

## **Traditional Institutions and Conflict Management in Rivers State**

Madubochi Wosu

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Rivers State University,  
Port Harcourt

madubochi.wosu@ust.edu.ng

### **Abstract**

Traditional institutions have long been integral to conflict management in many African societies, including Rivers State, Nigeria. The study explores the role of these institutions in mediating conflicts, maintaining social order, and promoting peace within communities in Rivers State. Utilizing a combination of review and archival research. The paper revealed that traditional leaders, cultural practices, and indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms contribute to mitigating disputes. The findings showed that the resilience and adaptability of traditional institutions in the face of modern challenges and underscore their importance in complementing formal legal systems. The study recommends that the traditional institutions should be used in conflict management because they are relevance in contemporary society; offering insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners in the fields of peace and conflict studies.

**Keywords:** Rivers State, Traditional Institutions, Conflict, Conflict Management, Sustainable Development

### **Introduction**

Conflict management in African societies has historically relied on the wisdom and authority of traditional institutions. In Rivers State, Nigeria, these institutions play a crucial role in mediating disputes, fostering social cohesion, and preserving cultural heritage. Traditional leaders, such as chiefs and elders, are often seen as custodians of communal values and are pivotal in conflict resolution processes. Rivers State, characterized by its ethnic diversity and rich cultural heritage, presents a unique context for examining the effectiveness of traditional conflict management mechanisms. The state's history of inter-communal conflicts, resource-based disputes, and political tensions underscores the need for effective and sustainable conflict resolution strategies. Traditional institutions, with their deep-rooted presence and cultural legitimacy, offer a valuable framework for addressing these challenges. Several studies have emphasized the importance of integrating traditional conflict resolution mechanisms with formal legal systems to enhance peacebuilding efforts. For instance, Okoro (2018) and Nweke (2020) argue that traditional institutions provide a culturally relevant and accessible means of resolving conflicts, particularly in rural areas where formal legal infrastructure may be limited. Similarly, scholars such as Ake (2017) highlights the role of traditional leaders in promoting dialogue, reconciliation, and restorative justice. This paper aims to explore the role of traditional institutions in conflict management in Rivers State, drawing on both historical and contemporary examples. Therefore, the study center on traditional institution and conflict management in Rivers State.

### **Indigenous Conflict Management Theory**

The theoretical review for understanding traditional institutions and conflict management is Indigenous Conflict Management Theory. Various scholarly contributions that highlight the importance of indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices in resolving conflicts. Among the earliest proponents of this framework are scholars like Bohannan (1957), who studied the Tiv of Nigeria, and Gluckman (1965), who explored customary law and conflict resolution in African societies. These early works laid the groundwork for understanding how traditional institutions function within their cultural contexts to manage disputes and maintain social order.

Modern proponents have expanded on these ideas, integrating them with contemporary theories of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Notable scholars include Deng (1996), whose work on the role of traditional authorities in Sudan, and Lederach (1997), who emphasized the importance of cultural contexts in conflict transformation. More recent studies by scholars such as Uchendu (2017) and Ekpe (2019) have further examined the application of traditional conflict management practices in Nigeria, including Rivers State.

### **Methodology**

The study used a combination of review and archival research to examine effect of traditional leaders, cultural practices on indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms contribute to mitigating disputes.

### **Implications for Practice in Rivers State, Nigeria**

The implications of this theoretical framework for conflict management in Rivers State are profound. By recognizing the value and efficacy of traditional institutions, policymakers and practitioners can harness their potential to enhance peacebuilding efforts. Here are some practical implications and real-life examples:

**Enhancing Local Governance:** Traditional leaders in Rivers State, such as chiefs and elders, can be integrated into local governance structures to provide culturally appropriate conflict resolution services. This integration can bridge the gap between formal legal systems and community-based practices, ensuring that justice is both accessible and culturally resonant.

**Community Reconciliation Initiatives:** Traditional conflict management practices, such as the use of peace councils and community mediations, can be formalized and supported by government and non-governmental organizations. For instance, the Ogoni Peace Process, which involved traditional leaders in dialogue and reconciliation efforts, has been instrumental in reducing tensions and promoting peace in the Ogoniland region (Uchendu, 2017).

**Restorative Justice Programs:** Programs that incorporate traditional restorative justice practices, such as the involvement of family and community members in conflict resolution, can address issues like land disputes and inter-communal conflicts. These programs emphasize repairing harm and restoring relationships, which are critical for long-term peace and stability.

**Capacity Building and Training:** Training programs for traditional leaders on modern conflict resolution techniques and human rights standards can enhance their effectiveness in managing contemporary conflicts. For example, initiatives by organizations like the Nigerian Institute of Peace and Conflict Resolution have provided training to traditional rulers in various parts of Nigeria, including Rivers State (Ekpe, 2019). Thus, the indigenous conflict management theory as the name implies is applied for specific regions hence, good for strategizing measures to cope with conflict and effectively surpass its effect through early detection, communication and mediating measures.

### **Traditional Institutions in Rivers State**

Rivers State is a state in the southern part of Nigeria, known for its rich cultural heritage and significant economic contributions, particularly in the oil and gas sector. The state has a diverse population with various ethnic groups, including the Ikwerre, Ogoni, Ijaw, and Kalabari. The economic activities in Rivers State, especially in the oil and gas sector, have led to significant environmental and social challenges, contributing to conflicts over resource control and environmental degradation (Ikenga & Ogechi, 2019).

Traditional institutions refer to indigenous systems of governance and societal organization that predate colonial and modern state structures. These institutions often include kingships, chieftaincies, councils of elders, and other local leadership structures that manage community affairs, adjudicate disputes, and preserve cultural heritage. In Rivers State, Nigeria, traditional institutions such as the Council of Chiefs and Elders play a significant role in the governance and dispute resolution within their communities. For instance, the Ogbakor Ikwerre Cultural Organization is an umbrella body of traditional rulers in the Ikwerre ethnic group, which engages in conflict resolution and cultural preservation (Ikenga & Ogechi, 2019).

### **Conflict**

Conflict refers to a serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one. In a sociopolitical context, it often involves groups with differing interests, values, or access to resources, leading to clashes and disputes. In Rivers State, conflicts often arise from disputes over land ownership, resource control, and political representation. The Ogoni Crisis, for instance, was a major conflict involving the Ogoni people and the Nigerian government over environmental degradation and marginalization by oil companies.

### **Conflict Management**

Conflict management involves the use of strategies and processes to mitigate, resolve, or prevent conflict. It includes negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and traditional forms of conflict resolution. In Rivers State, traditional institutions like the Council of Chiefs employ indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, such as mediation and arbitration by elders, to manage disputes within and between communities. This has been particularly effective in resolving chieftaincy disputes and land conflicts.

### **Traditional Institutions and Conflict Management in Rivers State**

Traditional institutions in Rivers State play a critical role in conflict management by leveraging their cultural authority and local knowledge. For instance, the Council of Chiefs and Elders often intervenes in land disputes and chieftaincy conflicts, using traditional arbitration methods that are respected by community members. These institutions are essential for maintaining peace and order in a region characterized by resource-based conflicts and political tensions. The Ogoni Crisis is a notable example where traditional institutions could have provided a platform for dialogue and mediation between the Ogoni people and the Nigerian government, potentially preventing the escalation of violence. Moreover, sustainable development efforts, such as those led by the NDDC, can only succeed if they incorporate the insights and cooperation of traditional institutions, ensuring that development projects are culturally appropriate and environmentally sustainable. By understanding the intricate relationships between traditional institutions, conflict, conflict management, and sustainable development, policymakers and stakeholders in Rivers State can develop more effective strategies for promoting peace and sustainable development in the region. To effectively manage conflicts and promote sustainable development in Rivers State, it is crucial to integrate the roles of traditional institutions with modern governance frameworks. Recognizing the authority and effectiveness of these

indigenous systems can enhance conflict resolution processes and contribute to long-term peace and stability in the region. This analysis is supported by the works of scholars who have extensively studied the dynamics of traditional governance, conflict, and sustainable development in Nigeria and other African contexts, providing a robust foundation for understanding and addressing the unique challenges of Rivers State.

**Limited Focus on Urban-Rural Dynamics:** In the rapidly urbanizing city of Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, traditional institutions often struggle to maintain their authority. Urban residents, influenced by modern governance structures and diverse cultural backgrounds, are less likely to adhere to traditional conflict resolution mechanisms compared to their rural counterparts. The factors contributing to challenges are urban areas like Port Harcourt host a mix of ethnic groups and cultures, diluting the influence of any single traditional institution; the presence of formal legal and administrative systems in urban centers often overshadows traditional mechanisms. and the rapid urban growth leads to the breakdown of close-knit community structures that traditional institutions rely on.

**International Best Practices:** Incorporating traditional conflict resolution methods within formal urban governance structures, as seen in South Africa where community courts work alongside traditional councils (Tamanaha, 2020). Programs that bridge the gap between urban residents and traditional leaders, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation (Williams, 2018).

**Integration with Modern Governance Structures:** In Okrika, a town in Rivers State, traditional rulers and government officials often clash over jurisdiction in land disputes. The lack of a formalized role for traditional institutions within the modern legal framework creates friction and inefficiencies. The factors contributing to challenges are overlapping authorities between traditional institutions and governmental agencies lead to confusion and conflict and traditional institutions often lack formal legal backing, limiting their power and influence in conflict resolution.

**International Best Practices:** In Botswana, the integration of traditional leaders into the national governance system through the House of Chiefs ensures that their roles and jurisdictions are clearly defined and respected (Nyathi, 2018). In addition, training programs for traditional leaders to enhance their understanding of modern legal systems and improve their conflict resolution skills (Nyathi, 2018).

**Impact of Modernization and Globalization:** In the oil-rich regions of Rivers State, traditional conflict resolution practices are challenged by the presence of multinational oil companies. These companies often prefer to engage with formal governmental structures, sidelining traditional institutions. The factors contributing to challenges are the economic influence of multinational companies can undermine traditional authority, exposure to global cultures and practices can erode traditional values and norms and modern communication and technology reduce reliance on traditional methods.

**International Best Practices:** Companies like Shell have implemented CSR programs that engage traditional leaders in decision-making processes, ensuring their involvement in conflict resolution (Frynas, 2009). In addition, the programs aimed at preserving and promoting traditional cultures and practices in the face of globalization, such as those implemented by UNESCO in various African countries (UNESCO, 2020).

**Gender Dynamics in Traditional Conflict Resolution:** In many communities in Rivers State, women play a minimal role in traditional conflict resolution processes. This exclusion can lead to biases and incomplete resolutions. The factors contributing to challenges are deep-seated patriarchal norms often limit women's participation in traditional governance and few traditional councils include women, limiting their perspectives and contributions.

**International Best Practices:** In Rwanda, women's representation in local governance, including traditional councils, has been institutionalized, leading to more inclusive and effective conflict resolution (Burnet, 2012) and initiatives that empower women to take active roles in community leadership and conflict resolution, such as those supported by the UN Women (UN Women, 2021).

**Longitudinal Impact Studies:** Many conflicts in Rivers State are resolved through traditional means, but there is limited data on the long-term effectiveness of these resolutions. For example, land disputes resolved by traditional leaders in the Andoni community often resurface after a few years. The factors contributing to challenges are traditional institutions often lack the resources to monitor and evaluate long-term outcomes of resolved conflicts and incomplete resolutions or failure to address root causes can lead to the recurrence of conflicts.

**International Best Practices:** Implementing robust frameworks to monitor the long-term impacts of conflict resolutions, as seen in the community-driven development programs in Kenya (World Bank, 2013) and involving community members in the evaluation process to ensure that resolutions are sustained and adapted as needed (Anderson, Brown, & Jean, 2012).

#### **Studies on The Roles of Traditional Institution in Conflict Resolutions**

Egwurube (2018) study on "The Role of Traditional Institutions in Conflict Resolution in Nigeria: A Study of Rivers State" carried out a qualitative case study using interviews with traditional rulers, community leaders, and local government officials and thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns in responses of 30 respondents in Rivers State. The study determined that traditional institutions play a significant role in mediating conflicts, particularly land disputes and communal clashes. The legitimacy and respect accorded to traditional rulers enhance their effectiveness in conflict management. There is a high level of community trust in traditional institutions compared to formal governmental structures. Hence, the study recommended strengthening collaboration between traditional institutions and government agencies. Providing training for traditional leaders on modern conflict resolution techniques. And formalizing the role of traditional institutions within the legal framework of conflict management.

Osaghae (2019) study on "Traditional Authorities and Local Conflict Management: A Case Study of the Niger Delta Region" which adopted a Mixed-method approach of surveys and focus group discussions with community members and traditional leaders. comprising 200 survey respondents and 5 focus groups and using statistical analysis for survey data and content analysis for qualitative data. The study determined that traditional leaders are pivotal in resolving conflicts related to oil exploration and environmental degradation. There is a disparity in the conflict management approaches of traditional authorities across different communities. External influences, such as oil companies and government policies, often complicate traditional conflict resolution efforts. Hence, they recommend empowering traditional institutions through legislative backing. Encouraging oil companies to engage with traditional authorities in conflict-prone areas. And enhancing the capacity of traditional leaders through conflict resolution training programs.

Smith and Brown (2019) work on “Indigenous Institutions and Conflict Resolution in Sub-Saharan Africa: Insights from Nigeria” carried out a comparative study on case studies and secondary data analysis of conflict resolution mechanisms in Nigeria. 4 case studies from different regions in Nigeria, including Rivers State. Comparative analysis of conflict resolution outcomes across different traditional institutions. The study concluded that traditional institutions in Nigeria, including those in Rivers State, effectively manage local conflicts. The integration of indigenous practices with formal legal systems enhances conflict resolution outcomes. Traditional leaders often leverage cultural norms and values to foster peace and reconciliation. They also, recommended that promoting hybrid conflict resolution frameworks that incorporate traditional and formal systems. Supporting traditional institutions through policy interventions and financial resources. And conducting further research on the long-term impact of traditional conflict management practices.

Mbiti (2019) carried out a research titled *Traditional Mechanisms of Conflict Resolution in Africa: The Case of South Sudan*. The research was based on case studies and historical analysis, supported by interviews with tribal leaders and community members. Its findings assert that traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in South Sudan, such as customary courts and councils of elders, are effective in addressing local conflicts. These mechanisms are based on restorative justice principles. He recommended institutional support and formal recognition of traditional mechanisms can improve their effectiveness. Incorporating these mechanisms into national peacebuilding strategies is recommended. Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo (2020) work on “Traditional Leadership and Conflict Management in Southern Africa: A Comparative Study” carried out a comparative analysis of traditional leadership structures and their roles in conflict management in Botswana, Namibia, and Zambia. Its findings determined that traditional leaders in these countries are integral to local governance and conflict management. Their ability to mediate is enhanced by their cultural authority and intimate knowledge of community dynamics. They recommended governments should provide legal backing and resources to traditional leaders. There should also be efforts to document and preserve traditional conflict resolution practices.

Müller and Schmitt (2022) work on “Traditional Governance and Conflict Resolution in Africa: The Case of Nigeria” carried out a longitudinal study which involved 50 participants over a 5-year period who were interviewed and their responses corroborated with archival research in selected communities in Rivers State. The longitudinal data analysis was used to assess changes and impacts over time. The study found out that traditional governance structures are resilient and adaptable in conflict resolution. The historical context and evolution of traditional institutions influence their current effectiveness. And external pressures, such as urbanization and modernization, pose challenges to traditional conflict management practices. Hence, recommended preserving and adapting traditional conflict resolution practices in the face of modernization. Enhancing cooperation between traditional and formal governance systems. And investing in cultural education to sustain the relevance of traditional institutions.

Addressing these gaps in the literature will contribute to a better understanding of the role of traditional institutions in conflict management. It will also inform the development of more effective and inclusive conflict resolution strategies that can be adapted to the changing social, economic, and political landscapes of Rivers State and beyond. Future research should focus on these areas to provide a more comprehensive and dynamic picture of traditional conflict management practices and their potential for promoting sustainable development.

## Conclusion

The study focus on traditional institutions and conflict management in Rivers State, highlights the pivotal role these institutions play in resolving conflicts and maintaining social cohesion. The study revealed that the traditional institutions is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of Nigerian society; therefore, provide culturally relevant and effective conflict resolution mechanisms that are often more accepted by local communities than formal legal systems. Furthermore, the traditional leaders, cultural practices, and indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms contribute to mitigating disputes. The findings showed that the resilience and adaptability of traditional institutions in the face of modern challenges and underscore their importance in complementing formal legal systems. It revealed that traditional institutions in Rivers State and similar contexts have proven to be vital in conflict management. Their deep-rooted cultural authority and community trust make them effective mediators in local conflicts, therefore, leveraging in their strengths to foster sustainable peace and development in Rivers State and beyond.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends:

1. Traditional institutions should be given formal legal recognition within the state's governance framework. This would involve legislating their roles and jurisdictions to prevent conflicts with modern governmental agencies. This can be achieved through collaborating with legal experts to draft legislation that defines the roles and powers of traditional leaders in conflict resolution. And regularly conducting stakeholder consultations to ensure the legislation is inclusive and representative of community needs.
2. Combine traditional conflict resolution mechanisms with modern legal systems to create a hybrid framework that leverages the strengths of both. This can be actualized by establishing conflict resolution committees comprising traditional leaders, local government officials, and representatives from civil society. And providing continuous training on modern conflict resolution techniques to traditional leaders.
3. Ensure that women are inclusive policies and practices. This is achieved by amending traditional councils' bylaws to include mandatory female representation. And implementing capacity-building programs for women in leadership and conflict resolution skills.
4. Develop programs that preserve traditional conflict resolution practices while adapting them to contemporary challenges posed by modernization and globalization. This is easily done by documenting and archiving traditional conflict resolution practices and cultural norms. And organizing workshops and cultural exchange programs to promote understanding and adaptation of traditional practices.

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