Indigenous Diplomacy and Conflict Management In Precolonial Bonny

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Abstract

The study examines the indigenous diplomacy and conflict management in Bonny. Bonny which is significant in the Niger Delta because of her strategic location in the days of slave trade, later legitimate trade and down to oil economy suffer from some handful of conflicts both internal and external, in the precolonial, colonial and post-colonial period. The uniqueness of all these is that, the Bonny people were able to think inward and style out unique indigenous mechanisms (oath taking, council of chiefs, council of elders and blood covenant) for managing the conflicts, and still maintain robust interactions, through indigenous diplomatic practices. However, in the contemporary time, these indigenous diplomatic practices have largely been abandoned because of modernization for the contemporary western model of diplomatic practices which are time consuming, expensive and temporal in management of conflicts. The paper adopted the multi-disciplinary approach and relied on primary and secondary sources, particularly oral evidence, using historical and analytical methods of data analysis. The study reveals that if indigenous diplomatic practice is employ in the management of conflicts in recent time, sustainable peace will be achieve in Bonny. This is because the people Bonny still revered indigenous diplomatic practices in conflict management because it is fast. The study also reveals that the challenges of the implementation of indigenous diplomacy is the introduction of Christianity, most persons would not want to consult oracles, not take blood covenant. The study therefore recommends a mixture of the unique politics of indigenous diplomatic

practice side by side with the received western model, since the home-grown method is more revered by the people.

Key Words. Indigenous Diplomacy, Deities, conflict management, Counsel of Elders

Introduction

Debatably a central phenomenon of the concept and practice of indigenous diplomacy in Bonny; no matter the stream or form, appears to be the application of indigenous wisdom by the elders, council of chiefs which in the contemporary diplomacy is refer to as 'tact' employed diplomats. Romokere (2019) asserted that, tact is described as special skill, and ready power of appreciating and doing what is required by circumstances, the ability to say the right thing, and generally, the sensitivity of the individual to address a particular situation in an apt manner. This was exhibited by the King Perekules and the Jajas of the pre, colonial and post-colonial Bonny and is also seen in the relations among the bonny communities and other communities outside Bonny. This was demonstrated by the council of Elders, council of Chiefs and in case of conflict resolutions, consultation of gods, and blood covenant among others. Satow's (2017) insists that 'tact' is an indispensable, and a basic ingredient of diplomacy. Further, in the early stages of development of indigenous diplomatic practices and conflict management, kingdoms and sovereignties were known for tact peculiar to them in dealing with issues that concern them and foreign nationales (Smith, 1989).

Such was the case with the Bonny in the time past; as each of the communities had developed indigenous diplomatic practices in managing conflicts peculiar to them before the advent of the Europeans in the region at the closing decades of 15th century. Though contacts were minimal, the Bonny people had developed not only state structures, but also a highly civilized intercourse essential to good diplomacy before the advent of the Europeans. It is therefore, that not only did indigenous diplomacy in conflicts management exist in Bonny but, that there were (and still are) politics of diplomatic practice of mediation and prevention of conflicts that are indigenous to the people of the region.

Statement of the Problem

Having studied much of literature bothering on diplomatic practices discovered that, only very minute percentage tends to present indigenous diplomacy in conflict management in a comprehensive perspective especially from the point of view of its impacts and usefulness before the introduction of contemporary diplomacy. There are books that actually talked about the practice of diplomacy, books like History of European Diplomacy by Orugbani, Diplomatic practice by Obuah among others, but the detailed information encompassing the nature, impacts and significant of indigenous diplomatic practice and conflict management are limited hence the essence of this paper.

Aim and Objectives of the paper

i assess Indigenous diplomatic practices in Bonny.
ii investigate Conflicts in Bonny
iii examine the role of indigenous diplomacy in conflict management in Bonny
iv examine the challenges of implementation of indigenous diplomacy
v suggest ways of improving on the indigenous diplomacy

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopted power theory. The power theory was most popularized by Hans Morganthau in 1973. It main signpost is the concept of national interest/individual interest defined in term of power. His traditional concept of relations either between the Etche people and her neighbour is that National interest requires constant accumulation of power for survival and security. To Morganthau (1973p.120) and his followers Heldley Bull, power is defined as "man's control over the minds and actions of others and can be determined by examine the psychological relationship between actors". The leadership of Bonny at that were able to hold their people together by exercising their power.

Methodology

The paper adopted the multi-disciplinary approach and relied on primary and secondary sources, particularly oral evidence, using historical and analytical methods of data analysis. This involved obtaining data from past and present studies, government and non- government bodies. The study relied on secondary

data, Published and Unpublished materials, Books, Newspapers, Conference and Seminar Papers, Journals and the internet.

The Practice of Indigenous diplomacy in Bonny

Before the coming of the Europeans into the Niger Delta, Bonny People have indigenous ways of conflict management, and a pattern of relations. The Council of elders, council of chiefs acts as diplomats and are giving the responsibility of negotiation, mediation and conflict management and resolution function. These functions were carried out effectively. When the matter seen to be intense, the gods are brought in and in some instances, blood covenant. These in the time past brought a reasonable amount of peace. Again, in the time past, there were minimal of contacts, and the people of Bonny interacted amongst themselves at various levels: economically, culturally, socially, politically and at the religious front before AD 1800 which determined their relations and diplomatic practices as truly diplomatic. Interactions at political, socio- economic, cultural and indigenous diplomatic levels of the Bonny people were very important in that they provided the essential linkages that resulted in the emergence of broad based practice, continuities, collective identities and changes (Chief Haniel Manila Peplle, 2023).
The people of Bonny before AD 1800 were relatively self-sufficient by reciprocal exchanges and through commerce. Isichei (1973) noted that 'when the Europeans first reached the delta, ...imported quality salt and fish from the Delta and luxury goods including copper, clothes and beads further afield.... They bought textiles from India... met her copper needs from African sources and had her own textile and iron products. Before the trade on slaves these states related in mutual inter-dependence, harmony and were self-sufficient Isichei wrote:

> Despite the difficulties of their environment the peoples of the delta (Bonny) had a well-organized political and economic life before the Europeans came. They had developed a relationship with their neighbour which was beneficial to both sides; the Bonny people exported agricultural product to the riverine and obtained salt and fish in return (Isichie 1980p. 117).

In Bonny indigenous diplomatic practice and conflict management, State actors includes, initially kings, and later their proxy which may be relatives, trusted

represented and envoys, and much later by the wealthy and powerful in pre-colonial. The beginning of distortion of indigenous diplomacy and the trade arrangement in the region was marked by the European penetration into the area, aimed at sideling the middlemen to make purchases directly from producers, palm produce. It should be noted that the structure of pre- colonial diplomatic practice in Bonny was sustained without external, European influence. The dependent and complementary environmental features actively encourage interactions and inter-connection which resulted in specialized groups and states; with specialization of the platform for the primary form of cross border (international relations) by way of long distance trade relation was created between Kingdoms, states, groups and empires in Bonny as Vasina (1962) put it "in pre-colonial Africa: regional trade was conducted over long distance between culturally different people within a single state or between neighboring people… trade was connected with the political structure…markets were organized by the states... and stateless societies were by no means excluded from exchange of foodstuff, salt and other luxury imports".
Every state of the Eastern Delta had a national deity or gods apart from the several titular gods that served a wide range of purposes from guaranteeing a successful fishing expedition, providing for the spiritual needs of other states to granting safe passage through other states or some enterprise. Take for instance in 1863 there was a very serious dispute over the succession of King Karibo of Elem Kalabari. This was resolved by the revelations of the Owame Akaso, the national deity of the Elem Kalabari nation, which predicted that the dispute will be settled by natural consequence, (Johnbull, 2005). This shows the indigenous diplomatic roles of these deities in mediation of conflicts and their impact and influence in intra state relations and prevention of conflicts.

The national deities of Nembe and Bonny are ogidiga and Ikuba respectively. Both deities, traditions had it are related in the world of the spirit. They are gods of war that ensured victory over their enemies and also helped in sealing inter-state marriages to command trust (Horton, 1969). Glyn (1968) noted that since the beginning of the seventeenth century the Ibani recognized the suzerainty of the king of Benin and dispatched envoys to the city annually to pay their loyalty to him... the tribute in question was of religious supremacy not of hereditary. "Fenibeso" is the war deity of the state of Okirika and was said to be related in the realms of the spirit to the gods of Bonny and Nembe Horton (1968), therefore war

was forbidden between any of the parties as there exists some affinity amongst them. Eferebo (2010), Wariboko (2014) havesuggested that this was the reason why these city states found a common enemy in the Elem Kalabari city state and formed alliance against that state during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Modes of Settlement of Disputes in Bonny

In time past in Bonny, both in colonial and post-colonial Bonny society, the indigenous Law enforcement agents, that is, the elders in collaboration with the king's guards and the youth wing and the local Courts were and are still responsible for ensuring compliance with the laws of the Bonny. The guards and some selected youth arrest law-breakers and bring them to trial before locally constituted elder's Courts. It is this Court that interprets and applies the law as found appropriate in resolving civil or criminal conflicts. However, in Bonny not all conflicts resulting from violation of law get to courts, some are result by visiting the Oracles were oaths were be taken the parties involved in the conflict. Some of the reasons for this are the intimidating size of the locally constituted courts as contrasted with the informal places used for resolving neighbourhood conflicts (Amaele, 2019).

The locally constituted court in Bonny provide 'common-sense justice' that is characterized by simplicity and lack of formality. It relies on 'irrational' mode of proof and decision as opposed to a legalistic approach to problem solving. The underlying desire to promote reconciliation of the contesting parties is paramount in the mind of the council of elders in Bonny rather than merely to rule on the overt dispute which they have brought to locally constituted court. Religious and ritual beliefs and practices are made to bear upon the determination of legal responsibility. In Bonny, Parties in conflict are allowed to bring in their witnesses only after evidence has been taken from the two sides. The judges play the role of counsel by cross-examining disputants and witnesses. The traditional courts system allows circumlocution and digression unrelated to the original case, which might later help the determination of the case (Albert, 1995).

Even in the present day Bonny, the observations in the form legal system often result in people seeking alternative means of resolving their conflicts knowing that conflict is unavoidable as a positive development through which people

understand each other better. Disputants, therefore, often take their cases to elders and neighbourhood mediators who can be depended upon to resolve conflicts with dispatch, in a local language, using familiar standards of behavior.

Like the modern courts starting from customary to the supreme court with rights of appeal, so also the resolution of conflict in the past commenced from the family court or the court of the council of elders in the compound, court of the various societies and the court of the chiefs-in-Council as the supreme court.

Ancestral Consultation in Conflict Resolution in Bonny

Another indigenous methods of conflict resolution in Bonny is the consultation of the ancestral spirits. This is seen in almost all the conflicts in Bonny during the pre-colonial and colonial times and even in the post-colonial. Ancestors constitute the basic categories of moral and legal thought. This function raises them above the transitory human level and invests them with sacred significance, superior and powerful, beyond all human challenge. Mbiti (1975:63) defines the ancestors as "the living dead". They serve as intermediaries between the living and dead. In Bonny, the ancestors are regarded as living in the communities with those presently living. Not all the dead qualify to be ancestors. It is only those who lived a neat life to old age and died a good death that qualifies to be.

Ancestors are the guardians of the affairs of the family because they are still human beings, "the living dead". They are seen as the best group of intermediaries between men and the dead. They know the needs of men since they are here with the living and communicate it to God. In Bonny, the heads of the families pour out drinks and leave bits of food for the ancestor because they are always with the people but invisible to ordinary men. The ancestors also demonstrate anger in their families or in the communities by the appearance of unusual things like humans. When these happen, a diviner is then consulted to find out the real cause of such omen.

The information provided above presupposes the fact that the living and the dead are in continual partnership and association in the day-to-day governance of Bonny. The most pertinent legal heritage which serves to prevent or resolve conflict is the fear of the supernatural. Bonny people believe that the supernatural

wields a lot of moral influence on the day to day activities of people which helps to facilitate peace and harmony. Bonny ancestors possess the motivation that drives the living elders in carrying out the function of conflict resolution since they are always inbued with the wisdom of carrying out this function as directed by the ancestors.

However, Kopytoff (1971) cited in Osaghae (2005) agrees with the view that the manner of addressing the living elder is the same as the one used in addressing the dead. The experience of the ancestors in conflict resolution is therefore old and original than the elders as the elders looked unto them through oath taking which is a demonstration of allegiance and loyalty to the ancestors.

Thus, the living elders who are physically seen in the venue of arbitration possess the representational voices of the ancestors. This obligation has been used judiciously by the elders in Bonny in carrying out their duties. The elders regard the obligation not as a right, but a privilege which must not be abused or neglected. If abused, the ancestors could wield their authority to punish erring living elders. Here, communication is done through divination with the ancestors. The ancestor also watches over the procedure and practice of conflict management even at the inauguration of council, panels and tribunals levels. The ancestors showers their blessing and support on the various groups responsible for the delivering of justice and installed social order in the communities

The Role of the Traditional Rulers and Council of Elders in Bonny

This is the highest traditional institution for conflict resolution. In the pre-colonial period, the council had the power to pass a death sentence on any offender brought before it. Nowadays, the situation has changed. It can only handle minor cases especially those pertaining to land, chieftaincy and inheritance. Other matters, such as the settlement of political rifts which Local Government Council and other State Government found very difficult to handle are usually referred to the council.

If the case has to be given verbally, the complaint is asked to state his case. If is a woman, she is traditionally experienced to be on her knees and to offer the traditional greeting unless the chief grants her permission to stand up. Even when

permission is given for her to stand up, some woman insisted on remaining on their knees to show that they recognize their traditional obligations to the Chiefs. A man has to start by prostrating which is as way of offering the traditional greeting. By so doing he is indirectly recognizing the authority of the chief and that whatever judgment the gives, will be accepted.

After the complainant has given his evidence, the defendant(s) who is (are) expected to have listen carefully to what has been said is (are) invited to respond to the charges. While either the defendant or plaintiff is giving evidence, he/she has the floor and cannot be interrupted except by the chiefs who are permitted to ask questions to clarify issues. The person giving the evidence is not to use offensive language against the other disputant as a mark of respect to the elders that constitute the jury. After the evidence has been given, the King and his Chiefs cross-examine the disputants before the judgment is given.

In the traditional judicial systems, fines of damages are not usually awarded by the mediators in civil cases. The utmost aim is to restore peace by settling disputes amicably. In other words, restoration of harmony is what's paramount in the traditional judicial systems. Sometimes, however, mediators award simple fines as a deterrent to the re-occurrence of particular anti-social behavior. This may be demanded in the form of kolanuts or local gin both of which have ritual significance. Some of the kolanuts are broken and passed round for everyone to eat as an indirect way of celebrating the resolution of the conflict. The drink is also passed round for all to taste. If no gin or palmwine is available, ordinary drinking water can be used. In some traditional settings, the palmwine or gin is used to pour libation to the gods and ancestors of the people involved in the dispute. These actions help to reinforce the terms of the reconciliation (Albert, 1995).

In Bonny, the traditional ruler is the paramount ruler and the supreme head of a community. The traditional ruler is being regarded as the custodian of the traditional laws and was usually the oldest descendant male of the founder of the village or clan. The traditional ruler carryout its administrative function in consultation with the elders who are generally respected by the people by virtue of their considerable age, experience and wisdom as well as their ripe knowledge of norms, laws and customs of the land. As earlier stated, they held the symbol of

spiritual leadership which signifies authority, standard behaviour and justice. Afigbo (1973:19) cited in Amadi (2010:104) posits that they serve as the link between the people and their ancestors or the gods while confirming the importance of the elders in traditional society when he visited the Aguleri and Umuleri in the Anambra East Local Government of Anambra State in Augusta (1999), President Obasanjo cited in Nwolise (2005 p.165) has this to say;

> … and what are we doing to really dampen this type of senseless killing, this type of senseless destruction of lives and property? You only need to go down there (Otuocha) and you will be shocked. I was shocked. In a small community like this … Are they not brothers and sisters? … A small community … What has happened to our traditional way of life where elders intervene and help to resolve differences? are there no more elders in the community? …"

Although, the traditional ruler was crowned as the paramount ruler, he may not subjectively take decisions without consulting the elders of the community. The traditional ruler in collaboration with the elders carried out executive, legislative and judicial duties. The traditional ruler with his council also hears final appeal in all matters or disputes earlier decided by various other bodies in the community. They were duty bound to resolve conflicts and create peaceful atmosphere for enhanced development in Bonny. They have helped in settling communal clashes in the various Bonny villages. For instance, the land disputes mentioned early on.

Challenges of Implementing Indigenous Diplomacy

The challenges of implementing indigenous diplomacy are enormous. This is because of modernization. Most persons would not want to go to the oracles for settlement of dispute because of their religion, while some will prefer going to the policy or employ Western pattern of conflict resolution mechanism. All these become a challenge for the implementation of indigenous diplomacy.

Conclusion

At the heart of politics of indigenous diplomatic practices is the peaceful conduct of relations. It will be right to affirm therefore that diplomacy is more about prevention and mediation of conflicts than resolution of conflicts. In fact, it is the failure of diplomacy, or the lack of it that breeds conflicts.

Bonny is an ancient City State that existed before AD 1800 and was a centre of mystics. It was these myths, belief in deities and mystical powers that placed Bonny at the enviable position of mediators.

Recommendations

(a) Government should adopt the politics of Indigenous Diplomatic practices, especially in the area of involving the various gods and deities of the people in the mediation and prevention of inter — communal conflicts side by side the contemporary practices to ensure more lasting resolution of disputes.

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Warisenibo Godswil Hart	M	90	Trader	Bonny	Methods of Conflict Resolution
Chief Jonah Amadi	M	60	Traditional Ruler	Abara	Traditional Diplomatic Ways of Settling Disputes

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