

# **THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN MITIGATING VIOLENCE AND ENHANCING PEACE AND HARMONY IN NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

Violence is a global phenomenon that exists the world over. The form and manner in which it exists vary from one country to the other. Nigeria has been facing severe challenges of violent acts since her independence till date. These violent acts range from ethno-religious crises, kidnapping, communal conflicts, Boko Haram Insurgency, Niger Delta Militancy, and farmer/herder clashes, among others, which threaten peace and harmony in the country. This study examines traditional leaders' role in mitigating violence and enhancing peace and harmony in Nigeria. The study predominantly relied on secondary data, including journal articles, books, newspapers, etc. Content analysis was employed in the data analysis. The findings reveal that traditional leaders play an essential role in reducing violent acts and enhancing peace and harmony by way of intervening in resolving conflicts such as farmer/herder clashes, the Niger Delta crisis, and so on. Finally, the study suggests that the government should empower traditional leaders more by involving them in resolving conflicts and peace talks.

**Keywords:** Peacebuilding, Traditional leadership, Conflict resolution, Settlement, Rural community.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Violence is a global phenomenon that exists the world over. However, the form and way it exists vary from one country to the other. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with an estimated population of about one hundred and ninety million people. After her independence, the country has been facing a range of violence, from ethno-religious conflicts, civil war, the Biafran crisis, Meitatsine, etc. These crises have destroyed lives and properties and threatened the peaceful co-existence of the people in the country.

Moreover, in recent times, there emerged the crises of Boko Haram insurgents in the Northern part of Nigeria, Niger-Delta Militants in the South-south region, and Farmers/Herders clashes, which pose severe challenges to the security, economy, and peaceful co-existence of the countries. For example, from 2009 to date, the crisis of Boko Haram has accounted for the death of about 20,000 people, displaced over two million people, and caused economic setbacks in the northeast and the country at large. Consequently, the Farmer/Herders clash in Nigeria has, according to Amnesty International, led to the death of more than 3600 people from 2016 to 2018. To curtail these crises, the government devised a crackdown using security forces such as the Military, Police, DSS, etc. Despite a remarkable improvement in the situation in recent years, the Global Peace Index (2018) ranks Nigeria 148 position out of 163 around the world. This shows that the crises are still alarming, which places Nigeria among the most violent countries in the world. Thus, this situation has prompted agitation and interest in incorporating traditional leaders to help resolve conflicts and other issues that can lead to peaceful co-existence in the country.

Traditional leaders in Nigeria have played an essential role in mitigating violence and ensuring the peaceful coexistence of the people in the country since the pre-colonial period.

For example, during the pre-colonial period, the traditional leaders were the repository of the executive, legislative, and judicial powers that implemented and maintained law and order, allocated land, resolved conflicts, especially land disputes, and ensured peace and harmony among people in their respective areas of the domain. As a result, violence, particularly ethno-religious conflicts and intra and inter-communal conflicts, were minimal. Moreover, during the colonial period, the British colonial masters recognized the position, 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.

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 resolving 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. The basic questions for this study are: What roles do traditional leaders play in mitigating violence in Nigeria? How have these roles enhanced peace and harmony in Nigeria? Against this backdrop, this study examines the role of traditional leaders in mitigating violence in Nigeria.

## **Literature Review**

This paper discusses the role of traditional leaders in mitigating violence and enhancing peace and harmony in Nigeria. Moreover, this section has been divided into four. The first section deals with the definition of violence. The second section discusses violence in Nigeria and the different

measures taken by successive governments to curtail it. Thirdly, the roles of the traditional leaders during the pre-colonial and colonial periods are highlighted.

Finally, the roles of the traditional leaders were discussed about mitigating violence and enhancing peace in Nigeria.

## **Violence**

First and foremost, there is a need to understand what the concept of violence is all about. Violence is a word whose verb form means to violate. To violate connotes different things: to injure, disobey, defy, disregard, disrupt, encroach, err, infract, infringe, meddle, offend, oppose, outrage, sacrilege, tamper with, transgress, trespass, abuse, invade, pollute, ravish, etc. Each of these constitutes the meaning of violence. Violence has been defined from different angles. In simple terms, violence means the use of intense force, often with the use of some weapons, to coax and threaten or fatally harm others in order to get them to surrender their properties or even their lives. The World Health Organization (n.d.) defines violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation." This implies any act (either physical or non-physical) by an individual or group that can cause harm or deprive others in their life endeavors. It also signifies any human actions that can destroy or harm other people's lives and properties and peaceful co-existence. Moreover, there are different forms of violence, which range from physical, psychological, sexual, spiritual, emotional, and cultural.

## **Violence in Nigeria**

Of course, violence is a global phenomenon that is not peculiar to Nigeria. However there are different forms of violence, but physical violence is the primary concern of this paper. Even though Nigeria has been experiencing almost all forms of violence mentioned above, evidence has shown that the country has been witnessing a wide range of violence, from ethno-religious conflicts, farmer/herder clashes, and politically motivated violence, among others.

It has also been proved that after the independence of Nigeria, almost all regions in the country have been faced with one or the other forms of violent acts. For example, the Northern part of the country has faced violence, such as the Maitatsine crisis, several ethno-religious conflicts and clashes between Hausa and Igbo in Kano, the Jos riot in 2001, the Bauchi riot in 1994, the Taliban crisis in 2004 in Yobe State and more recently the crisis of Boko Haram, Armed Bandits, kidnapping, and Farmers/Herders clashes. These crises have led to the death of thousands, the displacement of millions of people, and the destruction of economic activities in the region and Nigeria at large. It also aggravated the insecurity and heightened the level of violence in Nigeria. According to the National Bureau of Statistics Nigeria (NBS, 2019), the Boko Haram insurgency from 2009 to date has negatively affected about fifteen million people, out of which more than 20,000 people have lost their lives. On the other hand, the Amnesty International Report (2018) indicates that the conflict of Farmer/Herder in the North central part of Nigeria has claimed the lives of more than 2000 people in 2018 alone. However, most of the causes of these crises are directly or indirectly related to poverty, unemployment, ethnicity, ideology, poor governance, neglect, and human rights violations, among others.

However, Nigeria earns the most from oil revenue in the South-South region. Evidence shows that since the discovery of oil in the region, the region has faced conflicts and crises resulting from the struggle to control oil wealth. Okene (2011) observes that before the discovery of petroleum products in the region, the inhabitants were mainly fishers and farmers. However, with the discovery and the start of oil exploration in the region, environmental pollution and degradation existed, making farming and fishing activities impossible.

However, the government and the oil companies have not done enough to provide employment opportunities and social infrastructural services that would compensate the people in the region. As a result, poverty, unemployment, and lack of infrastructural service in the region have been prevalent. In response to their plight, people began peaceful protests, which later culminated in violent acts such as attacking oil companies, vandalization of pipelines, kidnappings, and killings of innocent citizens. This situation has caused severe damage to the country's economy by reducing the daily oil exploration in the region. For example, oil production at the zenith of the crisis, oil exploration has fallen from 2 million barrels per day to 500 thousand barrels (Mohammed et al., 2014). To deal with the security situation in the region, the government employed security forces such as the military, police, and other security forces to deal with such crises. Despite the measures to deal with the situation, the crises persist. Considering the increase in the crises and the damages it posed to the economy and the lives and properties of the people in the region, the government in 2009, as a way of resolving the crises, introduced Amnesty Programme, which was aimed at giving amnesty to the militants (who surrender their weapons and repent) and provides them with the employment opportunities that will make them productive and rely on their own hence the prevalence of peace and harmony and sustainable development in the region (Ogbonnaya & Ehigiamusoe, 2013). Amnesty Programme in the Niger Delta region has recorded tremendous

success in reducing the incidence of violent acts such as militancy, kidnappings, vandalization of oil pipelines, etc. Despite the success the program achieved, shreds of evidence indicate that the militant activities of vandalization of oil pipelines and kidnapping, among others, have begun to resume.

Nweke further states that traditional leaders' lack of involvement in the program has prevented a lasting solution to the crises in the region. Thus, he suggests that traditional leaders need to be incorporated into the program and other issues related to the peace process in the region.

Similarly, the Southeastern part of Nigeria has also witnessed a series of crises, from the Biafra crisis to kidnapping, among others. For example, in 1967, the Indigenous People of Biafra (Igbo) desired to have seceded from the Federation of Nigeria. In trying to protect the territorial integrity of the country, the Nigerian military and the Igbo people have been engulfed in a war that escalated to a civil war that claimed the lives of many Nigerians. For instance, evidence indicates that about 100,000 military personnel lost their lives in the war, and 2 million people died of starvation.

This situation has negatively threatened the peaceful co-existence of the people and destroyed the country's economic activities. However, the then-military government of Gen. Gowon tried to reintegrate and bring back normalcy in the country. Despite the success in truncating the movement of Biafra secession, there has occasionally been a resurgence of the crisis. For example, in 2016, the leader of the Biafran movement led people in an agitation, which resulted in an encounter with the military in which about 150 people lost their lives.

## **The Role of Traditional Leaders during Pre-Colonial and Colonial Periods**

For us to appreciate the roles of traditional leaders in mitigating violence and ensuring peace in contemporary Nigeria, some literature on the role of traditional leaders during pre-colonial and colonial periods needs to be reviewed. This will enhance our understanding of the roles of traditional leaders in mitigating violence and ensuring peace in their domains. The traditional institution is a type of institution in which the power to rule lies in society's traditions, customs, and values. It is an indigenous political arrangement whereby leaders are appointed to lead based on the traditions and customs of the people. According to Peter (2014, p.135), the traditional institution is an "indigenous political arrangement whereby leaders with proven track records are appointed and installed in line with the native laws and customs to act as custodians of the people's norms, culture, and practices." This implies that traditional leadership is hereditary and not subject to the electoral process. The powers to lead emanate from the customs and traditions of the people. Historically, traditional leadership existed based on the Kingdom, Sultanate, Emirate, and Empire for the time immemorial before the advent of colonialism in Africa. Traditional leaders held executive, legislative, and judicial powers in their respective domain areas during that period. They provided services, maintained law and order, resolved conflicts, allocated land, and ensured the peaceful co-existence of their people. For example, Fatale et al. (2013) 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 inter-communal," and ensured peace and harmony reigned in their areas of jurisdiction. Fatile further states that "the traditional leaders carried out the conflict resolution at that time 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 and cordiality were achieved, hence a state of hostility was avoided’.

As a result of the mechanisms employed in the process by the traditional leaders, the occurrence of conflicts that 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 added that ‘the successes recorded in resolving 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 honored by the communities.

Moreover, during the colonial period, traditional leaders continued to wield powers, especially regarding maintaining law and order. For example, when British colonists came to Nigeria, they acknowledged traditional leaders' positions. As a result, they introduced an "Indirect Rule," which means ruling the colony and the people of Nigeria through traditional leaders and their institutions of governance. Traditional leaders were assigned to maintain law and order at the initial stage. This is because, at that time, there was an uprising against British colonialists by the natives, hence a need for peace to be restored so that their colonial administration would run smoothly in the colony of Nigeria. Considering the legitimacy and respect the traditional leaders enjoyed from their people, British colonists increased their roles and used them to mediate between them and the people.

However, it was established that the colonial administration was successful in the colony of Nigeria due to the positive role played by the traditional leaders in maintaining peace and harmony during that period.

## **The Role of Traditional Leaders in Resolution of Conflict and Peace Building in Contemporary Nigeria**

The traditional leaders possess fundamental knowledge and skills of their people's customs, traditions, and values and the indigenous patterns of conflict resolution that place them in a better position to mitigate violence and ensure the peaceful co-existence of the people in Africa. In buttressing this point, different studies examine the impact of indigenous patterns of conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Africa. For example, Osei-hwedie & Rankopo (2012), in their case study of indigenous conflict resolution in Ghana and Botswana, observed that “the values embedded in the traditional institutions and cultural processes have a positive impact on the arbitration of conflicts to the extent that people favour the traditional pattern of conflicts resolution than by the courts”. This is because traditional conflict resolution is based on customs, traditions, and values that are more comprehended, accustomed, and accepted by the people. They concluded that the indigenous patterns of conflict resolution pave the way for peace and harmony to prevail in society. Supporting this argument, Bukari (2013) posits that the modern conflict resolution employed in the Bawku conflict in Ghana has failed to resolve the long-age conflict that bedeviled the area. He further asserts that the Kusasi and Mamprusi traditional conflict resolution patterns can positively resolve the conflict, hence the prevalence of peace and harmony in the area.

Similarly, a study by Sharma (1997) in Botswana shows that traditional customary courts have adjudicated over 75-80% of the criminal and civil cases in the country. These studies emphasize the strength of indigenous conflict resolution patterns in restoring peace without giving due consideration to their weaknesses. They also affirm that people prefer indigenous mechanisms for the resolution of conflict despite the absence of written laws that could guide the process.

In contrast, Loveness and Mathew (2017), in their case study on the role of the indigenous knowledge system in peace-building in the Umguza District in Zimbabwe, discover that traditional leaders play a significant role in arbitrating conflict and disputes. However, the process of indigenous conflict resolution has been fraudulent, subjective, and politicized. This problem was attributed to the absence of written law that could guide the process and prevent traditional rulers from adjudicating according to their whims. Traditional institutions must be formally assigned to resolve conflicts to protect the process against corruption and other personal interests.

Studies with different approaches in Nigeria have examined the extent to which traditional leaders play a role in resolving a range of conflicts, from ethno-religious, farmer/herder clashes, militancy, and Boko Haram insurgency, among others. For example, Aliyu et al. (2016) examined the role played by the Kano Emirate in resolving the spate of ethnoreligious crises between Hausa and Igbo that faced the state in the past. They found that the Kano Emirate has played a vital role in resolving ethno-religious conflicts using an informal mechanism. As a result, peace and harmony have been restored between Hausas and Igbos in such a way that most people preferred conflict resolution by the Kano Emirate over modern patterns by the police and courts in the state. Although the study has proved the legitimacy and respect the Kano Emirate still enjoys from the people in the state, it negates the fact that when conflict becomes violent, it must involve the formal pattern (by security personnel like the military and police) of resolving and restoring peace in the situation. Supporting Aliyu et al.'s arguments, Okonji (2016) postulates that the local chiefs contributed to resolving and restoring peace in the case of ethno-religious conflict in Kosofe in Lagos. In addition, he found that 88.8% of the study's respondents acceded to the decisions of the traditional chiefs over other actors in the arbitration of the conflict in Kosofe LGA in Lagos State. This shows that traditional leaders play a vital role in the resolution of ethnic and religious conflicts, and therefore, such

conflicts are best handled by them because people honor, respect, and accept their decisions. Similarly, Hamisu, Makinta, Muhammed, Garba, and Umar (2017) examine the impact of traditional leaders in resolving farmers'/herders' conflict in Borno State. They found that most people involved in the conflict believed traditional leaders played a vital role in resolving the conflict. As a result, peace has been restored in the area. This study concluded that the strategy employed by traditional leaders in resolving such conflict contributed to bringing peace and normalcy to the area. This is an empirical case study whose findings can be applied to other parts of the country where such a conflict is taking place.

In their studies, Chizea & Osumah (2015), Nweke (2012), and Olusola & Aisha (2013) argued that most of the crises, such as ethnoreligious crises, militancy in the Niger Delta, Boko Haram insurgency, farmer/herder clashes, among others, occur and aggravate in Nigeria as a result of not involving the traditional rulers at the initial stage of the crises. They further believed that the traditional rulers know their people's values, norms, culture, and traditions with which they can resolve and manage conflicts and crises and ensure peace and harmony prevail in their areas of domain. This assertion is true because evidence in the past (during pre-colonial and colonial periods) has clearly shown that the traditional leaders resolved and managed conflicts effectively and ensured peace reigned in their respective areas of jurisdiction.

### **Theoretical Framework of Analysis**

This study is anchored on historical orientation as its framework of analysis. Like the legal approach, the historical approach is essentially an orientation. The historian's orientation relies heavily on understanding the present through probing what happened in the past. The emphasis is on the sequence of past events. In this approach, the present is regarded as one stage in a series that will continue, and the specific features and complexity of developments are carefully

described and analyzed. A concern with trends and patterns is sometimes a feature of this approach. At its best, the historical approach helps to place a given administrative system in the broader context.

Historical studies are relevant because they give more local information. They constitute detailed studies of local communities in Nigeria. The authors concentrate mainly on the social communities in Nigeria. That is, they concentrate specifically on the social, political, and administrative systems in the various communities before the advent and during the era of British colonial administration. Descriptive historians have been able to challenge some myths and easy generalizations contained in the semi-official and official studies of the same historical period. The traditional states of northern Nigeria formed the backbone of the British system of Indirect Rule. From the early colonial period onwards, these states and their peoples have been the subject of several studies, most of which have been descriptive and historical. As articulated by Blench et al. (2006), critical early overviews include Burdon's *Northern Nigeria, Historical Notes on Certain Emirates and Tribes* (1909), Temple's *The Native Races and their Rulers* (1918), and *Notes on the Tribes, Provinces, Emirates and States of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria* (1919), Meek's *The Northern Tribes of Nigeria* (1925) and *Tribal Studies in Northern Nigeria* (1931), and Hogben's *The Muhammadan Emirates of Nigeria* (1930), revised and updated by Hogben and Kirk-Greene in *The Emirates of Northern Nigeria* (1966). Basic anthropological information is collected in the volumes produced for the *Ethnographic Survey of Africa* (e.g., Forde, 1950; Gunn, 1953; 1956; Gunn & Conant, 1960).

These works draw upon local histories and chronicles and have spawned more detailed histories of individual polities. The most widely known of these have been published by outside scholars and include Last's *The Sokoto Caliphate* (1967), M.G. Smith's trilogy *Government in Zazzau*

(1950), *The Affairs of Daura* (1978), and *Government in Kano* (1997). However, the most rapidly expanding and vibrant category of historical literature is that of locally published histories and hagiographies written by Nigerians. Examples are recent works on the Berom chiefship (Nyam & Jacobs 2004; Dung 2005) and on past and present Emirs of Zazzau (Dalhatu & Hassan 2000; Dalhatu 2002). Blech et al. (2006). Studies such as these are important both as sources of information and as active contributions to the debate about the contemporary significance of traditional rulers and related institution

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Traditional rulers and security agents should be seen as partners in the onerous task of maintaining internal security. Since security is a collective responsibility, we contend that traditional rulers should be ascribed official roles as they remain the focal point of the rural populace. This becomes more desirable as Nigeria today faces numerous threats to its stability. Traditional rulers who had played significant roles in security matters in the past can be energized to play more roles in the face of new security challenges. It is accepted that chieftaincy institutions in the country have served and will continue to serve vital roles in maintaining justice and order and preserving most of our cherished traditional values, especially in the rural areas where most Nigerians live. The clarion call is for more recognition, considering their past and ongoing roles in sustaining our national security. This calls for our traditional rulers to be true partners with government and security agencies at all levels in order to achieve the objective of *Security For All*, as stated in the current Grand Strategy on National Security (2016), which was enunciated at the inception of the present administration in 1999 by President Obasanjo. The nation is proud of the contributions of traditional rulers throughout our history: before, during, and after the colonial period, up to the present time.

We conclude this paper by drawing attention to the seemingly contentious conception of the role of traditional rulers in security matters between and among the state and societal groups. If we assume that political authorities' ultimate goal is preserving peace that is or would be disrupted by violent conflict, the question to ask is, what role does the traditional ruler play in restoring peace once violent conflict between the state and societal groups has occurred?

The role of traditional rulership institutions in conflict resolution is often assumed rather than demonstrated. In our view, traditional rulers' role in peace building and resolution of conflict is suspect and ambiguous. At best, traditional rulers effectively mediate conflict that falls short of violence. However, the traditional ruler becomes irrelevant. The irrelevance is a consequence of a unique dilemma that confronts traditional rulers. The traditional ruler is subject to the overarching control of his state governor. At the same time, the traditional ruler, as head of his kingdom, has responsibility to his people. What is being argued here is that the loyalty of the traditional ruler is put to trial when violent conflict breaks out between the governor and his people. In situations of violent conflict, therefore, the traditional order becomes an object of suspicion by the parties involved in the conflict.

Without further attempting to diminish Nigeria's already eroded federal system, there should be provisions in the constitution that would enable traditional rulers to exert greater leverage over their communities and domains. The states of the federation should make laws that empower traditional rulers and institutions to play a more active role in the maintenance of law and order. Embracing this view, while addressing members of the Kaduna State Traditional Rulers Council during their courtesy visit to his office, Governor Nasir El-Rufai said traditional institutions are essential in the management of welfare and security in the country but lamented that the local

government authorities have usurped their roles. He stressed the need to review the 1976 local government laws that give the traditional rulers powers to maintain peace and security in their respective domains. Governor El-Rufai lamented that the state's insecurity problem had become complicated and compounded because of the failure of past administrations to assign constitutional responsibilities to traditional institutions. He explained that a security committee, which will include traditional rulers and other critical stakeholders, will soon be established by the state government to work out the specific roles of traditional rulers in maintaining peace and security in the state( Daily Trust, 2016). Traditional rulers in Nigeria have gradually witnessed the erosion of their powers, from depending upon British colonial administration to dependence upon elected politicians. As their roles narrowed, that of the political institutions increased. Many Nigerians have agreed that this situation also creates a massive gap between the people at the grassroots and the government at the state and center. A few attempts have made traditional rulers relevant at the state and federal levels. The states have their council of traditional rulers, in addition to the existence of the ministries of local government and chieftaincy affairs. Traditional rulers have also been given ceremonial functions as heads of governmental and non-governmental institutions, such as Chancellors of universities and other institutions of learning. There is also the seemingly unwritten practice in many states of devoting five percent of local government allocations to the upkeep of traditional institutions. However, there is a need to move beyond these ritualistic acts of recognition. Traditional rulers should be more active in protecting not only the values of their people but also the lives and property of persons within their domains.



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