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TRADITIONAL RULERS AND PEACE BUILDING IN RURAL COMMUNITIES IN IMO STATE

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Abstract

This study focuses on traditional rulers and peace building in rural communities in Imo State. The study was anchored on the structural functional theory. The study employed only secondary data which were based on published literature. The study revealed that poor funding affects traditional rulers in maintenance of peace and harmony, lack of constitutional power/recognition affects traditional rulers in maintenance of peace and harmony and poor attitude of the people affects traditional rulers in maintenance of peace and harmony. It was recommended that the government should fund the traditional institution very effectively, and give constitutional recognition to traditional rulers. Furthermore, traditional rulers should be encouraged to mediate in conflicts in society and should be educated and on enlightened in modern and alternative dispute resolution that will enable them to facilitate and enhance resolution of conflict in the society. the study conclude that traditional rulers have put in place several measures in conflict resolution which have assisted in maintaining peace/harmony, law and order in their community.

Key Words: Traditional Rulers, Peace Building, Rural Communities, Poor Funding, Maintenance, Peace and Harmony, Constitutional Power/Recognition Poor Attitude and People.

Introduction

Traditional communities depended largely on self help. They initiated development projects to meet their communal felt needs. In traditional Nigeria, rural development was often known as community development. The traditional rulers play many roles to make the communities a better place to be. In this case, the role of traditional rulers in peace and development cannot be neglected. In view of Irene (2016), traditional rulers in Nigeria have been playing an important role in mitigating violence and ensuring the peaceful co-existence of the people in the country right from pre-colonial period. For example, during pre-colonial period, the traditional rulers were the repository of the executive, legislative and judicial powers who implemented and maintained law and order, allocated land, resolved conflicts especially land

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disputes and ensured peace and harmony among people in their respective areas of the domain (Fatile, Majekodunmi & Adejuwon, 2023).

As a result, violence particularly ethno-religious conflicts, intra and inter-communal conflicts were minimal. Moreover, during the colonial period, the British colonial masters recognizing the position and the legitimacy and respect the traditional leaders enjoyed in the country, they harnessed them to maintain law and order in the country for the smooth running of the colonial administration in Nigeria. For Julius-Adeoye (2022), even though after the independence of Nigeria, traditional leaders no longer wield executive, legislative, and judicial powers they used to wield during pre-colonial periods, the government, Non-governmental organizations and the public are referring to them on social issues such as the resolution of conflicts and disputes. This is because of the role they have been playing and can play in mitigating these challenges which pose a threat to peace and harmony in the country.

To appreciate the roles of traditional rulers in ensuring peace in contemporary Nigeria, there is a need to understand that operation of traditional institutions. According to Sharma (2017), the traditional institution is a type of institution in which the power to rule lies in the traditions, customs, and values of society. It is an indigenous political arrangement whereby leaders are appointed to lead based on tradition and customs of the people. For Igwubor (2020), the traditional rulers as the leaders of the people and custodian of the people's culture and tradition are highly respected and revered by the people within and outside their domain. Their words are laws to the people and their advice and opinions on issues are respected and accepted. This is so, because they are seen as intermediaries between the people and the gods and the ancestors, and as such, cannot be disobeyed or disrespected. Considering the legitimacy and respect the traditional leaders enjoyed from their people, they contribute positively for community development, peace and unity in the communities.

This study therefore focused on the role of traditional rulers in maintaining peace and harmony in Imo State. Basically, the essence of the traditional institution is to preserve the tradition, the customs, cultural heritage of the people and to manage, settle and resolved dispute/conflict arising within or between members of the community by the instrumentality of laws and customs of the people in that particular community or society. Traditional rulers are seen and referred to as the custodians of their people's norms, cultural values and practices (Olaoba, 2024). However, the role of the traditional rulers in this regard is being hindered by a number of factors which includes but not limited to lack of adequate funding of the traditional institution, lack of constitutional power recognition, poor attitude of the people toward traditional institutions, and many others. Based on this the traditional institutions has not been able to perform its functions as it should be. Based on that, this study focused on the role of traditional rulers in maintaining peace and harmony in Imo State.

Traditional Rulers

The concept of traditional rulers referred to leaders or persons by virtue of heredity or people with proven tracked records who are nominated, appointed and installed in line with the provisions of their native laws and customs (Wadama, 2023). Thus, traditional rulers hold the key to the success or failure in any political administration in Nigeria because they operate at the grassroot of the

society and interact closely with people in their daily activities, consequent upon which they were highly respected. Traditional rulers are popular symbol of tradition, culture, customs and their preservation, and as such, they are instrumental in ensuring growth and development in their communities through a well-structured system of communication. A traditional ruler has also been defined as a traditional head of an ethnic unit or clan who for the time being is the holder of the highest traditional authority whose title is recognized as a traditional ruler titled by the government of the state (Cookey, Alemika, Amucheazi, Oyebode & Yahaya, 2010).

According to Peter (2014), traditional institution is referred to "indigenous political arrangements whereby leaders with proven track records are appointed and installed in line with the native laws and customs to act as custodian of the people's norms, culture and practices". This implies that traditional leadership is hereditary in nature and it is not subject to the electoral process. The powers to lead emanate from the custom and tradition of the people. Historically, traditional leadership existed based on Kingdom, Sultanate, Emirate, and the Empire for the time immemorial before the advent of colonialism in Africa. At that period, traditional leaders held executive, legislative, and judicial powers in their respective areas of domain. They provided services, maintained law and order, resolved conflicts, allocated land and ensured peaceful co-existence of their people. For example, Fatile et al., (2023) observed that during the pre-colonial period in present-day Nigeria, traditional leadership had an organized system of administration in which traditional leaders' wielded executive, legislative and judicial powers.

They implemented and maintained law and order, allocated land, resolved conflicts both "intra and intercommunal" and ensured peace and harmony reigned in their areas of jurisdiction. Fatile et al., (2023) further stated that the conflict resolution at that time was carried out by the traditional leaders in such a way that the parties involved were invited to a forum whereby they were engaged in negotiation with the aim of resolving their differences mediated by the third party who ensured that reconciliation, cordiality are achieved hence state of hostility was avoided. As a result of the mechanisms employed in the process by the traditional leaders, the occurrence of conflicts which could distort the peaceful co-existence of the people was minimal. Even though, participation and acceptance of such a peace-making process were voluntary. Moreover, Olusola and Aisha (2013) added that the successes recorded in the resolution of conflict by the traditional leaders at that period were attributed to the fact that the traditional leaders possessed basic skills, knowledge of the customs, traditions, and values which communities honoured and revered. Moreover, during the colonial period, traditional leaders continued to wield powers especially with regards to the maintenance of law and order. For example, when British colonists came to Nigeria, they acknowledged the positions the traditional leaders held.

Peace Building

Peace building is a strategy aimed at enhancing order, unity, reduce conflict, and promote harmonious relations among different people and group (Hussaini, Sani & Mohammed, 2021). Okonji (2016) defined the term peace building as ranging from specific tasks that might derive from a comprehensive peace agreement - such as helping to disarm the parties, canton troops, and hold or destroy weapons; monitoring elections; fielding civilian police; and repatriating refuges - through far broader and less tangible objectives such as the restoration of order, advancing efforts

to protect human rights, reforming or strengthening governmental institutions, and promoting formal and informal processes of political violence (Chizea & Osumah, 2015). Lastly, as educators and participants in the development process, women contribute to building the capacity of their communities and nations to prevent violent conflict. This is made possible as a result of socialization processes and the historical experience of unequal relations and values that women bring to the process of peace building (Muhammed, Garba & Umar, 2022).

According to Abdullahi (2023), peace and harmony mean dealing with disputes and resolving conflicts fairly and properly with neutralization and middle way principles to further the welfare of each individual as well as the wellbeing of mankind as a whole. Peace and Harmony are the significant factors for any nation to be developed in an appropriate way. If there is peace and harmony among the people of the country, then only it can develop as a nation. The people and the government itself have to make enough endeavors to create harmonious and peaceful climate among the various societies. For Igbafen (2022), peace and harmony are enjoyed and possessed jointly by mankind, which is a base for the full realization of the creativity potential of individuals, the sustainable development of the economy and culture of nations, and a true security for the long lasting prosperity of mankind society. Peace and harmony can bring a peaceful and stable order to society, and they are a necessary condition for the survival and development of mankind. A world deprived of peace and harmony certainly will fall apart and return to the jungle era in which the strong prey on the weak. Peace and harmony is high wisdom. It is the height of wisdom that determines the breadth of vision, the depth of exploration, the extent of progress and the limit of transcendence (Efeizomor, 2014). None of the current major religions and major cultural traditions of the world does not love peace or pursue harmony. History shows that all the thoughts that are against peace and harmony are against the will of the people and shall perish by themselves. Peace and Harmony is the basic need of any nation. Only if a nation enjoys peace and harmony would it be able to prosper. The Constitution of our country includes laws to ensure political and social equality among the citizens in order to avoid clashes and maintain harmony among its citizens. Though the people of our country live peacefully with each other, often the peace is disturbed owing to some political, social, economic and religious factors (Akinola, 2019). Price rise and unemployment also creates unrest among the people. People often come forward to protest against these issues due to which the normal functioning of the society is disrupted.

The Role of Traditional Rulers in Peace Building and Sustainable Development

The traditional rulers as the leaders of the people and custodian of the people's culture and tradition are highly respected and revered by the people within and outside their domain (Okunloye & Olokooba, 2017). Their words are laws to the people and their advice and opinions on issues are respected and accepted. This is so, because they are seen as intermediaries between the people and the gods and the ancestors, and as such, cannot be disobeyed or disrespected. There is the need therefore, for the government to partner and collaborate with them to resolve National crisis and conflicts that could escalate to the level of terrorism in Nigeria. The terrorists and militants belonged to an ethnic group that has a king. They listen to the traditional rulers because of the respect they have for them. The traditional rulers can reach the people involved in terrorism and militancy in Nigeria and call them for dialogue and negotiation (Nweke, 2012).

The people have the confidence of the traditional rulers and would always confide in them. The government should empower and encourage the traditional rulers to open up the channel of communication with the people, especially the aggrieved ones to know their grievances and demands. The government would not have the capacity to do so because the people might have lost confidence on them just as Hamisu, Makinta, Muhammed, Garba and Umar (2022) noted, "from the optimism that prevailed in the 1960s to the unease and apprehension of the late 1970s, the mood in contemporary Africa has shifted to one of acute anxieties. Commentators now speak of a 'loss of confidence' and write of a struggle of survival". Africans, though has lost confidence on their political leaders as result of corruption, underdevelopment and ineffective leadership, they have an implicit confidence on the traditional rulers. This can be seen on the honour and respect accorded to traditional institutions and rulers in Africa (Alemika, 2015). The traditional rulers can negotiate or initiate the process of negotiation for the government in order to achieve peace for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Traditional rulers promote peace, foster cohesion and contribute to the political system of governance. The aim of Government is to ensure that the people, irrespective of tribe or language live harmoniously in an area. This creates political stability that aids development (Banchoff, 2013). It ensured the safety of the people and their properties in an area and also held to attract investors. When there are investors, the economy of an area is stimulated; jobs are created, leading to employment and eradication of youth restiveness. Employment is an anti-dote to crimes, militancy and violent agitations. The traditional rulers in ensuring peaceful co-existence in their domain ensure that the security of the area is guaranteed. This is a major factor in nation building and national security. As Erezene (2011) observed, "no responsible country play with its security". This is so because security is the basic factor in the existence and survival of the society and the nation. Therefore as the traditional rulers promote peaceful co-existence, peace and security in their domains, they are playing a major role in the promotion of national security which is a factor in national development.

There is the need for the government to encourage the traditional rulers in this regard to ensure continuous peace and harmony in the society. The society is dynamic and continues to change from time to time and it need peace and security in all ramifications to sustain the change. The government adapt to the change by modernizing and changing her policies to meet the realities of modernization and globalization. The traditional rulers therefore, remain a major force of stability in moments of change. They can serve as intermediaries to ensure that change occur in an orderly and familiar way (Emma, 2013). In ensuring this, they display an impressive flexibility, adapting to measures that will help meet the needs of the people in order to ensure that there is peace, stability, progress and development in their area or community. They lead their people to adapt to change by publicly accepting the change in spite of the consequences and challenges. The government, to maintain an effective leadership and good governance, comes up with policies that will ensure its realization.

However, in the recent times, people and communities do rise against such policies (Abah, 2019). It is the duty of the traditional rulers to help disseminate information on government policies and explain its purpose to the people. This has been the practice from the colonial period. This has to a large extent been neglected by the government in recent times. The government needed the

traditional rulers not only to explain her policies to the people, but also, help in implementing such policies so as to avoid frictions and conflicts between the people and government leading to instability. As Smith (2010) noted, "he who attempts to remove the stability which chieftaincy provides without first ensuring an even greater stability is courting disaster". Therefore, for any government to come up with a policy, especially on a sensitive national issue without letting in the traditional rules to play a role, either in its dissemination or implementation is courting a great disaster for such a policy. It should be noted that, just as the British could not do without the Chiefs and traditional rulers during the colonial period in implementing her policies, so will Nigeria cannot do without them, as they are major a force against factors of instability, disintegration and social chaos.

Traditional rulers are a major factor in the unity of the nation. They remain a great force in the communities and by extension among their neighbours in ensuring peace and unity of the people both in their communities and environs which includes their immediate neighbours. They mediate on conflicts and crisis that arises from time to time, ensuring that amicable resolution of the crises are achieved as soon as such conflicts comes up. In the resolution of conflicts, the traditional rulers ensured that crises are well managed so that normal social systems and instruments of control and limitation described by the term, "management" may operate (Kaniem & Biermann, 2017). The traditional rulers, by the office they occupy, are seen as the intermediary between the people and the gods and their ancestors. In some areas their office is considered "divine and sacrosanct". They are therefore held in high esteem as they remain impartial on issues and in conflict management as they answer to the gods for their actions. It is in search for impartial arbitrators that the traditional rulers were looked up to, for the adjudication of cases and resolution of conflicts.

The traditional rulers on their part rely such information to the government to act upon. The tradition rulers through the representative of the Traditional Council of Chiefs are members of the Security Council in the state (Tumbari, 2014). Through this body they make their contribution on security matters. Such contributions have helped in the maintenance of public order and preservation of peace in Nigeria. In recognizing the roles of the traditional rulers in the maintenance of security at the local government areas, the Federal Government in its guidelines for local government reforms, provides for the establishment of police committee at the local government areas in which the traditional rulers are represented. A section of the guidelines as published by the government printer, Kaduna, stated that "the committee is required to hold regular meetings to consider and make recommendations on all matters concerning the police and preservation of peace in the area" (Owojobi, 2014).

The traditional rulers in the maintenance of security in their areas has setup local vigilante which is made up of able bodied men and local hunters in the area. They are funded by the community and in some cases they are on voluntary mission. These local vigilante, police the locality, checking criminality in the area, preventing acts of lawlessness that could lead to breach of peace and instability. They also provide information to the security agencies on security matters. Through these means, the traditional rulers compliment the efforts of the government and the security agencies in the maintenance of national security to ensure stability, which is a sine qua non to nation building (Okonkwo, Ndubuisi-Okolo & Anagbogu, 2015). They need to be encouraged and empowered to continue in this regard for sustainable development in Nigeria. Traditional rulers

are bridge builders that could be used by the government to cement the existing relationship among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. "The amalgamation of 1914 could not undo the North-South dichotomy".

Factors Militating Against Traditional Rulers in the Maintenance Peace, Harmony and Sustainable Development

The traditional rulers have great roles to play in the maintenance of national security (Abdulwakeel, 2017). This has become necessary as the government alone cannot provide the necessary security that will secure lives and property in Nigeria as well as guarantee peace and unity of the nation. However, the role of the traditional rulers in this regard is being hindered by a number of factors which includes but not limited to lack of adequate funding of the traditional institution. The traditional rulers have no security vote or any allocation for security. This hinders their efforts to effectively mobilize the people for action on security matters (Anayo, 2019). The local vigilante they established for the maintenance of security in their domain are not remunerated and all the traditional rulers can do is a tip occasionally. In the 1999 constitution, there is no definite constitutional role for the traditional rulers.

This is one of the defaults of the 1999 constitution. How do they operate without a constitutional backup for their actions? A thorough scrutiny of the Nigerian constitution since 1979 clearly shows that traditional authority has not been recognized therein. It is a known fact that, even if the state council of chiefs/traditional rulers is in the constitution, it's membership is prescribed by the state House of Assembly without a constitutional role and according to Ekong (2015), "such council is supposed to act in advisory capacity to the state government, whenever requested to do so". It should be noted that the government may accept or reject their advice. The power of the traditional rulers in conflict resolution has seriously been undermined both in terms of authority and power. Attesting to this fact, Abdulqadir (2016) noted that "the instruments of coercion the police, courts, prisons, were removed from its control". There is no constitutional provision for the enforcement of the resolution reached in arbitration.

Alagoa (2011) shared a similar view when he stated that, "the traditional institutions no longer have full rein of operation, since they have to operate in a context where there authority is limited by Federal, State and even Local Government authority". Without the means of enforcing the decisions reached in the arbitration, the parties in conflicts may refuse to abide by the terms reached Also, as Nwani (2011) noted, "the emergence of public court destroyed the use of our traditional conflict resolution mechanism because it encourage people to bypass traditional courts to go regular courts". In some cases, the traditional rulers neglect their primary role as conflict managers especially at the grass root. Their inability to intervene at the earlier stage of crisis has led to the escalation of such crisis leading to a serious instability, chaos and huge damage to lives, property and economic activity of the nation.

Strategies for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Traditional Institution in Maintenance Peace, Harmony and Sustainable Development

The traditional rulers have a great rule to play in the maintenance of security for a sustainable development in Nigeria (Adejumo & Adejumo, 2014). However, for the traditional rulers to play the

role effectively, they should be security allocation for the traditional institution which will enable the institution to mobilize the people for the maintenance of security. The government should give the traditional institution constitutional recognition and backing for their actions. This will enable the decisions reached in arbitrations by traditional rulers implemented by parties in conflicts. In a restructure Nigeria, the traditional rulers should be partnered by the government and security agencies to obtain information on security matters in an area. Such information should be treated with up uttermost secrecy and with dispatch. The traditional rulers should be allowed and encouraged to establish Security Council or committee in their domain with the collaboration with security agencies (Akin, 2019). Their area of focus can be set out by the government. When this is done, security will be better handled both by the government and the traditional rulers who are at the grassroots as the government cannot handle security alone as events of the recent time has shown.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

In this study, the researcher used two theories. They are the structural functional theory, Vacuum-Filling Theory and Conflict theory. But the study was anchored on structural functional theory.

The Structural Functional Theory

Gabriel Almond and his associate in 1954 developed the structural functional theory. Almond focused on identification of functions of the polity in modern western system and how these functions are performed in non-western systems in the process of modernization (Unanka, 2004). This Theory holds that all the system in a society has structures or institutions and these structures or institutions have functions to perform for the survival of the society. Therefore, all political systems have structures which they must perform certain task in order to achieve equilibrium. According to Ekwonna (2014), the objective concern of structural functionalism is to identify which structures constitute which system, which structures perform which functions, and which functions impact on the system as a result of the relationship it creates with the structure and the rest of the structures in the system.

According to Varma (1975), structural functional analysis revolves around certain concepts more important of which are: functions and structures. In using structural functional analysis, three basic questions are usually asked, namely: (a) What basic functions are fulfilled in any given system, (b) By what structures and (c) Under what conditions? The basic assumptions of this theory include:

1. All system has structures which can be identified and these structures have certain functions to perform.
2. The broad aims and principles underlying a social structure can be identified
3. There is an interconnection between the parts of the society and tensions are resolved by the parts working together.
4. The society serves as a single interconnected system where each structure performs certain functions and interacts with each other to achieve maintenance of equilibrium (Sharma 2014; Johari 1983 cited in Ekwonna, 2014).

The relevance of this theory to this work is to guide us to explain the roles of traditional rulers in peace and harmony in the communities. The use of structural functional theory as the framework of analysis is based on its suitability for this study. The community (where the traditional rulers are the head) is seen as a sub structure in political system with the aim to achieve peace/unity, development, ensure community participation and preservation of cultural values. And the failure of traditional rulers to perform its function will automatically undermine the survival of the community i.e. political system. The formation of traditional rulers in Community is to improve the lives of the people and achieve peace, harmony, unity,

The Vacuum-Filling Theory

This theory was propounded by Ugwulebo in 2003. He belief the vacuum exist between the planned, the traditional rulers supposed roles and what they do in practical. According to Ugwulebo (2003), vacuum – filling theory aims at explicating and bringing to bear why people (especially those in high places) behave the way they do. In other words, the theory wants to unearth what these people do not want to say but have as the foundation bedrocks of their policies. It aims at looking at the reasons behind the offered reason or reason guiding certain actions. According to Ibe (2019), the major tenants of the theory are:

1. There is usually a gap or difference between what people (especially traditional rulers and government) promise and what they actually do.
2. There is a gap between what the traditional rulers promise the people and what they actually do in practical.
3. There is also a gap in what people of different communities needs and what is provided (in terms of peace making, unity, and promotion of development projects by traditional rulers).
4. The promises made to the masses heighten expectations which are usually dashed with reckless impunity on assumption of office.

Vacuum – filling theory was employed as the framework of analysis in this study. This is true because the theory focused on the need to understand the behavior and inconsistent way of life of our traditional rulers. Here, some of them do not actual promote peace and unity as it should be. This may be because of lack of funds, lack of constitutional recognition, and poor attitude of the people.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory can be seen as at development that took place in reaction to structural functionalism. Conflict theorists see dissension and conflict at every point in the social life. They see many societal elements contributing to disintegration and change in the society, people are seen as inherently sociable but also as particularly conflict prove in their social relations. They believed that the conflict theory must focus on real life rather than abstract formulations, that in a situation of inequality, those groups that control resources are likely to try to exploit those that lack resources. They saw the relationship between age groups in particular, between young and old as one of conflict. He looked at the resources posed by the various age groups and said that

adults have a variety of resources including size, experience, strength and the ability to satisfy the physical needs of the young.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of traditional rulers in maintaining peace and harmony in Ideato North LGA of Imo State. It has been pointed out that the traditional rulers have a role to play in the maintenance peace and harmony. This is due to the fact that the government cannot do it alone. Also, the fact remains that the traditional rulers are grassroot leaders who live among the people. They are highly respected and revered as the custodian of the people's culture, tradition and wisdom. As grass root leaders, they have a grip of all issues, peace/harmony issues, development issues, and security matters. They are therefore in a better position to play a role in the maintenance of peace in Nigeria. Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that traditional rulers have put in place several measures in conflict resolution which have assisted in maintaining peace/harmony, law and order in their community.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that:

1. The government should fund the traditional institution very effectively, and give constitutional recognition to traditional rulers.
2. Traditional rulers should be encouraged to mediate in conflicts in society and should be educated and on enlightened in modern and alternative dispute resolution that will enable them to facilitate and enhance resolution of conflict in the society.
3. All traditional rulers should be mandated to resolve conflicts regardless of differences in age and marital status.

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