers in the quest to resolve conflict within their domain of the Taraba North Senatorial district.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employed a qualitative research design, specifically adopting a descriptive case study approach to investigate the roles and mechanisms of traditional rulers in conflict resolution within Taraba North Senatorial District. This design was particularly appropriate for exploring the complex social processes and cultural practices underpinning indigenous dispute management, allowing for an in-depth examination of participants' lived experiences. The target population comprised first-class, second-class, and third-class chiefs, as well as district and village heads

across the six Local Government Areas, Jalingo, Lau, Ardo-Kola, Zing, Yorro, and Karim Lamido, alongside one senior management staff from the Taraba State Bureau for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs and the Chairman for Peace and Conflict Resolution in Taraba State. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select a total of ten information-rich respondents who possessed direct experience in managing communal conflicts. Data were gathered through structured key informant interviews conducted in English and Hausa, complemented by detailed field notes to document non-verbal cues and contextual observations. Each interview was audio-recorded with consent to ensure accuracy and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of the narratives. The interviews were transcribed and reported.

Rigorous measures were taken to ensure the credibility and dependability of the findings, including the use of a standardised interview guide to maintain consistency, member checking to validate participants' accounts, and a detailed audit trail comprising transcripts, coding logs, and analytic memos. Additionally, peer debriefing and reflexive journaling were integrated into the process to enhance transparency and minimise researcher bias. The methodological choices, especially the focus on a small, carefully selected sample, were justified by the study's emphasis on depth over breadth, ensuring rich, context-sensitive insights into the traditional conflict resolution practices of Taraba North.

DATA PRESENTATION

This section presents the findings generated from the semi-structured interviews conducted with traditional rulers and key officials across the six Local Government Areas of Taraba North Senatorial District. The data are organised thematically to reflect the core areas of inquiry, including the roles and practices of traditional rulers in conflict resolution, the specific mechanisms they employ, and the challenges encountered in maintaining peace within their communities. Each theme is illustrated with direct quotations and summaries of participants' perspectives to provide authentic insights into indigenous conflict management practices.

Objectives I: Examine the mechanisms adopted by traditional rulers in resolving conflict within their domain of the Taraba North Senatorial district.

This objective seeks to identify, describe, and analyse the specific approaches and practices traditional rulers employ to manage and settle disputes. These mechanisms may include dialogue and mediation sessions, customary arbitration, ritual and spiritual reconciliation ceremonies, enforcement of traditional sanctions, and the mobilisation of community elders or councils.

A Respondent stated:

"The primary mechanism I use is called 'open compound hearing'. We summon disputing parties to my compound in the presence of community elders and observers. This transparency discourages lies and fosters truth." Also, "We depend on traditional boundary indicators such as trees, stones, and even oral narratives from elders to settle land disputes. These methods may not be legal documents,

but they are respected by the people." (Jalingo LGA, 2:00 pm 04/04/25)

Another Respondent stated:

"In our palace, we use a layered reconciliation model. First, we listen separately. Second, we conduct fact-finding with neutral elders. Lastly, we bring all together for public resolution. Each stage builds towards lasting peace." He also explained, "We utilise a form of customary arbitration where parties are asked to sign a verbal and symbolic agreement, often sealed with a handshake and shared kola nut. It's a public declaration of peace and accountability." (10:00 AM 05/04/25, Zing LGA)

Also, a Respondent stated:

"We rely heavily on the testimony of respected elders, hunters, and family heads. Their memories of traditional histories are used to verify claims and decide cases without modern documentation," He also explained, "I lead 'land-walks' to disputed areas with a team of elders. We identify ancient trees, footpaths, and boundary markers. These visual inspections are respected more than any court paper." (11:AM, 06/04/25, Karim Lamido LGA)

In addition, a Respondent stated:

"Our conflict mechanisms start with communal dialogue. Disputes are brought before the village square, where both parties are given time to speak. Public input is allowed, but managed respectfully." He elaborated: "We sometimes involve traditional diviners or spiritual custodians if the conflict is deep-rooted or involves swearing. Their role is not to take sides but to reinforce sacred truths that people fear to violate." (12:00 pm, 09/04/25, Karim Lamido LGA)

Further, a Respondent also said:

"For serious matters like inter-tribal land ownership, we create temporary peace treaties, signed in the presence of both parties, and often commemorated with symbolic peace tokens like a shared goat or salt." He also added, "We embrace symbolic restitution. If a person is wronged, we require a token gift or service from the offender, not for punishment, but to show humility and rebuild dignity." (9:00 am, 10/04/25, Ado Kola LGA)

Furthermore, a Respondent explained:

"When the community is divided, we initiate what we call 'peace walks'. I lead delegations through the town, stopping at homes and praying for unity. These walks are spiritual and symbolic acts of re-connection." He also stated, "We hold a traditional town-hall meeting at the beginning of each farming and festive season, reminding everyone about the rules of engagement, boundaries, and channels for complaint." (10:00 AM, 13/04/25, Jalingo LGA)

Objectives II: Identify challenges facing traditional rulers in the quest to resolve conflict within their domain of the Taraba North Senatorial district.

To identify and analyse the challenges traditional rulers face in their efforts to resolve conflicts within their domains in Taraba North Senatorial District. This includes exploring issues such as political interference in chieftaincy matters, lack of formal recognition and support from government institutions, limited resources to implement decisions, erosion of traditional authority due to modern legal systems, and difficulties in managing deep-rooted grievances among community members.

Respondent stated that:

"One major challenge is that many people, especially the younger ones, no longer respect traditional authority. They question our relevance and refuse to comply with our judgments, believing only in modern law and social media." He further explained, "Sometimes, families involved in a conflict threaten palace elders, especially if they are politically connected. This intimidation weakens our neutrality and prevents us from speaking freely or issuing firm verdicts." (Jalingo LGA, 2:00 pm 04/04/25)

Also, a Respondent explained:

"We also lack trained mediators. As conflicts evolve to include things like land development, politics, or digital abuse, we need exposure and training on how to handle such complex matters properly." He also said, "Some elders in the community take sides because of kinship or personal interest. When council members are biased, it affects the integrity of our verdicts and creates more resentment." (10:00 AM 05/04/25, Zing LGA)

Another Respondent stated:

"Conflicts are increasingly violent. We used to settle matters with words and customs, but now, people fight with guns and machetes.

By the time we're informed, lives are already lost." He also shared, "Young people today have formed their leadership groups outside traditional structures. They organise protests and boycotts, ignoring palace summons. It's hard to control conflict when the youth operate independently." (11:AM, 06/04/25, Karim Lamido LGA)

Again, a Respondent explained:

"The media misrepresents our efforts. When a conflict is poorly resolved or not resolved on time, people go online and accuse the palace of corruption or favouritism without understanding our limitations." He added, "Language diversity is another issue. Our communities are multi-ethnic. Sometimes, miscommunication during mediation leads to misunderstanding. We need interpreters, but they're rarely available or trained." (11:AM, 06/04/25, Karim Lamido LGA)

Moreover, a Respondent stated:

"Women in conflict, especially those experiencing domestic violence, are afraid to speak in palace settings. The absence of formal support systems like legal aid or shelters limits what we can offer them." He further said, "Political rivalry spills into local matters. People drag traditional councils into their disputes, especially when they want the palace to endorse a candidate. If we refuse, they paint us as enemies." (12:00 pm, 09/04/25, Karim Lamido LGA)

In addition, a Respondent explained:

"In some communities, the elders are divided along religious lines. This makes it difficult to have unified council decisions, especially when the conflict involves a sensitive religious element." He also stated, "We receive no financial or moral support from local governments. We operate on goodwill and our resources. This limits how many cases we can handle effectively, especially those that span multiple communities." (12:00 pm, 09/04/25, Karim Lamido LGA)

Further, a Respondent added:

"Traditional justice has no enforcement mechanism. Once we make a decision, we rely on community acceptance. If someone chooses to defy it, there's no legal instrument to force compliance." He further stated, "Mistrust between ethnic groups is so deep in some

areas that even the ruler is suspected of favouritism. In such cases, no matter how fair we are, one side always claims bias." (9:00 am, 10/04/25, Ado Kola LGA)

Furthermore, a Respondent stated:

"We lack youth representation in our councils. As a result, decisions affecting the younger population are often misunderstood or rejected. We need to integrate youth into peace processes more formally." He added, "Traditional rulers are overburdened. We're expected to resolve conflicts, protect culture, advise politicians, and remain neutral. The workload is heavy, and we're not supported structurally or financially." (10:00AM, 13/04/25, Jalingo LGA)

Again, a Respondent explained:

"In inter-community conflict, traditional rulers from one side may refuse to meet or collaborate due to past grievances. This blocks communication and delays peace efforts." He also shared, "Conflict fatigue is real. As conflicts increase in frequency and complexity, palace staff and council elders become overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted, especially when there is no closure or reward." (1:30pm, 14/04/25, Lau LGA)

Lastly, a Respondent stated:

"Lack of access to formal mediation tools, like documents, recording systems, or trained facilitators, means that every case depends only on oral recall, which can be unreliable and manipulated." He further explained, "Some wealthy individuals ignore palace rulings entirely. They use their influence to bribe local police or courts and overturn our decisions. This breaks community trust in traditional justice." (2:00 pm, 15/04/25, Lau LGA)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This paper set out to explore the role of traditional rulers in conflict resolution within the six Local Government Areas of Taraba North Senatorial District. Drawing on rich narratives from semi-structured interviews, the findings illuminate both the enduring relevance of indigenous mechanisms and the contemporary challenges undermining their effectiveness. The discussion is presented according to the study's objectives, demonstrating how these results align with, extend, or challenge insights from previous empirical studies and theoretical frameworks.

The findings revealed that traditional rulers employ a variety of well-established and culturally significant practices to manage disputes. Respondents described conducting open compound

hearings, in which conflicts are presented transparently before elders and community members to discourage dishonesty and promote consensus. Other mechanisms included layered reconciliation processes, beginning with private interviews, progressing through neutral fact-finding by respected elders, and culminating in public resolutions endorsed by symbolic gestures such as shared kola nuts or handshakes. Additionally, many traditional rulers conduct land walks, physically inspecting disputed areas to verify claims based on ancient boundary markers and oral histories. Ritual elements, such as communal dialogue in village squares, symbolic restitution, and spiritual reconciliation ceremonies, were also widely used to restore social bonds and affirm collective responsibility. These approaches align closely with the work of Odeh and Yusuf (2020), who emphasised the importance of palace dialogue and oral traditions, and with Ishaya and Bala's (2020) observations on the binding power of ritual acts in sustaining peace. The findings further reinforce Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), demonstrating how traditional rulers occupy central positions of moral authority and legitimacy in their communities, enabling them to mediate disputes more effectively than many formal institutions.

Alongside these strengths, the study uncovered significant challenges that limit the capacity of traditional rulers to manage conflicts sustainably. A prominent theme was the declining respect for traditional authority, especially among younger generations who increasingly view customary practices as outdated. Respondents also reported political interference, with influential individuals attempting to manipulate or intimidate councils to influence outcomes. Other barriers included the lack of training in handling modern forms of conflict, such as land development disputes and digital defamation, and the absence of resources to support mediation processes. Additionally, language diversity in multi-ethnic communities contributed to misunderstandings during proceedings, while media misrepresentation further eroded public trust. Some rulers described how wealthy or politically connected individuals routinely ignored palace rulings, using formal courts or law enforcement to override decisions. These findings echo the challenges highlighted by Chizea and Osumah (2015) and Loveness and Mathew (2017), who noted that modern pressures often undermine the credibility and effectiveness of traditional conflict resolution structures. The persistence of unresolved grievances also resonates with Realistic Group Conflict Theory (Sherif, 1966) and Human Needs Theory (Burton, 1990), underscoring how unmet needs for security, recognition, and justice sustain intergroup hostility. Overall, the results demonstrate that while traditional rulers remain essential actors in conflict resolution, their effectiveness depends on addressing systemic constraints and integrating their practices with formal governance frameworks. By documenting these dynamics within Taraba North, this study fills an important gap in the literature. It provides a foundation for future policies that strengthen the role of indigenous institutions in peacebuilding.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the mechanisms adopted by traditional rulers in resolving conflicts and to identify the challenges they face within the Taraba North Senatorial District. The findings confirm that traditional rulers remain indispensable actors in community-based peacebuilding, relying on culturally embedded methods such as open compound hearings, layered reconciliation processes, land walks, ritual ceremonies, and symbolic restitution. These practices demonstrate not only the resilience of indigenous dispute resolution but also their continued relevance in fostering

communal harmony, affirming the principles of Stakeholder Theory by showing how traditional institutions serve as trusted intermediaries in local governance. At the same time, the study reveals that multiple contemporary challenges significantly constrain traditional rulers' effectiveness. Political interference, erosion of respect among younger generations, lack of training, insufficient resources, and the undermining influence of formal legal systems all hinder their ability to manage conflicts sustainably. These barriers underscore insights from Realistic Group Conflict Theory and Human Needs Theory, highlighting how competition over resources, unresolved grievances, and unmet needs for recognition and justice perpetuate cycles of violence and mistrust.

Recommendations

The paper recommends the following:

- i. The Taraba State Government, in collaboration with the Bureau for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, should establish a formal policy framework that clearly defines the mandate, authority, and operational boundaries of traditional rulers in conflict mediation. This framework should grant traditional councils' legal recognition to issue binding resolutions, create structured channels for collaboration with law enforcement and the judiciary, and provide dedicated funding to support their activities. Such support could include resources for transportation to conflict sites, stipends for council members, interpreters for multi-ethnic mediation, and tools for record-keeping. Institutionalising these measures will not only reduce the influence of political interference and elite manipulation but also help restore public confidence in traditional institutions as impartial and effective arbiters of communal disputes.
- ii. Traditional rulers should adopt proactive strategies to engage a broader spectrum of community members, particularly youth, women, and minority groups, in conflict resolution processes. This can be achieved by creating formal advisory councils that represent diverse perspectives and by integrating their voices into decision-making structures. Regular capacity-building programs should also be organised to equip traditional leaders with skills in contemporary dispute management, including mediation of land development conflicts, handling digital misinformation, and addressing gender-based violence. Additionally, traditional councils should conduct community sensitisation campaigns to educate residents about the continued relevance of indigenous practices and to counteract misconceptions spread through social media. By embedding inclusivity and continuous learning into their operations, traditional institutions can enhance legitimacy, strengthen social cohesion, and ensure that peace agreements are respected across all segments of the community.

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