

## **Towards Peace and Stability in the Society: The Imperatives Of Traditional Institutions In Local Government Administration In Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Peace is the prime value in contemporary Nigeria today, the most valuable “public good”, but yet the most elusive. This paper tried to identify and clarify the place of tradition in the promotion and sustenance of peace in Nigeria. The article stressed the point that societal harmony in primary societies is more easily achieved through the instrumentality of tradition and traditional institutions. It, therefore, argued that there is need for a reappraisal of the place of tradition and traditional institutions in governance at the local government level. The paper recalled that the colonial authorities appropriated traditional institutions to facilitate their rule especially in Northern Nigeria. Further, it contended that the traditional judicial system based on natural law concept is more acceptable to the people and, therefore, can more effectively guarantee peace and stability in the society. Finally, the paper recommended that there is need to restructure \_ the local government set-up by making the structure and culture congruent, in order to enable the system function well and bring about development and peace in the society.

### **Introduction**

The issue of peace and conflict resolution should be of special interest or concern to the young nations in Africa in particular which have been grappling with the problem of national integration. The raging conflicts and civil wars in various parts of Africa amply underline the problem and call for serious search for solution other

than military which has obviously failed. In parts of Africa civil wars have persisted for as long as the nations have been independent. *Coups d’ et at* are still events in Africa and those coups in most cases are brought about by the deep-rooted cleavages in the society, Collier (2003:179).

Down to the primary societies the cleavages and conflicts are not less intense than at the national level partly as a result of the maladministration from the top. The national government, in most cases, refuses to appreciate the interests of the various constituent units and thus deprive them of their merited entitlements. In Nigeria, for instance, the various *coups d’ et at* that occurred since 1966 have been linked to ethnic interests and pressure, as one ethnic group or the other tried to

mobilize the military to suppress the other groups and acquire power in its own interests, Anifowose (1982:202).

Students of politics have always observed that violence is never the appropriate instrument to bring about lasting national integration. The collapse of colonialism, the survival of blacks in South Africa after hundreds of years of repression, the return of the Jews and the recreation of Israel among others can easily attest to the validity of the limitation of coercion as an integrative force in the society. Social values, long cherished by the community, are in the end, the solution to the problem of integration. That is, to say, the tradition of the people must be regarded as key factor in our search for peace and stability of the society, Gurr (1970:79).

### **Conceptualizing Peace**

There is a tendency to conceptualize peace as the converse of war. Thus, we often hear of war and peace being two sides of the same coin. In other words, peace is defined as the absence of war, and by logical extension, war is the absence of peace. This way of conceptualizing peace, though attractive, is inadequate for understanding the nature of peace, Ibeanu (2007:3).

In the first place, it is tautological and circular in logic there is peace because there is no war, and there is war because there is no peace. Second, it really tells us nothing about the real meaning of peace. However, even common sense would suggest that peace does exist independent of war. War is only one form of violence, which is physical, open and direct. According to Boulding (1977), there is another form of violence that is not immediately perceived, which has to do with social conditions such as poverty, exclusion, intimidation, oppression, want, fear and many types of psychological pressure.

Finally, it would be wrong to classify a country experiencing pervasive structural violence, as peaceful. In other words, although war may not be going on in a country where there is pervasive poverty, oppression of the poor by the rich, police brutality, intimidation of ordinary people by those in power, operation of women, or monopolization of resources and power by some sections of the society, it will still be wrong to say that there is peace in such a country, Ibeanu (2007:4). Consequently, it is possible not to have peace even when there is no war.

Peace is said to have the social function of integration and order, Isard (1992:219). As such, for society and the state to function properly they need peace, otherwise there would be a lot of stress on the social and political systems and then they would breakdown. Related to this, it is posited that the central function of both the social and political systems is to create peace, Berkowitz (1962:168).

Sociologically, peace refers to a condition of social harmony in which there are no social antagonism. Peace is achieved where existing social structures perform their functions adequately, supported by the requisite culture, norms and values. The role of culture, norms and values in achieving peace in the society is hereby stressed. To create peace, politics must be mediated by stable structures and secular culture. Peace entails that government minimally

employs the coercive apparatuses of the state, such as the armed forces and police, in dealing with citizens.

## **Tradition And Modernization**

Tradition is a set of established values and beliefs that have persisted over generations and therefore are not easily wiped away. Indeed, where it is destroyed through revolution or through other means, the society is thrown into chaos and remains so for long until a new set of tradition emerges. We can once again support this assertion by the survival of the Israelis after nearly two millennia of dispersal throughout the world. They stuck to their culture where they found themselves and no matter their fewness in number. Political thinkers

from Aristotle, through the Roman thinkers down to contemporary period have always advised on the relevance of tradition for the sustenance of the society. Machiavellian reminded the prince on the importance of religion, which embodies the beliefs, and tradition of the people and therefore the need to exploit it to control the people, Ogbu (2002:58). As a matter of fact, the colonial powers who derived the tradition of the conquered people and tried to destroy it and replace it with their own values were by implication admitting the influence of tradition in the life of a people.

Modernization theorists find it difficult to accommodate traditional and cultural norms in a modern state, which they argue must be secular and capitalistic in outlook. The model state is of course western, which developing countries must aspire to approximate. The collapse of the Soviet Union has strengthened their claim to the superiority of the western system. Attention is also drawn to Haiti among other traditional societies where the forces of change have been resisted by traditional institutions, Mitchell (1993:242).

These arguments are not necessarily justified. The west has appropriated modern technology more than some other countries and created jobs and wealth more than others. But that does not suggest that the latter is resisting change; they are absorbing these changes even if at a slower pace than their western counterparts. It is certainly accepted that modern, technology has brought about tremendous changes the world over but that does not imply that there would be one world value system, Alogoa (2001:58). As we mentioned earlier, the West have their own traditions and traditional institutions, which have provided stability to their societies. It is the refusal of the West to appreciate the need for the tradition and traditional institutions of others to be harnessed for the development of those other countries that has affected their appraisal of the nature of development of those countries. In fact if these countries have been allowed to absorb modern technology within the context of their tradition, they may have achieved more rapid change and stability than currently exist among them. We should note that the stability of the Western countries themselves has been achieved within the context of their tradition and traditional institutions.

The point we are stressing is that tradition and traditional institutions are inevitable instruments for the achievement of an ordered society in the developing countries just as they contributed to

the peace and stability in the West. Tradition is an inevitable attribute of a people and cannot be wished away. The idea of uniformity of political culture (of the western type) all over the world as a prerequisite for political development is not possible or acceptable. As many African political scientists have insisted, only a system that evolves antohtonously could ensure orderly growth and sustenance.

Finally, we must point out that even the western countries which have derided the traditions and traditional institutions, say in Africa, have not hesitated to appropriate them where it is convenient to do so, thereby contradicting their stand on these institutions. In Nigeria, the colonial government adopted the traditional system of government at the grassroots in northern Nigeria. Having seen that the system was indeed functional they attempted to export it to the Southwestern part of Nigeria, which had a completely different political culture. The result was predictable: the experiment just collapsed after a couple of years. Our contention is that if the colonial government had equally adopted the existing tradition and traditional institutions in Eastern Nigeria, the outcome would have been different, Afigbo (1972:211).

In summary, we contend that there is need for a reappraisal of the place of tradition and traditional institutions in governance. It is culture, after all, that defines a people, and to deny it in the management of a people is to deny the existence of the people. Imposed institutions and values may well replace the traditional ones but it takes too long to achieve this, if in fact it is possible. The failure of colonialism in the long run is a testimony to the resilience of traditions of colonized people and failure of imposed culture. The ongoing interest and enthusiasm in cultural revival in developing countries and concurrent search for alternative and viable political system underlines the awareness of the challenge before them for the creation of political system through indigenous institutions, Best (1998:164).

## **Tradition And Grassroots Government**

We had earlier pointed out the discriminatory acceptance of traditional institutions for grassroots administration in this country by the colonial government. The emirate system in the Northern part of the country was adopted and indeed adjusted functional to the extent that it was considered appropriate or good for export to other parts of the country. In Eastern Nigeria, the colonial government accordingly decided to create “*chiefs*” and issued them “*warrant*” of authority, that is, in the absence of the Emirs and district Heads of the north, Afigbo (172:257). It failed to understand the democratic set-up in the communities in the eastern zone and thought that it must impose a uniform system of local government throughout the country, Smock (1971 ;66). The rest of the story is, of course, familiar: the system did not last for more than a couple of years and it collapsed. The colonial government, unfortunately, refused to learn any lesson from the failure of their experiment; they came up with one contraption or the other thereafter, until they installed their own type of local government in the 1950s, Amucheazi 9173). It is noteworthy that as at now, the year 2010, the local government system has failed to deliver the goods to the people and the Nigerian government is taking a second look at the whole set-up even if in an unconstitutional manner.

## **Traditional Institutions And Local Government Administration**

At the moment, there is a dual system of government at the community level and they have not been properly harmonized. The imposed local system relates to the state and federal governments and hardly to the people and their traditional authorities. Contrary to the accepted concept of government, the local government is not responsible to the people; indeed, it governs like an alien or colonial authority merely imposing laws and demands on the people without creating and distributing necessary goods, Achebe (1993:277). The chairman of the council and his councilors are sponsored by a party, which is not even accepted by the people. They are voted into office by minority of voters through single plurality system. In the period between 1999-2010, the performance of the councils was abysmal, It is said that the members and the chairman meet every time on receipt of allocation funds from the State and Federal Governments to share the funds amongst themselves without using the money to maintain roads, electricity, water, healthcare, etc.

Unfortunately, the communities cannot call them to order or recall them, which would have been the case if the people voted them into power. For instance, if the communities had elected their representatives without intervention from party or government, they would easily exercise control over these representatives who, in fact, are duty bound to report frequently to their constituencies on their activities. The democratic system of government at the community level through the town union has been the reason behind the rapid development of the communities. They ignore the local council and run the affairs of the community, raising their own funds, settling disputes, maintaining law and order. It stands to reason that unless the local council reconciles itself with the town union and the traditions of the people, it is difficult for it to function. There is, thus, alienation from the council, and by extension from the overall political system. We can now understand the political decay at the primary communities in our society.

### **Traditional Institutions And Societal Harmony: A Case For Customary Courts**

One traditional institution the national government, even from colonial days, has found indispensable is the traditional system of justice. In the North, the Sharia was, of course, in place with the acceptance of Islam and the emirate system of government by the colonial administration (Mitchell, 1993:117). The successor Northern Nigerian governments have revised the penal code in the North, but have always retained the Sharia. Presently, the Sharia judicial system has an appeal court from where cases could go to the Federal Supreme Court.

In the Eastern part of Nigeria, customary court was set up by the colonial government and is very much acceptable by the successor Eastern Nigerian Governments (Amucheazi, 1973:138). Like the Sharia court system, it also has a court of appeal from which appeals could go to the Supreme Court. The customary judicial system is based on customs and traditions of the people. It is empowered to handle family, property and intra/inter community conflicts. Characteristically, its emphasis is on restitution, arbitration and reconciliation. A rogue that has stolen money would have to return it rather than being sent to prison for a few months only to come back and enjoy the loot. Land disputes could be settled to the satisfaction of the parties concerned rather than in such a way as to create perpetual enmity and bitterness. Family properties are shared out to beneficiaries in an equitable manner. In the end, it is this approach to conflict resolution that makes for peace and harmony in a community.

It is worthwhile to point out that the judges are drawn from the community. In most cases, they are the titled and highly respectable members of that community who are, of course, familiar with the customs of the people. Lawyers are hardly allowed to defend cases before customary courts (Smock 1971:163).

It is a fact that, where customary courts are active, less conflicts are observed and enhanced harmony exists. In fact, it is the modern legal system that emphasizes legality as against morality associated with tradition and custom, in our environment that impedes speedy conflict resolution and generally leaves deep wounds among litigants. The point being stressed here is that societal harmony in primary societies is more easily achieved through the instrumentality of tradition and traditional institutions.

## **Conclusion**

Our purpose here is to identify and clarify the place of tradition in the promotion and sustenance of peace in our society. The need for the exercise is particularly strong given the continued instability in our society and half-hearted appreciation and respect for our customs and traditions. In the exercise, we focused essentially on governance at the grassroots and in a limited part of the country; but, of course, our findings and conclusions could apply nationwide. We observed that tradition and traditional institutions still maintain their stronghold on the people and can only be ignored to the detriment of the society. The traditional judicial system, for instance, based on natural law concept is more acceptable to the people and, therefore, can more effectively guarantee peace and stability in the society. We also argued on the need to restructure the local government set-up if the aim is to bring about development in the society. The structure and culture must be congruent for the system to function.

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