

## **Traditional Institutions and Communal Conflicts Resolution Strategies in Anambra State**

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### **Abstract**

*This study seeks to examine traditional institutions and communal conflicts resolution strategies in Anambra state. The objective of the study is to identify some of these traditional conflicts resolution strategies and analyze how they could be adapted to address mounting conflicts and crises in different parts of the country. Survey method was used to collect data, while the Marxian Conflict theory based on dialectical and historical materialism of the society was adopted as a framework of analysis. The collected data were converted into percentages and frequency tables for analysis. The findings revealed that traditional institutions are effective in communal conflicts resolution in Anambra state. It is recommended that the government should recognize, strengthen and integrate these traditional institutions into conflicts resolving mechanisms in the state. Troubled communities in the state should not benefit directly from governments' financial release. Communities that prefer traditional methods of conflict resolution can be assisted to appreciate challenges involved in doing so, especially in this era of globalizations.*

**Key words:** *Communal, Conflicts, Institutions, Traditional, Resolving, Strategy.*

### **Introduction**

Traditional institutions participated actively in the governance of the Igbo people before the advent of colonialism. This explains why Lord Lugard was compelled to introduce the Indirect Rule System in Northern Protectorate, which was later extended to the Southern Part of the country following the amalgamation of the two protectorates in 1914. The methods of resolving conflicts in the pre-colonial Igbo political system were very effective, as various traditional institutions participated actively in addressing communal conflict challenges, thereby facilitating peace, orderliness and good governance in Igbo land. Even after the political independence in 1960 when the powers of the Native Authorities were remarkably eroded, traditional institutions still played vital role, especially in conflict management in Eastern part of Nigeria. Traditional institutions, such as, traditional rulers, town union executives, age grades, the Umuada, the titled holders and a host of others acted as instruments for coordinating various social-economic activities. Traditional institutions are supposedly people centered and developmental oriented. Each of the institutions confines itself within its area of influence, so that its efforts towards the development of their area could be optimally utilized.

The various pre-colonial political systems, such as, Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, Igbos, Ijaw, among other ethnic nationalities, performed their input-output functions, including conflicts resolution and management, which are the hallmark of every political system.

Easton [1965] has argued that every political system performs the input-output functions. Prior to the advent of colonialism in Nigeria, the various ethnic groups, such as, Igbo, Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, among others, had various strategies for organizing the public affairs of their people as well as ensuring progress and development in their respective areas. These resolutions do not manifest haphazardly rather, there are strategies adopted in order to ensure that their efforts are not in vain.

Lord Lugard confirmed the efficacy of traditional institutions when he clarified that 'there was no desire to impose on the people any alien system of administration, but to evolve from their old institutions, based on their own habits of thought, prestige and custom, the form of rule best suited to them and adapted to meet the new conditions (Nwekeaku, 2007:23)

Best [2007] has countered the view that traditional institutions are feudalistic, anachronistic, and, therefore, irrelevant to our current needs. There are some other people who think that at this period of serious efforts towards national integration, traditional institutions which encourage ethnic instead of national interest should be scrapped. Others hold the view that traditional institutions wield undue influence on governmental affairs. This argument stems from the lessons of the past when traditional institutions played great role in governance.

Today, the roles of traditional institutions in the governance of the state have greatly declined. There are no defined roles for traditional institutions in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Some people have argued that the traditional institutions should be insulated from partisan politics in order to maintain their neutrality, objectivity, fairness and justice for all citizens. Recently, the All Progressives Grand Alliance, APGA, led Anambra State Government sanctioned 12 traditional rulers, who went to Abuja to felicitate with President Muhammed Buhari on his 'good governance' on alleged partisan politics. The State Government frowned at their visit at a time of increased insecurity, unemployment and worsening economic woes in the country, and described their actions as unpatriotic and partisanship.

As a matter of fact, some traditional institutions have played disappointing roles in recent years to the disappointment of their subjects. The Igbo people have rigid mindset to conflict resolution (Anigbo, 2015). This in itself is a source of conflict (Ibeanu, 2003). The incorporation of Igbo society into the world capitalist system consequent on colonialism was characterized by the emergence of new values. The values elevated individualism, pursuit of naked selfish interest above humane living characteristic of Igbo associational life. The capitalist values permeated even the family institution and by implication, associational lives thriving on sentimental and emotional values. Traditional institutions are the components of the capitalist social relations of production in Nigeria. They emerged to take care of the obligation deficiencies of the government at the state and Federal levels, including local government on social development issues. As the people struggle for values within and through their association in the production process, conflict tends to arise when some of its members feel relatively deprived. In Igbo land, traditional institutions played great role in resolving conflicts, such as, communal conflicts, land disputes, chieftaincy disputes, among others.

Nwankwo [2007] has noted that traditional institutions strategies of conflicts resolution mechanisms could be adapted to address numerous conflicts and security challenges in Igbo land and other parts of the country. In Anambra State today, just like

other states of the Federation, insecurity, armed robberies, kidnappings, banditries, communal conflicts, land disputes, among other conflicts and crises have become the orders of the day despite the existence of the police, the armed forces, civil defense, the Customs, the Immigration, the State Security, among other security agencies. This has resulted to increasing calls from different quarters for the introduction of the state police, community police, as well as the constitutional roles for traditional rulers, among others. These calls for urgent solution to the insecurity problems in the country warranted the need to re-examine the role of traditional institutions in managing conflicts in Anambra state.

Despite the increasing spate of crises and insecurity in the country, South East, including Anambra State have enjoined relative peace. It is also believed that traditional institutions play great role in managing communal conflicts in Anambra State; hence the need to examine their roles and strategies in managing conflicts in the state.

**Conceptual Framework** There is no consensus on the exact definition of conflict among scholars in the field. Most of these definitions treat conflict as a negative pathological condition characterized by lack of co-operation, hostility, struggle, breakdown and destruction. Perhaps, the reason for this bias lies in the value system of the observer (Agboeze, 2004).

For Nwankwo (2007), the entire institutional set up today seems to be very complex. In fact the sweet and harmonious relationship that exists no sooner than later pave way to strain and stress. Whether the reason behind it is convincing or not, the story is that all these revolve on the orbit of social, economic, traditional, cultural and psychological realms for a proper understanding of it all. One has to cross-examine our family lives under different cultural backgrounds from typical Western societies to African traditional milieu.

According to Akumuo (2013), conflict is an inevitable circumstance that happens in all spheres of life. It cannot be totally eliminated from life activities but it can be controlled. Ezra (2011), maintained that conflict is absence of love, peace and unity between or among parties. Ezeh and Mbah (2014) noted the tendency for conflict to occur whenever and wherever people have personal and group interactions. As people are organized into groups to seek a common goal, the probability of conflict greatly increases. Conflict has a negative connotation, for many people and communities face conflicts at all levels. Conflicts are rarely resolved easily. Various authorities have different views regarding the types of conflict.

Okonkwo (2007) sees conflict as a state of opposition, disagreement or incompatibility between two or more people or groups of people, which is sometimes characterized by physical violence. Conflict is a part of life and inevitable. It can be experienced in various places, such as, home, school, work place, communities, states and countries, etc. Some people think that conflict is bad and should be avoided. We cannot avoid having conflicts. We have different views on issues and ideas. Our ideas will differ with other people's view points and this may result in conflict. In a larger context, if we look at what is happening around the world today, we will find out that the majority of the conflicts occur as a result of clash of interest or opposing positions on issues.

### **Traditional Strategies of Conflict Resolution in Anambra State**

There are internal and external methods of resolving conflicts in Anambra State. The internal methods include those strategies of conflict resolutions outside the criminal justice system. It includes covenant making, use of respectable elders, age grades, youth

organizations, influential community leaders, women groups, and so forth in trying to resolve a conflict situation. The external methods include the use of police, courts, caretaker committees and commission of inquiry, among others in trying to resolve a conflict situation.

Parties to any conflict situation, hold divergent views on the issue generating the conflict. This is because of variations in man's cognitive processes. On receiving a conflict stimulus, parties to the conflict evaluate it often according to their previous experiences and history. The meaning they assign to the stimulus is a function of these variables. It is the meaning that influences their response to the conflict situation. The meaning again is influenced by each party's needs, interest and value preferences. According to Vercovitch (2009:6):

When conflict issues are defined in terms of interests, the basic incompatibility between the parties is perceived as differences on the preferred model of distribution of resources. When they are defined as conflict of value, the basic incompatibility is perceived in terms of differences in beliefs, ideologies and cognitive structures. Such differences have their effects on how conflict is managed.

These traditional strategies for managing conflicts include some institutional arrangements, such as, immediate family members ("Umunne" or "Ezi-na-ulo"), "Umunna", "Umuada", extended family members called "Ikwu-na-ibe" and it includes the paternal and maternal relations "Dewunne", in-laws "ndi oogoo" the village, the age grade and the town union executives:

*[Umunne/ Umunna] The Family* Depending on the nature of the conflict, the "Umunne" or "Ezi-na-ulo" that is the immediate members of the family first sit together on the issue and find out the root cause of the problem and decide on the solution to that. Most often, the conflict is resolved within the immediate family members. In a situation, when the conflict is beyond the capacity of the immediate family members, the problem would be reported or handed over to "Umunna" [members of the patrilineage descent from one common male ancestor], to look into the issue and resolve the conflict.

Depending on the nature of the conflict, the "Umunna" often involve the "Umuada" - [their married daughters living outside the community] in the issue, or the family concerned might report the problem to them ("Umuada"). These daughters - the "Umuada" have powers in the resolution of conflicts. They do not fear anyone and most often their decision or ruling is usually respected and accepted by all as the final [Nwekeaku, 2007:19].

Any conflict that is beyond the capacity of "Umuada", "Umunna" is considered very serious and viewed by those concerned as heading to irreparable rifts, resentments and break ups. The issue is then reported to the Extended family called "Ikwu-na-ibe", The "Ikwu-na-ibe" institution which includes the in-laws, is rather all embracing - ("Umunne", Umunna", Umuada, "Ezi-na-ulo", ndi-oogoo") and was concerned with the total welfare and well-being of its members. The extended family is mobilised only in extreme or crisis situation when the lower levels of familiar institutions were unable to take proper care of the needs of a member(s) The decision of the extended family during resolution of conflict is normally sort for, by the village, age grade or the town, whenever the issue is reported to them.

*Umuada (Daughters of the Community)* Anazonwu [2001] has noted that in the pre-colonial era, among the Igbo people and Anambra in particular, women were held sacred and they participated in collective decisions making on certain sensitive issues that touched on their interest. They do this through an institutional group known as Otu Umuada members. The Otu Umuada were dynamic, powerful and well respected by their communities. They were highly regarded as critical group and guardians of the village traditions and peace makers. The Umuada often intervened whenever the customs and traditions are violated and are likely to cause serious crises and irreconcilable conflicts in the community. They could impose sanctions just to ensure compliance and peace in the community.

*The Age Grades* The age grades are a very important organ of social structure especially in our traditional Igbo communities. The formation and membership of an age grade is much revered activity. It is a universal social institution that is highly appreciated by various communities. Over the years age grades in different communities have distinguished themselves in performing such roles that aim at enhancing the socio economic life of the people. They help in such traditional functions as maintenance of law and order, settlement of disputes between warring members, construction and maintenance of roads and markets, ensuring the cleanliness of local streams and above all; protecting their communities from external aggression. The age grades system is very strong, nonresident community members cannot avoid going home periodically to participate in the activities of their age grades [Nwankwo, 2007]

*Traditional Rulers* The word traditional rulers "entail the reign of a monarchy or a titled ruler vested with the authority to rule over a people, as well as be the custodian of customs and traditions of the people. Traditional institutions are headed by traditional rulers and these institutions are very vital in bringing development closer to the rural people [Sievers, 1998]. Traditional rulers have succeeded in boosting community development through the provisions of bore holders, rural roads, formation of co-operative societies, setting up markets, constructions of culverts, constructions of earth dams, mobilizing people for health programmes and residing disputes within their domains. Sievers [1998] further observed that traditional rulers are the arrow head of the promotion and protection of the customs and traditions of their people, as well as coordinates the efforts of other institutions for the well-being of the people.

*Town Unions* This practice reached its peak in Igbo land after the civil war when almost all public facilities such as markets, town halls, maternity homes, and schools were damaged as a result of the war. The town union became very necessary tool for rural development as it became the veritable instrument for grassroots mobilization in the state. They disseminate information about government policies, mold public opinion, raise fund, expand and extend the utilities, undertake and encourage group farming activities, and help in the maintenance of law and order in the community [Onwuekwusi, 2011]

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work is anchored on the Marxian variant of structural conflict theory as it relates to the character of the state and the relative deprivation theory of social conflict as propounded by Gurr (1970). It is the conflict associated with the colonial and post-colonial patterns of using state power which necessitated the emergence of traditional institutions as development partners of the state. The structure of the Nigerian state is such that production process is poorly integrated. Consequently, social relationship within the state

is weak because primordial feelings, sentiments and attachments define interpersonal relationships. Ethnic voluntary associations became institutionalized avenue of establishing, recreating and defending this mindset. It influenced the political process when political parties used them as channels of political mobilization against the out-group. Emerging conflict from this social development could not be seriously investigated by the state because the theory of modernization that is the thrust of her development process was very deficient in making such an investigation (Igun, 2006).

Being Western-initiated and Western-oriented, modernization theory believes in one-size -fits-all approach to development. Unfortunately, the conflict of interests defining the economic and social relationship between developed nations (championing the modernization of Nigeria) and Nigeria as a nation state influenced patterns of public service delivery in matters of state policy and direction (Rostow, 2011). The prevailing methods of resource allocation in the country were not based on demands of even development and collective well- being (Nnoli, 2008). Although traditional institutions rationalize their emergence and role processes on advancing their common ancestry and structural conflicts, which anchor on how the institutions go about their business. The Igbo society is traditionally structured around caste system (Imogena, 2013; Nwosu, 2009). Modernization has not wiped out this (Achuba, 2016; Anazonwu and Obiajulu, 2001). Component villages comprising traditional institutions often experience social conflicts arising from prejudice, stereotypes and horizontal inequality. These are usually rationalized with myths of origin (Nzimiro, 2001), settlement patterns (Okonkwo, 2007; Okafor, 2010), competition for scarce resources (Ibeanu and Onu, 2001; Ibeanu, 2003), caste membership (Onwuegbusi, 2011) and so on.

## **Methodology**

The survey method of social investigation was used in collecting both the data used for the study. This method has been seen as very useful in designing and conducting studies that capture the demographic characteristics of a population under study (Burn, 2006); generate theory and a wide understanding of social processes or social action (Arber, 2001) and achieve active selection of people with competence in narrative production that serves to illuminate social contexts, interdependency and construction of reality (Holstein and Gaborim, 2015).

Data were randomly collected from institutional leaders and officials. These were administrative heads of the various institutions at the lineage levels. They were the channels of communication between institutions executives and community members. A total of 125 respondents were randomly sampled from the state.

## **Data Presentation and Analysis**

*Research question 1:* What strategy do traditional institutions in Anambra State use in conflicts resolution? The respondents were asked about the strategies they used in resolving conflicts. Responding, 80 respondents said that that the strategy adopted by traditional institutions in resolving conflicts in Anambra state was through the engagement of relevant institutions to specific issues. On the other hand, 25 respondents stated that it was through the involvement of Umuada, while 20 respondents said that was through the engagement of the age grades.

**Table 4:** RESPONDENTS RESPONSES ON INSTITUTIONAL METHODS

Variables	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Engagement of pertinent institutions	80	64
Involving the Umuada	25	20
Engaging the age grades	20	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Fieldwork Survey, 2021

**Research question 2:** What do the traditional institutions in Anambra State see as internal sources of conflicts resolution? Responding to research question 2, 52 respondents opined that the struggle for leadership is the source of internal conflict in the state, hi like manner, 60 respondents are of the belief that lack of accountability is the source of internal conflict in Anambra state, while 13 respondents held the view that internal source of conflict in the state was as a result of role allocation along gender sensitivity. This information is presented in table 5 below.

**Table 5:** RESPONDENTS DISTRIBUTION ON SOURCES OF CONFLICTS

Variables	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Struggle for leadership	52	41.6
Lack of accountability	60	48
Role allocation along gender	13	10.4
Total	125	100

Source: Fieldwork Survey, 2021

**Research question 3:** What do the traditional institutions in Anambra State see as external sources of conflicts resolution? The data indicated that the traditional ruler's insistence on producing the President General (PG) is the external source of conflict in the state, while 42 respondents held the view that the state government's financial allocation is the external source of conflict. Another 35 respondents attributed it to the creation of caretaker committees.

**Table 6:** RESPONDENTS VIEWS ON CAUSES OF EXTERNAL CONFLICTS

Variables	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Traditional Ruler's Insistence on producing P.G.	48	38.4
State governments' financial allocation	42	33.6
Creation of Caretaker Committee	35	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Fieldwork Survey, 2021

**Research question 4:** Which of the conflict resolution strategy (external or internal) is preferred by traditional institutions in Anambra State? Responding to research question 4, table 7 below demonstrates that 85[68%] respondents are of the opinion that allowing those in dispute to nominate a mediator was the preferred strategy in resolving conflicts in the state; similarly, 10[8%] respondents likened it to the use of elders, including traditional rulers, whereas 30[24%] respondents held the view that the preferred strategy was covenant making (igba ndu).

**Table 7:** RESPONDENTS DISTRIBUTION ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES

Variables	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Allowing those in dispute to nominate a mediator	85	68
Use of elders including traditional ruler	10	8
Covenant-making (Igba ndu)	30	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Fieldwork Survey, 2021 Discussion on Findings

Findings indicate that traditional institutions are veritable instruments of conflicts resolution in Anambra State. According to the data collected, 25 respondents [20%] stated that the use of Umuada in resolving conflicts in their communities was very effective, another 20 [16%] said the age grades were better, but 80[64%] said that the various traditional institutions were very good. The data also revealed that the conflicts were both internal and external. According to the data, 48 respondents, about 38.4 per cent said the traditional rulers were the major cause of internal conflicts because of their insistence on imposing their views on the community, while another 42[33.6%] said that the state government interference in community matters was the major external source of conflicts in the state.

Among the internal conflicts facing communities is the leadership struggle among its members, while Land disputes are inter-communal conflicts. The age grades, umuada, title holders, town union executives, traditional rulers, among others, played effective role in resolving conflicts for the purpose of maintaining law and order in the society. These institutions handle many cases that could otherwise lead to break down of law and order in the state. These conflicts prevailed there due to variables, such as, settlement patterns, myths of origin, superiority contest, desire to be recognized in the community as an influential person, and desire to appropriate collective wealth. Generally, 85 respondents [68%] said the traditional strategies would improve their performance if the disputing parties are allowed to nominate their mediators, another 30 [24%] said that covenant or oath taking would be better, while 10 stated that the use of elders in conflict resolutions would produce better results.

State governments' financial allocation to the communities has been found in this study, to be an external source of conflicts. In-depth interviews revealed that the reason for the release, according to government officials, is to enable government's influence reach the grassroots, especially during festive periods. The latent consequence of the financial release has been the increasing frequency of misgivings, infightings and silent conflicts among members of traditional institutions.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, efforts have been made to investigate traditional institutions and conflict resolution strategies in Anambra state. Though there was no consensus on the exact definition of conflicts, it was agreed that conflicts are inevitable in every human organization or society [Akumuo, 2013]. The traditional institutions have potency in resolving communal conflicts in Anambra State. The various conflicts resolution mechanisms, such as, the age grade, the umuada, umunna, town union executives, traditional rulers, among others, are still relevant today in the state despite the modernization process. They help to resolve conflicts of different dimensions; hence Anambra state enjoys relative peace despite the increasing security challenges in the country. It is believed that these traditional strategies could be adapted and integrated into the Anambra State conflict resolution mechanisms, especially now the call for the introduction of state police has become louder and persistent.

In the light of the findings of this study the following recommendations are made: (a) Traditional institutions should be, recognized, adapted and strengthened for improve participation and performance in conflicts resolution in the state. (b) Government should involve traditional rulers, town union executives and other traditional institution in handling land disputes, chieftaincy tussles, inter-community disputes and other matters that may lead to break down of law and order in the state.. (c) These traditional institution should be co-opted and integrated into the security architecture of the state for operational efficiency in resolving communal conflicts. (d) Communities that prefer traditional methods of conflict resolution can be assisted to appreciate challenges involved in doing so, especially in this era of globalizations. In this regard they should be encouraged to entrench in their constitution indigenous methods of conflict resolution they like and de-emphasize the foreign ones they dislike.

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