



**Indigenous Methods of Conflict Resolution among the Awori People of Nigeria:
An Overview**

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Abstract

This paper examines the traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution in Igbesa, an Awori speaking town located in the western part of Nigeria. It is an attempt to analyze how an indigenous African society has been managing conflicts, peacemaking and peacebuilding among its members and neighbors prior to the arrival of foreign conflict management mechanisms. Beyond ethnographic narratives, this paper provides a philosophical analysis of the fundamental jurisprudential principles underlying the indigenous conflict resolution system with some implications drawn for contemporary global liberal societies. Guided by the non-adversary principle of conflict management, and using the mechanisms of intercession, settlement, compromise, adjudication, concession and coercion, every conflict, regardless of its complexity is manageable and resolvable among the Aworis. The peoples' indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms entail a process of thorough investigation and discussion of the claims of the parties to a conflict by the traditional governing authorities. The palace often easily resolves ordinary cases. However, difficult Yoruba cases may take complex turn by involving the expertise of 'the Ijoru Cult Group', the body whose duty is to enforce the decisions of the traditional authorities on complicated cases. It should be stressed, however, that the emergence of modern system of law and new religions (Christianity and Islam) has limited the practice of the old methods of conflict management among the Aworis. In order to articulate the thesis of this paper, I shall divide the work into five sections. Section one is the introduction to the paper. In section two, an exposition of the major concepts in the work such as 'traditional mechanisms' and 'the Ijoru Cult Group' shall be done. In section three, details of the traditional methods, the *modus operandi* and salient values shall be critically examined. Section four attempts a criticism of the methods and their reconstruction to allow for global applications in contemporary liberal and diversified ethnic system. The final section is the concluding part of the work with notes on future areas for scholarship.

Keywords: Awori Yoruba speaking people, conflict resolution, Ijoru cult, traditional mechanism

Introduction

Igbesa town is an Awori speaking people in Ogun West senatorial district of Ogun state, southwestern Nigeria. It is located about 11 kilometers west of Lagos, with a population of about 11,000 people. It was a small agricultural hub with a few large agricultural businesses until recently when it turned to an industrial focal point with the establishment of a Free Trade Zone in the area by the state government. They could be grouped into two major divisions. These are the early Awori and the later Awori groups. Igbesa is an early Awori settlement in Ogun state of Nigeria, having been founded before 1500. Thus, the monarch of the town is a first-class Oba (Oreva, 2017). The later Awori towns are post 1500 settlements. Both groups have Ile-Ife as their ancestral home. This paper focuses its attention on Igbesa-Awori simply because it is one of the early Awori settlements, which makes its culture typical of a Yoruba sub-ethnic group.

In this paper, therefore, efforts would be made to present and appraise the workings of the old town's mechanisms to resolve conflict with a view to finding out their relevance in modern times for adoption in democratic dispensations. To achieve this, it would be profitable to start by embarking on the exposition of the major concepts to be engaged in the work.

Exposition of the Major Concepts

Conflict Resolution

The Cassell Concise Dictionary (1987) defines conflict as (i) a fight, a struggle, a contest; (ii) a clash or the opposition of interests, opinions, or purposes; (iii) to differ, to disagree; and as (iv) the opposition of incompatible needs, desires, etc. Conflicts often have their roots in ideological dissimilarity. For instance, when two people disagree on how certain issues are to be resolved, the stronger between them tries as much as possible to dominate the other's view. He/she may, in this case, impose his/her view on the other. However, in a situation where the other party is as equal as him in strength, ideological disparity may lead to physical conflict, which leads to war.

The Ijoru Cult Group

This was a formidable secret sect that operated in the town in the dead of the night. The function of this group was mainly to enforce the decisions of the traditional authorities on difficult issues, especially on security. It is the community's special anti-criminal squad that handled the execution of high-profile criminal cases. It also protected the community from external enemies.

Oro Cult

'Orò' is one of the important traditional cults in Igbesaland. The group is very vital to the resolution of crises in the community. It was responsible for the imposition of curfew in the town whenever there is an issue to be resolved by the Ijorus. Oro cult prohibits women from being a member, and also, women are banned in the vicinity of its rituals. The cult's rituals are distinguished by a screeching sound coming from a piece of bamboo tied to a piece of sturdy thread (Daramola & Jeje, 1969).

Igbodogu Shrine

'Igbodogu' is the most formidable deity brought by the founding father of the community,

Akeredun. Its place of veneration is the popular ‘Igbodogu Shrine’ in the town. The god is believed to have ‘automatic answering command mechanism’ known as ‘Olugboun’, ‘Ase’ or ‘Gbetugbetu’ built into its shrine. That means any request made in the shrine gets instant approval. The deity is believed by the community to have been responsible for the survival of the town since its inception, especially against external aggression. The chief priest of the town superintended over the shrine.

Ojuaale Shrines

These are also the places of worship of some powerful gods in the town, but their power is subordinate to that of Igbodogu. Four Ojuaales are in the town, located in each of the four quarters that made up the community. The Quarters are: (i) Idomo, (ii) Osi, (iii) Igbe, and (iv) Ogona. Each of the Ojuaales has its own priest, who works independently of the chief priest on issues that concern his quarters, but works in conjunction with the chief priest on spiritual issues that affect the entire community.

Oath-taking

An oath is a vow, which is followed by an invocation; it spells out what should befall an oath taker who deliberately violates the pledge. This oath is often invoked in the name of an indigenous god(s), spirit(s) or *juju*. When taken, an oath would make an accused person say the exact truth for the fear of the consequences of telling lies.

Aroko

‘Aroko’ is a process involving the passing of messages through the use of symbols, which all parties in the communication media understand. The purpose of using this means of communication is to pass on messages and information with the intention that the receiver of the coded idea would understand and possibly react to it.

Ase, Olugboun or Gbetugbetu

An ‘Ase’, ‘Olugboun’ or Gbetugbetu’ is a *juju*, charm or voodoo, installed in the shrine of the deity or brought to the venue of the oath taking by the priest of the deity. It has a built-in command mechanism, which makes the vow made by the oath-taker active.

Aale

‘Aale’ is a cautionary sign in the form of a palm frond placed on a property to warn that anybody who trespasses on the property will incur the wrath of the gods.

The ‘Modus Operandi’ of Traditional Methods of Conflict Resolution in Igbesa

Prior to the arrival of the Europeans in Nigeria, the Igbesa community had been managing conflicts, arising from such causes as boundary disputes, power tussles among the indigenes, power tussles between indigenes and neighbors, foreigners or women, land disputes between members of the community, and between community members and their neighbors, using the mechanisms of intercession, settlement, compromise, adjudication, concession and coercion. In all the methods, there was an intervention of a peacemaker within the community, who was known to be a sage and respected by all due to his wealth

of experience and wisdom. In all of them, negotiation was the keyword, whereby reinstallation of peace was attached to the idea of ‘give’ and ‘take’, wherein disputants gave up some of their grounds in the conflict in order to ensure there was peace and harmony in the community.

For easy administration, the town was bifurcated into four quarters: Idomo, Igbe, Osi, and Ogono. A chief supervised each of the quarters. The chiefs stood for their quarters in the Oba-in-Council meetings. Apart from the quarters’ chiefs, the monarch also appointed some high chiefs: Otun Oba (right-hand man to the Oba), Osi Oba (left-hand man to the Oba), Balogun (warlord), the Otun and Osi Balogun (right and left-hand subordinates to Balogun), Abore or Oluwo (the chief priest, who was an experienced and renowned Ifa priest), and quite a number of other chiefs representing various interests. Each quarter was headed by a Baale; a quarter was sub-divided into compounds (Agbole). A compound was headed by an Alagba Adugbo, who was supposed to be a sage and highly respected male member of his compound. The compounds were broken down into families. A family in this context consists of a man, his wife, their children, and extended members of the household. Each family had its head (Olori-Ebi, who was the most senior male member of his folks).

Choosing an Oba in the town involved various activities before the right person could be found. During the process of selecting an Oba for the town, the names of the persons chosen by the various ruling families would be given to the kingmakers who would take them to the Ifa chief priest. The Ifa priest would consult the oracle so as to help the kingmakers to make the right choice. Only the candidate from the existing royal lineages whose candidacy was approved by the oracle would eventually emerge the occupant of the stool. Hence, it is a well-known fact that in the town’s traditional setting, “the rules were carefully set out, and members of the community were aware of the rules as they affected them” (Salami, 2006, p. 70).

In the business of conflict resolution in the town, the family head (Olori-Ebi) was to settle conflicts emanating from his folks (except those that involved life). Where the matter could not be successfully resolved at the family level, it moved to the compound. At this level, the compound head (Olori Agbole) was empowered to adjudicate over all matters in his compound (except a murder case). Where the matter could not be resolved at this stage, it would move to the quarter level, where the Baale handled the case. Any issue that could not be successfully handled by the Quarters’ Council, moved to the palace (i.e., the town’s traditional governing authorities headed by the town’s monarch).

The process in the town was an open affair. It commenced with the laying of complaint by the parties to a conflict at the palace of Oloja of Igbesaland. The strict condition for the acceptance of any complaint at the palace was the proof as to whether the issue had passed through the lower echelons of conflict resolution authorities (i.e., the family, the compound and the quarters’ levels). If the case failed this test, it would be referred back to the appropriate level for adjudication. However, if the complaint passed the test, it would be accepted and slated for hearing by the Traditional Governing Council. The council comprised male and female elders/sages (some of whom were paramount chiefs, with the king at the apex. The regular local authority police normally executed its decisions. However, execution of the council’s decisions on complicated cases was often referred to a special traditional security squad called the ‘Ijorus’, members of which were appointed by the Oba-in-Council.

At the commencement of the trial, the disputants were mandated to take oath administered by the chief priest so that they would not lay false claims or give false information at the trial. During trial, parties were given fair hearing (nobody could interject while one of the disputants was having the floor). The

object of trial was the establishment of truth. In the course of the trial, the council members intermittently cross-examined the claimants with a view to establishing the facts, after which the claims were thoroughly investigated. Depending on the nature and circumstances of the case, the period of investigation could last weeks or months. After its findings, the trial officials would withdraw to a reclusive session to look at the issues more critically with a view to coming up with a fair and an unbiased judgment. After the judgment had been delivered, the conflict was deemed to have been successfully resolved when the disputants indicated interest in feasting in the palace within seven days. Failure of the two parties or one of them to indicate interest to feast in the palace within this period meant that there was a difficult case at hand. The decision of the palace on such an extra-ordinary case was usually transferred to the Ijoru Cult Group by the palace for execution.

The job of the Ijorus included the use of the Oro cult to warn disputants of the consequences of not allowing peace to reign in the community through their actions, and ultimatum would be given to them to reconsider their position; failure of which the cultists would compulsorily summon them to 'Igbodogu Shrine', where an oath would be administered to them to force them to agree that the conflict had been finally settled. Any of the parties who engaged in any activity thereafter to resurrect the conflict would incur the wrath of the deity. This stage usually led to the final resolution of a conflict between two parties. It was characterized by the disputants' joint preparation of a sumptuous feast for the palace. If it was the case of a criminal, the Ijorus dealt with him/her summarily.

However, the advent of the Europeans had whittled down the influence of the indigenous mechanisms in the community. This is because the indigenous judicial institutions have come to be seen as barbaric, outdated, and ineffective. Thus, while traditional institutions' assignment was the amicable settlement of crises, regular courts and police systems established in their places place emphasis on punishment as a method of deterring criminals. The consequence is that most of the cases are not properly handled, leading to recurrent crisis situations. Ademowo (2017) vividly captures this mood when he writes that in many situations under the modern systems, "these disputes were not properly resolved because the administration of justice in Africa was, mostly, aimed at resolving conflict rather than pronouncing judgments. Emphasis was placed on reconciliation and restoration of social harmony than on punishment of the conflicting parties" (p. 3).

Added to the above was the introduction of foreign religions into the town: Islam and Christianity. At inception, the main goal of the two foreign religions was to destroy the local religion and its institutions. For instance, not only was it that the new converts to the foreign faiths were mandated to destroy everything about their former religion (such as the burning down of the shrines and other paraphernalia of the office of the deities), also, they were made to divulge some secrets of the deities for public consumption. The result is that the town's indigenous peace institutions were destroyed.

Criticism, Reconstruction and Adoption of the Old Systems

As could be seen, therefore, the traditional epoch revealed almost clearly the danger to which a society could be exposed by the absence of a clear-cut effective institutional guarantee of the independence of the judiciary. For example, the Oba appointed the chiefs, the palace officials, and leadership of the Oro and Ijoru cult groups at his own discretion. The Oba could indiscriminately dismiss the chiefs and palace officials who could be judicial officers. An Oba could also utterly ignore the views of the chiefs in arriving

at a judicial ruling in contending cases. Of utmost importance were the activities of the Oro and Ijeru cult groups, which were shrouded in secrecy. The Oba might decide to summarily deal with his adversaries who might be accused of criminal activities on ‘trump-up’ charges, and he might send such ‘perceived enemies’ to the cultists for punishment without any avenue for redress. Also, some community members might have crossed their paths of the cult groups who might take revenge. One should also be worried by the cases of persons who might innocently violate the terms of the community’s poorly publicized curfews, which could lead to their paying the supreme price.

Moreover, the cultists have no objective means of ascertaining the guilt of an accused person. The gross self-righteousness displayed by these cultists, which is apparently accepted by the palace, showed that the traditional governing authorities presumed the guilt of the accused persons and placed the onus on them to prove their innocence. But unfortunately, all avenues to establish their innocence were closed, which is contrary to the spirit of justice. The minimum content of the rule of law is that the rights and duties of a person in a community, and the consequences of breach of any such rights and duties, must be capable of objective determination.

However, despite the great power said to be possessed by the town’s monarch, he did not exercise absolute authority over the community. This was because there was an elaborate institution of palace officials or chiefs he had to consider in his day-to-day functions. The executive, legislative and judicial functions in the town were performed by the Oba-in-Council. The council comprised the representatives of all the segments of the community. There were hierarchies of judicial institutions: from the family, to compound, to quarters, with the palace serving as the final court of appeal.

Also, apart from merely being the kingmakers, the high chiefs entrusted with the duty of selecting the Oba could also moderate the power and influence of the Oba. Very importantly also, the leadership of the kingmakers had the power to present an Oba with an empty calabash (as an ‘aroko’, against the Oba’s high-handedness) to compel him to commit suicide. Also, the high chiefs (who were believed to belong to all the cult groups in the community) moderated the powers of the Oba and the kingmakers. Of immense importance in the control mechanism of the power exercised by the Oba was the presence of the Abore or Oluwo (high priest). Like in all Yoruba traditional societies, the Abore was in charge of rituals. So, “when issues arose, the town in the olden days used to employ ritual checks and balances for resolving conflicts” (Okunola & Ojo, 2012, p. 11). Thus, the Oba had to govern with caution and respect for his subjects, who, in turn, held him in high esteem.

As to what appears as the excessive power exercised by the Oro and Ijeru cult groups, one is tempted to believe that the Oba-in-Council that appointed the cultists would monitor and check them. Very importantly also, rituals were usually performed and guidance of the deities sought to determine the culpability of an accused person before the cultists acted. In fact, determining the culpability of an accused person in a situation like this is so important to the Yoruba that it is reflected in their maxims such as: “Ika ti o ba se ni Oba nge” (meaning that it is only the guilty that is punished by the monarch) (Owomoyela, 2005, p. 19). The import of the saying is that the traditional Igbesa society had an objective way of determining the guilt of offenders before meting out punishment to them.

At this point, in view of the levity with which public officers treat the oath of office in modern times, it is the view of this paper that the use of oath, wherein ‘Ase’, ‘Olugboun’ or ‘Gbetugbetu’ is employed to get the facts of complicated cases should be encouraged in the judicial systems of liberal societies, instead of the demand of proof beyond reasonable doubt from the accused, which often, is a

difficult task. “It is irrelevant whether the swearer believes in juju or not ... The efficacy of juju is not a matter of belief. It is real. And the man who believes that juju is not really efficacious is not losing anything; let him swear by it all the same” (Momoh, 1991, p. 132).

Moreover, the contemporary society should also borrow a leaf from the Igbesa judicial processes that while emphasis on punishment does not help matter, everybody must, however, be made to obey the law always to make society possible, for their authentic freedom lies in obeying the general will of the society, otherwise they should be forced to do so (Rousseau, 1913). Therefore, the cultists’ supposed overbearing power to achieve this goal may be justifiable. It is the duty of the society to ensure that its laws are compulsorily enforced; for law without compulsory enforcement is empty (Ihering, 1968).

Finally, at the international level, a democratically constituted body could be given the role being played by the Ijerus in the community. This body, which must be widely represented by nations, must, however, have its activities open for scrutiny and necessary checks. Again, it is the submission of this paper that *juju* should be employed at important United Nations Summits, where international leaders are slated to take serious decisions on global securities issues. With this mechanism in place, no leader could afford to renege in the pledge he/she took at such important meetings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as the Igbesa customary community’s methods of conflict resolution and management seemed to be efficacious, this paper recommends it for adoption in contemporary democratic system in Nigeria. The paper, however, elicits further research into the dark and shady operational areas of the cult groups. This is necessary because what might ordinarily appear to us to be crude and unacceptable manner of operation could, on deeper study, turn out not to be so crude; and could even be desirable. Thus, instead of throwing away the baby with the bath water, a rigorous research should be embarked upon to unveil the cults’ ‘modus operandi’, so as to know which aspect of it humanity should do away with, and which aspect could be incorporated into the ethos of democratic societies.

However, the paper is opposed to the Ijorus’ method of operation. It is true that there may be special moments in the life of a society which may demand use of force in the application of law; this situation should not give a compelling reason for taking law, in the last analysis, to be nothing but a rule which can only be made effective by the use of force.

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