

History, Culture and Conflict Resolution in Opobo Kingdom: Lessons for the West African Sub-Region

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Abstract

Crisis and conflict permeate our society, institutional framework for resolving it is either nonexistent or inadequate. This paper advocates the recourse of the past and the understanding of the culture, values and traditions in resolving such conflict. Lessons of the Opobo conflict is advocated for the West African sub-region.

Introduction

Too often, the instrument of History and Culture is not employed in addressing problems thus leading to undue tension in the entire society. The ability to handle volatile circumstances maturely with adequate recourse to history and culture is the only safeguard against crisis and disintegration. This paper examines the conceptual issue history, culture and conflict resolution using the of Opobo example and advocates a sense of history to prevail in addressing the question of crisis resolution.

Conceptual Issues

The challenge of conflict resolution in any study of society requires serious historical approach. This is all the more important for a nation like Nigeria where the search for stability remains a mirage. In dealing with the question of conflict resolution, the central place of history is incontestable and its proper understanding in resolving the contentious issues which arise.

Harold Perkin sees history as the summarized experience of the society, and experience is the condensed history of the individual (Harold Perkin 1970). Without history, the individual is as lost as a child without a mother. In essence, history is the record of the life of societies men, of the social, cultural, economic and political changes which these societies have gone through, of the ideals which have determined the actions of these societies and of the material conditions which have helped or hindered their development.

The more charges occur in our society, the more it becomes imperative for the past to be studied with a view to establishing the connection and continuity between what had been and what is. The significance of history is incontestable because human experience repeats itself. The future, from proper analysis, is like the past and it is only by ascertaining accurately the courses of past events, that we may equip ourselves to solve future problems of men, because on man is an Island, everyman is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

What is Culture?

Culture over the years have undergone definitions Kroeber, (1952) thought, about culture as the super organic syndrome that was biologically transmitted or inherited through biological means by social groups and individuals in the society. Beattle (1964) thinks that culture is species specific, although other species can communicate, only humans can communicate through symbols; Language being the most important symbol

system is more a part of culture. Culture has to do with the best achievements in arts, literature and music. Moreover, it has to do with the artificial growth or development of microscopic organism or species of plants, a meaning derived from the word “cultivate” to husband.

Culture in its generality involves the society, the system, the structure and the origin combined with tradition. The concept of culture over the years has been mis-used and misinterpreted interchangeably with the concept of society. Beattle (1964) points that studies in culture is the general study of the society. For example, the study of social institutions, social beliefs, political systems, judicial systems are all in culture, Douglas (1980:110) posits that attempts to split off culture from the rest of the human behaviour has been relatively unsuccessful. Therefore, the concept of culture has to do with the biological transmission of the beliefs, values and customs of a particular people and society (Khlichohn 951:43). What is conflict? Why do people fight? Easy as this question may seem, addressing it has remained difficult among scholars.

This difficulty arises from the use of the term conflict and crisis. Crisis is a turning points, especially in cases of sickness or disease; moment of danger or suspense in polities. Conflict is also a period or moment of great danger difficulty or uncertainty especially in politics or economics. Conflict is defined as violent collision, a struggle or contest, a battle, a mental struggle. It is also defined as “to fight, contend, to be in opposition. Conflict according to Stagner, (1967:16) is a situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being obtainable by one or the other, but not both. Each party is mobilizing energy to obtain a goal, a derived object or situation and each perceives the other as a barrier or threat to that goal.

The definition suggest that conflict is inherent in human society Simmal () sees conflict as an essential ingredient in the balance of group life. To him conflict is positive and will always be part of human nature. On his part Coser (1956:8) notes that Conflict comes from an incompatibility of go goals..... struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resource in which the aims of the opponent are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals.

In reality, conflict is a way of settling disputes, even if the mean employed is destructive and injurious to either or both of the parties in conflict and by extension, to their neighbors. Conflict by nature is dynamic and so tends to be chaotic, incontrollable and often manifests into violence.

It is important to note that conflict do not normally result in the destruction of the societies in which they occur, Otite (1998) observes that conflicts often follow their own courses and stages and usually terminate in the reconciliation of the communities concerned. Such reconciliation restores society to at least some degree of order, which permits it to continue to exist in a changed form. In the Opobo conflict the objective of the conflict is not to, eliminate the conflict, but to remove the fundamental causes of crisis, to remove the factors that actually caused the conflict, to the satisfaction of the parties in the conflict. As Jaja (2006:102) observed, it would appear that this principle was adopted in the Opobo monarchical conflict. In Opobo, conflict resolution took the form of direct negotiation between the parties involved with the help of a third party.

Third party technique used in the Opobo conflict are conciliatory technique, power politics technique and the judicial technique (see Table1).

Table 1: Third party techniques adopted in the Opobo conflict.

Conciliatory technique	appeasement Problem Solving
Power politics technique	Government threats
Judicial technique	Arbitration –from lower to supreme court

The Opobo Amanyaboship conflict show that theories and mediation process failed. Problem solving techniques also failed. This technique entails identifying the issues dividing the parties to the conflict and moving towards a solution that appeals to them (Jaja 2006:105). The demand of party “B” made up of in the Opobo Amanyaboship conflict did not meet the endorsement of party “A” leading to a breakdown of negotiation.

Power politics technique where government openly threatened to starve the society of social amenities like water electricity, hospitals and even appointments into high government position did not solve the problem. As noted government was more concerned with peace and stability, than in responding to the genuine needs and aspirations of the parties and their struggle for balance of power. Of the third party techniques adopted only the last-the judicial technique was effective. This we shall examine more closely on account of its success and relevance to West Africa and modernity.

It must be noted that the Trado conflict resolution methods such as the Seniapu forum and Oath-taking were not utilized in the Opobo Amanyaboship conflict. (Table: 2).

Table 2: Trado-Conflict Resolution methods not utilized

(a) Seniapu Forum	Not institutionalized nationally
(b) Oath-Taking	Eroded by modernization/Christianity

The Seniapu forum (elders forum) regarded as eminent peace makers were not institutionalized on a macro or central level under a national or an umbrella body. Consequently it could not play effective part in the conflict resolution on a Central or Opobo national level except at a unit level where the seniapu council was relevant (Jaja 2006:106). The oath taking method of conflict resolution on the other land was also not utilized probably on the account of the fear of false declaration of claim or innocence. This cult/religions agency said to be quite potent has greatly been eroded by Christianity and modernization. Moreover, there are conflicting views on the role of these spiritual agencies. While some attest to their potency and proper identification and resolution of conflicts, other argue that they are manipulated by unscrupulous priest agencies and the unsuspecting people become pawns in their hand. In fact it is believed that they played similar roles the Ibumskpab (Long Jaja) played in the interior. That such roles very easily lead to the destruction of families and societies.

Jaja has shown (Jaja 2006:106) that the use of conferences by elites in Opobo Kingdom was also neglected.(Table.3).

Table 3: Elite Method not Utilized

Conferences	Elites were polarized
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This method involves the conduct of researches relevant to the issue and coming out with groundbreaking recommendation that would be acceptable to the conflicting parties.

Unfortunately, the elites were polarized and therefore unable to utilize the archives, libraries and other and evidence sources to pursue and convince others by superior argument of their stand. Moreover their chauvinistic interests and the outrageous amount spent in the law courts weakened their interest in this other option, making it difficult for them to collaborate in the interest of peace in the Kingdom.

One final word on the effective use of court process; as scholars, one must commend the two parties in the Opobo Amanyaboship conflict for their doggedness in pursuing the court option to a logical conclusion. No doubt the process was long, tenuous and the frequent adjournment would certainly have frustrated and cowed lesser minds. In spite of the animosity which had become pathological and the desire of the conservatives, not to shift ground, their extreme stand did not lead to killing and destruction of life and property

in the ancient kingdom. This is what we want to recommend to other West African societies.

Moreover, the Elite method of making intensive researches and the use of conferences to martial out superior argument based on facts and evidence should be adopted. The fact that Opobo historians and elites did not utilize this method does not mean that it is not effective as an avenue in conflict resolution.

Conflict resolution is a cultural and political task of generating support of the parties in conflict to real agreement and be satisfied with the outcomes. The support can only be achieved if the method of resolving the conflict appeals to their shared values, beliefs, customs and practices as well as their past. Knowledge of history of the traditions of origin and settlement of the various war canoe Houses, their roles and position in the hierarchy, effective grasp of their instrumentalities were necessary to properly address the Opobo question.

If leader are adequately knowledgeable in the history of the society, their opinions would be less adverse. For instance the Ndoki, Ibani and Opobo Ibani have not separated from each other for too long. So also the cultural affinities and a linkage of common contact in the Atlantic slave trade and palm oil trade connecting people from the Opobo hinterland to the Niger Delta. The significance of this is intellectually discernable because it is a chain of contact which does not necessarily imply physical contact alone but might be referring to diffusion of cultural traits. These traits were clearly visible in the history of the Niger Delta peoples and the people of the hinterland.

It must be borne in mind that to avoid the pitfalls of ignorance over this matter, adequate grasp of Nigerian history, taught by those who know how to recall it becomes imperative. It is only then that stereotypism could be eliminated.

As Ifemesia (190:8) notes if a culture group knew enough about the background and antecedents of their neighbors, inter group relation would be advanced, for that would enable one know the merits and defects of the other and so they can tolerate one another and interact with minimum friction and conflict.

True history is the study of conduct of the things that men and women in the past have done, why they did them and what the doing caused. In history, human experiences repeat themselves. History makes people aware that the chain of human obligations binds us not only to our contemporaries but also to those who went before us and those who will come after. It is shocking how much that awareness is lacking among the educated elites of our time. The traditional African method of crisis resolution has recourse to history and institutional hierarchy. In Ibani (Opobo) the hierarchy has the Amanyabo at the apex of conflict resolution (see Table:4). As king and owner of the land, he personifies the law. As custodian of the custom and tradition of the people he represents the ancestor his and will prevails.

He is followed by the council of Alapu. The highest level of alapu council and its major role rests on conflict resolution. This council of alapu represents the consensus forum of the council. They are composed of alapu in the kingdom. They are known for their justness, fairness and truthfulness in the resolution of conflict.

The Senapu council at one point or the other represents the Alapu in conflict resolution at the wari level. They are men who had contributed to the development of the war-canoe house in one way or the other. They are influential and knowledgeable in the custom and traditions of the House.

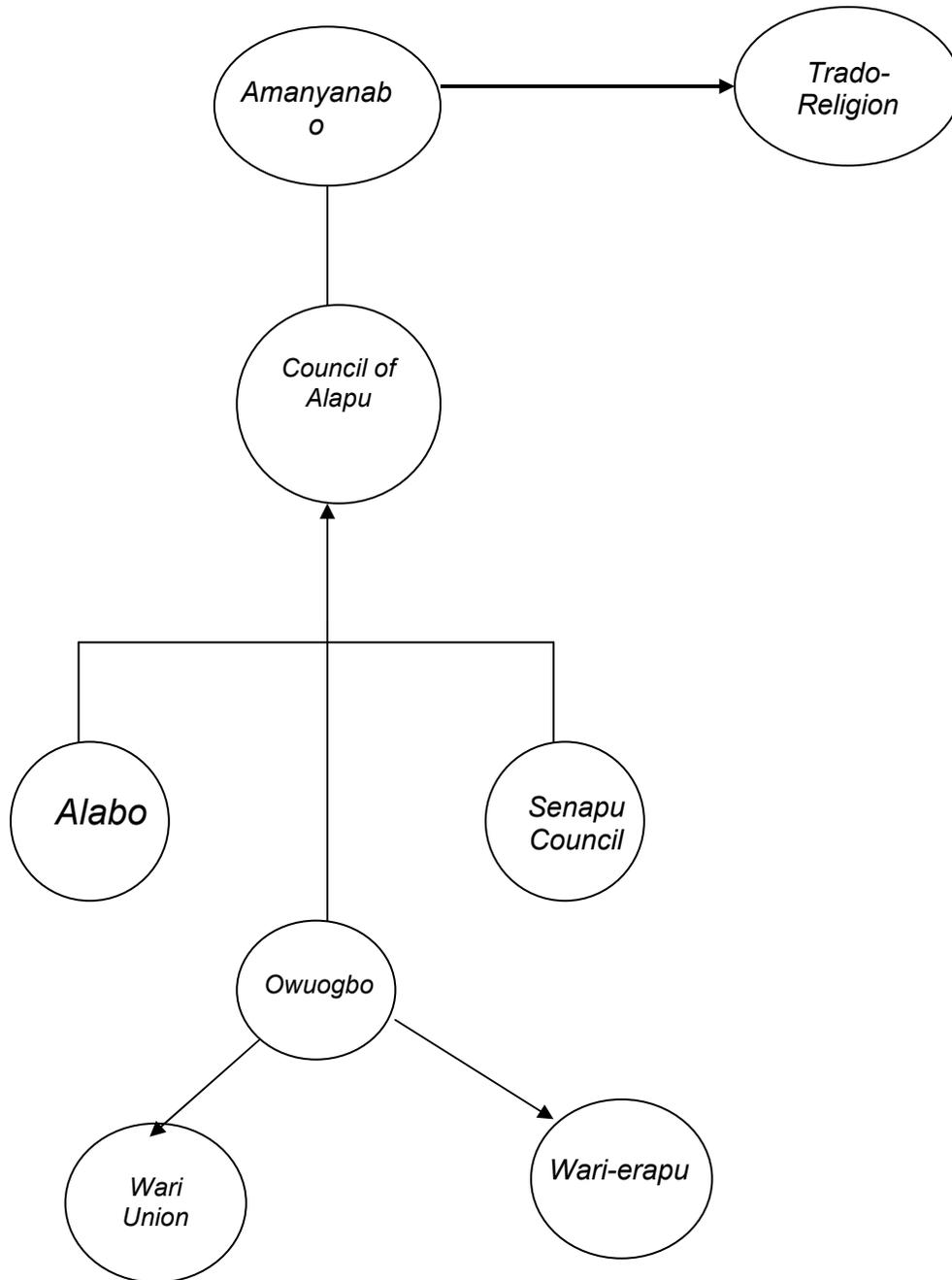
“Wari erapu” women of the war-canoe house. This concentration of women are involved in resolving conflict in the wari (house), especially between husbands and wives, witchcraft and adultery cases, and inter-group domestic conflict. The wari union are the union of men, women and children. They are involved in resolving conflict among their members but when difficult cases emerge, the council of Alapu are consulted who in turn report to the Amanyabo who then proclaim verdict.

The owuogbo, a semi-secret organization responsible of enacting masked plays, play very significant role in conflict resolution, especially in areas deemed to be spiritual such as in land where they mark the area with “Omu” a sign that the land is in dispute and no one should enter. They play similar roles in market disputes.

However, sometimes the Amanyanabo’s verdict may not be satisfactory to a party and that party may resort to trado-religious authority through oath-taking. These are cult/religious entities whose verdicts are respected and feared. They include tolofari Amakiri, Owuekpe etc. In oaths-taking, contending parties maintain their innocence or right to claim in contest. Contending parties could recourse to cult-agency on which.

The following table explains the hierarchy of how conflicts are tackled. Every individual is eligible to air his/her view on issues in question.

Table 4: The Hierarchy of Conflict Resolution in Ibani (Opobo)



The innocence of one party or both parties is then sworn. The consequences of false declaration of innocence could fall on the oath taker and his relatives now and in the future (Brimoh 1998:170). This hierarchical nature of conflict resolution lies in the power to stimulate a sense of the past. This explains why the traditional methods of crisis resolution have enough recourse to history. Such traditional methods are part of the culture of the social formation, very institutionalized and stern from the accumulation of the peoples experience in stemming disorder in the society. These peaceful methods are carried out through institutionalized Senapu (elders) in the community. The elders are peaceful facilitators and eminent peacemakers.

History and Conflict Resolution

It is an established fact that conflict resolution is not a technical endeavor; the method of resolving any conflict must appeal to the people shared values, beliefs, customs and practice. Although the knowledge of history does not provide simple or easy solution to conflict situations, it however makes possible an appreciation of the antecedents to conflict. (Jaja 2006:10). The more charges occur in our society, the more it becomes imperative for the past to be studied with a view of establishing the connection and continuity between what had been and what, is. A careful and thoughtful experience of human events show that history takes its revenge on individuals who had neglected it.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the resolutions of conflict amicably have become the hall mark of the 21st Century. Most especially with regards to ensuring that the history, belief, values and traditions of a people are guaranteed and respected under the methods utilized to resolve the conflict. Most significantly, conflict resolution is based on the expansive desire to build a society free of conflict and to unify the world based on recourse to history and culture. Little wonder that the Opobo example become worthy lessons for the West African sub-region

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