

Extra Mundane Means of Conflict Resolution among the Igbo Group of Nigeria: An Anthropological Appraisal

Okpan, Samuel .O

Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Evangel University Okpoto, Nigeria.

**Corresponding Author: Okpan, Samuel .O, Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Evangel University Okpoto, Nigeria. okpansam@yahoo.com*

ABSTRACT

There is ample evidence in literature of extra mundane options for conflict resolution among the Igbo group of Nigeria through the continuous interaction between the living and the dead. This is exemplified in the masquerade, deities or oracles and the role of diviners who consult the spirit world and bring forth their opinion on issues that bother the living. The objectives of this review paper which is anchored on structural functionalism is primarily to account for those extra mundane approaches to conflict resolution adopted in traditional Igbo society. Secondly, the paper is an attempt to assess both the impact of modernization and the relevance of such mundane strategies of conflict resolution to today's conflict ridden Nigerian state. The author were of the view that given the fact that masquerades, deities and diviners are still important and revered aspects of the culture of contemporary Igbo societies, extra mundane approaches to conflict resolution should be refined and integrated into conflict resolution paraphernalia of the new Nigerian state.

Keywords: *Extra Mundane, Conflict, Conflict Resolution, Masquerade, Deities, Diviners*

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a crucial feature of interaction between individuals and groups across all known societies. It could be of varied dimensions including pathological or destructive, functional or constructive. It could also be merely symbolic within the cultural setting it is observed. The increasing frequency, intensity and spread of violent, destructive conflict is a major source of worry to the global community, governments, communities and individuals etc

In a multi-ethnic and multi cultural setting like Nigeria, conflicts easily sprout in the course of diverse forms of interaction that could be political, economic, social, religious etc.

Consequently, we now encounter Boko Haram insurgents in the north east, militants in the south-south, kidnapers in the southeast, conflicts arising from Fulani herdsmen among others. Unfortunately, western models of conflict resolution have failed to effectively address conflict situations both in Nigeria and beyond. Nonetheless, records abound effective conflict resolution strategies adopted among traditional societies of Nigeria and Africa in general that helped to scale down destructive

conflict in their societies. The Igbo group in addition to other methods applied what could be referred to as 'extra mundane approach' to resolve conflicts in their area, In the context of this paper, extra mundane means of conflict resolution refer to employment of measures beyond human physical efforts extending to the spiritual and metaphysical realms to source solutions to conflict situations that will be devoid of human resistance, challenges and abuse. Such extra mundane approaches are anchored on the belief system and socio-cultural fabric.

The purpose of this short review paper is to account for those extra mundane approaches, and to assess both the impact of modernization and their relevance to today's conflict ridden Nigerian state. Observations and secondary data formed major sources of data.

CONCEPTUALIZING EXTRA MUNDANE MEANS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION AMONG THE IGBO GROUP OF NIGERIA

The role of extra mundane strategies of conflict resolution among the Igbo cannot be over emphasized. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that unlike human elements who serve as mediators

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who may know very little about the facts of the dispute; this approach has the advantage of operating under direct influence of the gods as symbolized by masquerades, deities and diviners. Because of the elaborate initiation process into masquerade cults, incantations invocations, persons behind the mask are not equated to mere mortals again; rather they are considered to have transited to the level of spirits and cannot be questioned by the people. No one also claims knowledge of the man behind the mask in such situations because as Odunlami (2006) wrote; the mortal cannot claim knowledge of the immortal especially as he has taken refuge behind the mask.

There is huge advantage when immortal, unknown spirit/god intervenes in any matter. The towering status of such gods also recognized as ancestors to whom everyone else adore and ask for protection, makes it impossible for anyone to openly declare resentment to the actions and pronouncement of the gods.

Thus acceptance of the decisions and roles of the gods on any dispute could be real or imposed by the final authority of the gods symbolized in masquerades. Layiwola (1998) strongly emphasized the potency and essence of this Igbo conflict resolution strategy through the metaphysical or extra mundane means

EXISTING CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISM IN IGBO LAND PRIOR TO WESTERNIZATION

Masquerade Groups

In traditional Igbo society, membership of masquerade groups were restricted to initiated male adults. In absence of sophisticated secret societies, the masquerade groups are the nearest approximation.

Masquerades 'mmonwu' were conceived as ancestral spirits whose interest in the affairs of their living descendants compels them to visit the community during festivals, funerals and when things are not normal in the community. Masquerade also visits Igbo villages during festivals and uses the opportunity to caution individuals who behave contrary to social norms.

The appearance of masquerades is also a sign that the village still enjoys some measure of tranquility with their ancestors.

If masquerades fail to appear during important males festivals, such is seen as uncustomary and depicts the dissatisfaction of the ancestors over

the behavior of the living. This is in order to attract masquerades during festivals and to prevent the 'merciful' deities from becoming angry and withdrawing their services.

These masquerades performed varied functions of rule application, entertainment during festivals/funerals and social control. They may be brought in to discipline children who are disobedient or to flog women who cook when others have gone to bed. Night masquerades that appeared only at night performed the social function of using satirical songs and ridicule to criticize the defects in the behavior of any member of the community and thereby press for change.

Writing on the role of masquerades in rule application among the Igbo group, Ogbonna (1984) argued along with P.M Weil that the masked figures provide a mechanism through which the probability of sustained divisive conflict is decreased by converting secular actions of rule application into sacred, supra social actions. This assertion is very true of Igbo society.

Takena Tamuno (1966) have observed that masked dancers purporting to represent the spirit cult were used whenever there was difficulty in enforcing law and order in Igbo communities. This is another indication that masquerades were probably more efficient than the ordinary human elements in rule application. They are at the apex of conflict resolution structures of the Igbo group.

As conflict resolution and social control agent, the masquerades were unchallengeable. They intervened in land disputes, summoned people for communal work and collected levies from deviants.

They were dreaded and thought to have power of life and death. Individuals were therefore socially restrained from deviant behavior for fear of attracting the wrath of masquerades. To disobey the masquerade is to be at crossroad with both the living and the dead which most Igbo people avoid. Matters or disputes resolved by masquerades are most difficult to appeal against if any party is still aggrieved or dissatisfied. More so Brown and Lovejoy (2010) identified a strong masquerade institution "Ekpe" that exist in hinterlands of eastern Nigeria especially amongst the Calabar, Effik and Arochukwu people.

A male only association whose masquerades symbolized by the leopard, its membership is

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hierarchical with the highest ranking member being the oldest to be initiated. Ekpe effectively served as an executive and judicial body that controlled the above mentioned societies within the Bight of Biafra. They observed that the supremacy of the Ekpe society within the region aided the 17, 18 century slave trade as most of those sold were convicted of one crime or the other by the Ekpe organization, they group was highly regarded and its rules were sacrosanct.

Diviners (DibiaAfa)

The traditional belief system of Igbo society accommodated the services of diviners (dibiaafa) who provided the background to crucial problems and uncovered prospects of the future. The diviners explained why misfortunes or mysteries occurred and at times relate them to lapses in individual or communal behaviour. The individual or group whose deviant behavior was implicated in the misfortune was required to offer sacrifices to appease the spirit or to undergo ritual cleansing after which they must adjust and be of good behavior. It is in this regard that diviners serve as agents of social control and conflict resolution.

It was not uncommon however for the diviners to attribute the deviant behavior to factors outside the individual. Green (1964) have pointed out that the Igbo (diviners) often associate some cases of erratic anti-social behavior to some circumstances in a former existence or to the activities of a supernatural being rather than as a direct fault of the individual concerned.

The author agrees with Green that the practice often made the deviant to be tolerated in his society. But this is not without the danger of actually increasing non-conformism since it rationalized deviance and made the individual to expect deliverance from his 'possessor' rather than task him to adjust his behavior. Nonetheless, diviners lived up to expectation as instruments of conflict resolution and social control in traditional Igbo society and were accordingly respected.

Deities

Many deities abound in Igbo society and served the religious needs of the people. Additionally, they act as agents of social control because as Parkin (1972) observed commitment to a single faith is a sophisticated means of social control. Deities are believed to punish erring members of the community for offences openly or secretly committed. They fight the course of people whose rights were tampered with for no just

cause. The maltreated individual in company of the shrine priest was expected to make a formal report to the deity and leave the deity to pursue the matter.

The earth deity 'ana' among the Igbo group was responsible for good harvest, health and children. The deity was believed to be seriously offended when sacrilegious crimes like incest, murder or abduction are committed in an area. The people therefore restrain themselves from such crimes to avoid the rain of punishment that the deity might shower in such circumstances. On the other hand, cleansing rituals and sacrificial services are promptly administered through the deity's priest 'ezeana' when such crimes occur and before the deity turns out her wrath.

Deities made their mark by exploiting religious and ritual practices to which the people were strongly committed. It is therefore safe to agree with Parson (1952) that religion is closely related to the integration of the social system; and that the ideal type of a fully integrated society of a certain kind would have one completely integrated religious system. The traditional Igbo society had such integrated religious system.

Nwala (1985) further reported that the desire for social order and justice gave rise to the belief in the gods as agencies of social control in the Igbo country. These gods (deities) are successful in the function the Igbo environment.

There were several deities that served the purpose of dispute settling in Igbo land before the colonial invasion. One of such prominent deity is the supreme IbiniUkpabi "long juju" of the Arochukwu Kingdom in present day Abia State Nigeria. Speaking on the activities in the shrine, Ofoelue noted thus: "IbiniUkpabi shrine, which is located in Arochukwu, gained fame in the past because people from far and near came to consult it when in trouble. Oluikpe (2014) reported that the IbiniUkpabi shrine served as the Supreme Court of all Aros. People were reported to bring all disputes from far and near for spiritual justice at the IbiniUkpabi shrine. Because of the high esteem in which the shrine was held, its judgments remained supreme. The shrine was being administered by a group of cultists headed by a chief priest. In his book, *The Dust Must Settle*, Obinna Ozoigbo stated that due to the great influence of the long Juju, shrine stewards and lower members of the Juju cult migrated to clans south of the Niger and settled. In their new abodes, they served as emissaries and informants on disputes to the

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shrine and relayed information on disputes to the shrine and equally arranged trips to the latter and thus a Long Juju network was established in the region. Those found guilty were said to meet their fate at the tunnels of disappearance and the Red River, which would turn red when a person was killed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A relevant theoretical perspective for examination of conflict and conflict resolution must take cognizance of the socio-economic and political complexity of the society under study. The conflict tradition which sees conflict resolution and social control as state control designed to protect the interest of a privileged few is obviously deficient in explaining the phenomena of conflict resolution in an acephalous primary group like Igbo traditional society. The exchange model with emphasis on personal rewards is more economic oriented and less sociological and anthropological.

This research adopts the structural functionalist framework. The conflict resolution structures of the Igbo group constitute part of the social structure of their society. The functions of these structures are defined in terms of the contributions they make toward resolving conflicts, maintaining consensus and group solidarity. Parsons (1965) argued that human action is directed by norms provided by the social system.

He pointed out that the cultural system provides more general guidelines for action in the form of beliefs, values and systems of meaning. The norms which direct action are not merely isolated standards for behavior: they are integrated and patterned by the values and beliefs provided by the cultural system.

The Igbo traditional conflict resolution is largely hinged upon their religious believe. This is guided by the faith on the supernatural being that binds and dictates the people's actions and behavior in every circumstance. In relevance to religious believe as a bond that facilitate conflict resolution and also bonding members of the society Durkheim (1961) in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*; emphasized the importance of collective worship. He stated that, when the social group comes together in religious rituals full of drama and reverence.

Together its members express their faith in common values and beliefs. In this highly charged atmosphere of collective worship, the integration of society is strengthened. Members

of society express communicate and understand the moral bonds which unit them. The belief in gods and spirits which gives relevance to the social bond amongst worshipers originates from belief in the ancestral spirits of dead relatives.

MODERNIZATION AND ENGENDERED TRANSFORMATIONS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISM.

Indeed, the significant fact about African cultural history is the convergence upon the indigenous tradition of the two external influences—the Arab-Islamic and the European-Christian—to which the continent has been exposed for well over a millennium. The values and lifestyles associated with these traditions have been assimilated and to a large extent indigenized on the continent. This observation provides a broader perspective on the phenomenon of Westernization in Africa, an observation made as early as the late nineteenth century by the great African cultural theorist Edward Wilmot Blyden and summed up in the late twentieth century by Ali Mazrui as “the triple heritage” (Irele, 2010).

African society is not culture less as been espoused by some western scholars or devoid of a structured mechanism for governance and conflict resolution. Evidence pointing that traditional African societies especially the Igbo have a functional conflict resolution mechanism abound. However, as a result of Western cultural imperialism traditional African conflict resolution mechanisms were denigrated through the activities of European slave trade, missionaries, and colonialism. This is correct to the extent that colonialism serves as a vehicle of implantation of cultural imperialism in Africa. Colonialism, perceived in this context, is an imposition of foreign rule over indigenous traditional political setting and foreign dominance and subjugation of African people in all spheres of their social, political, cultural, economic, religious worship and conflict resolution mechanisms. It is important to stress that colonialism distorted and retarded the pace and tempo of cultural growth and trend of civilization in Africa. One of the most profound consequences of colonization has been how the political and economic rape of the colonies has also led to what sometimes seem to be an unbridgeable cultural gap between the nations that were the beneficiaries of colonization and those that were the victims of the colonial assault. Dare (2010) was of the view that with

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Africa subjugated and dominated, the Western culture and European mode of civilization began to thrive and outgrow African cultural heritage. Traditional African cultural practices paved the way for foreign way of doing things as Africans became fully 'westernized'. Western culture now is regarded as frontline civilization. African ways of doing things became primitive, archaic and regrettably unacceptable in public domain. Not only were certain aspects of the material culture in the colonies lost or destroyed, colonial societies also lost the power and sense of cultural continuity, such that it became practically impossible to recover the ability to strive for cultural progress on their own terms. Symbolic African crafts representing objects of worship and reference were carted away to European museums and cultural centres.

Great deities such as Amadioha, Ubini Ukpabietc that the people revered and believed in therefore serving as effective means of conflict resolution was categorized as idols that must be destroyed and replaced by western systems.

CONCLUSION

The trend of cultural westernization of Africa has become very pervasive and prevalent, such that Western civilization has taken precedence over African values and culture and the latter is regarded as inferior to the former. This paper is of the view that with the increasing spate of intractable conflict in Nigeria there is a need for a different approach towards effective resolution mechanism. It is obvious that westerns means of litigation is expensive, delays judgment, and in most cases the authorities perceived partial.

The processes have not adequately resolved major conflicts in Nigeria. Thus the people are gradually losing faith on the system and persistently yearning for a more effective mechanism. This paper therefore calls for a reawakening on how the existing Igbo conflict resolution mechanism could be harnessed and incorporated into mainstream conflict resolution in Nigeria.

Igbo conflict resolution mechanism is hinged upon the supreme divine authority that the people reference and accept its judgments as being impartial and fair. The chief priest whom is considered as intermediary between the people and their ancestors is perceived as semi god whom orders are considered instructions from the gods therefore sacred and obeyed without any form of objection or resistance.

The chief priest could be likened to a chief judge with absolute powers and authority. However, the chief judge is considered human that could be influenced, while the chief priest is perceived to possess divine powers as such more respected and revered by the entire community.

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Citation: Okpan, Samuel .O. “Extra Mundane Means of Conflict Resolution among the Igbo Group of Nigeria: An Anthropological Appraisal”, *Journal of Law and Judicial System*, 2(1), pp.8-13

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