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**The Role of Traditional Institution in Managing Ife-Modakeke
Conflict**

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Abstract

The conflict between the Ife and Modakeke appears to be a protracted and seemingly intractable intra-ethnic conflict that has continued to pit two groups of the same ethnic background against one another. This study, therefore examined the role of traditional institution in managing Ife-Modakeke conflict. The study found that the major causes of the conflict between Ife and Modakeke group include land issues, Ife-East Local Government, debate over Modakeke's sovereignty, boundary disagreement etc. This study discovered that one of the shortcomings of the past methods of managing the Ife-Modakeke conflict is inability of bringing succour to the minds of those who records losses during the war. The role of traditional institutions in managing the conflict includes several committees comprising of chiefs of both towns inaugurated whereby chiefs of both towns meet at intervals to discuss the peace and progress of the towns and conclusions are reached on salient issues. Conflict is indeed an inevitable aspect of human interaction. There is the need to learn to manage them and deal with them in a way that prevents escalation and destruction, and to arrive at new, innovative, and creative ideas to resolve them.

Key word: Traditional Institutions, Ife-Modakeke, Conflict Management

Introduction

Nigeria, a multi ethnic country located in West Africa has recorded a number of ethnic conflicts at inter-ethnic and intra ethnic dimensions some which began since pre-independence and some since post-independence. Many of these conflicts have reoccurred severally and they have continued to threaten the polity. Historically, Ile-Ife on the one hand is widely acclaimed to be the cradle of the Yoruba group. And according to Oyeniyi (2010), Ile-Ife has been described as the political, religious and cultural headquarters of Yoruba-land. Oyo on the other hand was a Yoruba town spanning many parts and towns of Yoruba-land founded by an Ife prince known as Oranmiyan. And Modakeke is regarded as an Oyo town made up of Oyo refugees. Historical evidence show that the Modakeke are Oyo refuges who migrated at one point in time or the other to Ile-Ife from different locations of Yoruba Kingdom at the end of the Yoruba inter-tribal wars (Asiyanbola, 2010). In spite of the obvious historical interconnectedness between the Ife and Modakeke, the relation between both sides has not been very cordial.

The conflict between the Ife and Modakeke group appears to be a protracted and seemingly intractable intra-ethnic conflict that has continued to pit two groups of the same ethnic background against one another. There had been seven major wars between the Ife and Modakeke, that is 1835-1849, 1882-1909, 1946-1949, 1981, 1983, 1997-1998, and 2000. Based on this, the conflict appears to be the oldest intra-ethnic conflict in Nigeria because it has been going on for more than a century (Asiyanbola, 2007). Since its first outbreak in 1835, there have been a number of causes which have overtime varied or consolidated and culminated into open violent conflict that has on a number of occasions pit both Yoruba sub-groups against one another. Among them are land ownership, rent over land and the question of local government for Modakeke. For instance, the August 1997 violence was sparked off by the location and relocation of headquarters of the Ife – East local government council. The ultimate objective of the separatist sentiments has always been the creation of a separate local government for Modakeke. Indeed, the issue of a separate local government has been central to Ife – Modakeke relations and was certainly prominent among the concerns in the civil disturbances of 1981. It was both a cause and a suggested solution at the same time (Tokunbo and Oladipupo, 2006). The causes of the conflicts between Ife and Modakeke are many and varied and are partly economic and partly political and identity issues revolving around landownership issues, payment of land rent (*Isakole*), status of Modakeke community, local government creation and location of local government headquarters (Asiyanbola, 2010).

Since 1847, various attempts have been made to resolve the crisis between the two communities by individual traditional rulers, *Obas*, state and federal governments as well as socio-political and cultural organizations (Ogbeide and Olatunki 2014). (Aja,

2007) outlined the resolution process into the pre-colonial traditional peace approach, the colonial interactive peace approach and the post-colonial partisan peace approach. Considering the sporadic nature of the conflict in that it gets settled and re-ignites, and then it will be proper to state that these resolution methods brought about what one could refer as temporary relief.

From records, it appears only a fraction of the Yoruba traditional institution (i.e. the role of Oba) has been applied towards the pursuance of peace. For further elaboration, the first attempt to resolve the crisis was made by Ooni Abeweila in 1847 to find a new settlement for the Modakeke (Shina and Ndukaku, 2010). Ooni Adelekan Olubuse attempted to resolve the crisis by implementing an 1886 treaty which recommended the expulsion of Modakeke from Ile-Ife. Since becoming the Ooni, Oba Okunade Sijuade has also spent much of his energy and time in resolving the crisis (Ogbeide and Olatunji, 2014). There have been a number of approaches and studies suggesting possible ways of permanently resolving or managing the Ife-Modakeke conflict but there has not been much emphasis on the role or ways in which traditional institutions have been able to manage the conflict. Traditional institutions in Yorubaland include the office of the king, chiefs, deities' chief-priests, the *Ogboni* to mention a few which are all part of the Yoruba culture which the research work will focus on in unveiling how the traditional institution has been able to manage the conflict.

Methodology

The research design used for this study is descriptive using interview method. The descriptive research attempts to describe, explain and interpret conditions of the present i.e. "what is". The purpose of a descriptive research is to examine a phenomenon that is occurring at a specific place(s) and time. A descriptive research is concerned with conditions, practices, structures, differences or relationships that exist, opinions held, processes that are going on or trends that are evident. By traditional institutions, for the study, it means the home-grown or local models and methods the communities have used overtime and possibly still use in managing the conflict that has threatened their continued existence. The major goal of the study is to investigate the causes of the Ife-Modakeke conflict and also relating it to the local models used in managing the attendant actions in order to prevent violent conflicts. There is a wide range of traditional institutions in Ife-Modakeke and the whole of Yorubaland as a whole. There are three levels of conflict resolution in the traditional Yoruba court system. These are dispute resolution at the inter-personal or family level, the extended family level and the village or town level (Chief-in-Council). These levels represent the political units making up the community. The smallest political unit within Yoruba towns is the "*idile*", which roughly corresponds to the nuclear family and is headed by a Bale. This is followed by the "*ebi*", the extended family headed by "*Mogaji*", who is usually the oldest or most influential person. Extended family includes all people

who have blood ties. Lastly, there are several family compounds and these are headed by a *bale* (Gbenda, 2012). However, the population of this study was streamlined to the traditional institutions that were likely involved or played frontline roles in the management of the Ife-Modakeke conflict. The institutions considered for both communities include the palace, the chiefs, selected chief priests of selected deities, the *Ogboni*, the *Egungun*, the compound and ward courts.

The sample population were the Kings, chiefs, deities' chief priests, *Ogboni* members, elderly men and women as well as youths of Ife-Modakeke community. Purposive sampling was employed to interview those traditional institutions or individuals that were likely involved or played frontline roles in the management of the Ife-Modakeke conflict. Purposive sampling method was selected for its accuracy of drawing out the study population in that the actual people suitable for the sampling study were selected and were expected to give accurate data which will then be used as a general representation of the study. It was also selected for its ability to be less time consuming and inexpensive.

Sources of data for this research comprises of both primary and secondary sources. A primary data involves first-hand information collected directly by a researcher, while a secondary data is a data that have already been collected by and readily available from other sources.

The research instrument employed for this study is Key Informant Interview (KII). Specifically, open-ended questions were developed by the researcher to elicit the opinions of the interviewees on the subject matter of this work. The open-ended questions were developed in line with the aim and objectives of this study.

Primary and secondary sources provided the data for this study. For the primary source, given the nature of the study being qualitative, the need to get well detailed descriptive narratives in order to achieve the objectives of the study informed the use of data collection instrument which is Key Informant Interview (KII) and observations of conflict management proceedings in traditional courts; the Kings of both towns, chiefs, traditional belief chief priests, *Ogboni* members, elderly men and women as well as youths who are knowledgeable in the conflicts and management methods were interviewed. However, for the secondary sources, it is pertinent to state that it formed an undeniable major bulk of the work considering the use of journal articles, books, internet sources to mention a few.

Qualitative research, unlike its counterpart the quantitative, cannot be employed with the use of figures, values or charts for analysis. Given the detailed and historical nature of the study, i.e. what the informants say about and how they interpret the events occurring within their environment, the descriptive method of analysis was adopted. As noted by Osuala (2005), qualitative methods are essentially concerned with

processes rather than consequences, with meanings rather than behavioural statistics. Perception and interpretation of reality are linked with these meanings that are derived from the context of direct experiences. Thus, the reality of a given social setting may be seen not as a fixed and stable entity but as a type of variable that might be discerned only through an analysis of these multiple forms of understanding. Only qualitative methodologies provide avenues that can lead to the discovery of these deeper levels of meaning (Fasesin, 2007). Hence, content analysis was adopted to analyse the data collected.

Result and Discussion

This study found out that the major core causes of the conflict between *Ife* and *Modakeke* group include land issues, *Ife* East Local Government issue, debate about *Modakeke*'s sovereignty or staying with *Ife*, masquerade (*egungun*) crossing into each other's territory, boundary disagreement, etc. This finding was supported by Akanle (2009) that the *Modakeke* people are generally considered strangers, tenants, and migrants in *Ife*. According to Akanle, historical accounts suggest that they migrated and settled in *Ife* in the aftermath of the collapse of the Old *Oyo* Empire in the nineteenth century, causing a refugee crisis to the south and resulting in the occupation of their contemporary location.

Asiyanbola (2010) claimed that at the initial stage, the relationship between the *Ife* and *Oyo* refugees was very cordial to the extent that *Ife* Chiefs throw their doors open to more *Oyo* refugees because they are good allies in moments of warfare and in farm work. Specifically, he posited that the *Oyo* refugees provided military support to the *Ife* during the *Owu* War of 1825 and various *Ijesha* invasions. As at when the *Modakeke*' were accepted at *Ile-Ife* in a separate settlement by the then *Ooni Abeweila*, the *Ife*' started regretting such action. This was because they lost political and economic dominance over *Modakeke*'.

Akanle added that two distinct categories of people were thus created: the original settlers (landlords) and the migrants, tenants, farmhands, and a resettled group considered as refugees (*Modakeke*). These categorizations form the remote causes of the conflicts between the two groups. Indeed, crisis are bound to exist in relationships like this when parties perceive their aspirations to be contradictory and their values, needs or interests divergent. Thus, while from a general sociocultural and identity perspective the two groups are identical as part of the Yoruba race, economic and political gains engendered through superior-subordinate notions have created an overarching challenge to peace.

Akanle (2009) further submitted that the first major economic cause of the crises was the *isakole* (land tribute) which the *Ife* landlords collected from the *Modakeke*' until the late 1970s. After the promulgation of the Land Use Decree of

March 29, 1978 by the military government, land tributes were abolished. The Decree created uneasy relationships between the two groups as the *Ife* people perceived it as an infringement of their rights as landowners. The *Modakeke* people, who were predominantly farmers, saw the Decree as an opportunity for free tenancy and refused to pay tributes to their landlords. A battle for liberation then began, finding its expression in the political arena as the legitimate domain for different power groups.

Oyerinde (2002) put this more succinctly that with the promulgation of the 1978 land use decree, land conflicts between tenants/migrants and indigenous landowners (families/compounds) have led to the non-recognition of indigenous institutions for conflict resolution in some rural Yoruba communities and increasing number of inter-group fights. He added that the 1978 land use decree transferred landownership in Nigeria from the family/compound to the government without any regard for peculiar local circumstances that structure the relationship between migrants/tenants and indigenous landowners in different communities.

Oyerinde (2002) added that the promulgation of the 1978 uniform land regime was consequently accompanied by conflicting claims over landownership between tenants/migrants and indigenous landowners in some rural Yoruba communities. Issues over the appropriate form of landownership, strictly individual private property or common property, are included among the important issues being addressed in these conflicts. In such rural Yoruba communities, tenants/migrants recognize the government as the landowner but their former landlords (families/compounds) have continued to maintain their claims to landownership. Much as indigenous institutions for resolving this kind of conflicts between indigenous landowners and tenants/migrants have remained successful in some rural Yoruba communities, they have broken down in other rural Yoruba communities with the promulgation of the 1978 land use decree and have led to land fracas that has, in turn, degenerated into killing, arson, and mayhem of unprecedented proportions, such as the case of *Ife* and *Modakeke* people.

Corroborating the above, Makinde (2014) reported that a resident of *Modakeke*, who pleaded not to be named, alleged that many indigenes of the town who are farmers had not been allowed to return to their farms since the end of the last crisis. He added that some people from *Ife* always prevented *Modakeke* farmers from harvesting their cash crops. He added that the youths from the town had vowed that they would resist such practice henceforth. According to him, the people of *Ife* are demanding that *Modakeke* indigenes who are farming on *Ife* land should pay land tribute.

Asiyanbola (2010) argued that the causes of the conflicts between *Ife* and *Modakeke* are many and varied and are partly economic and partly political and identity issues revolving around land ownership issues, payment of land rent (*Isakole*), status

of *Modakeke* community, local government creation and location of local government headquarters. He added that the crisis since the post-colonial period has been a veritable weapon in the hands of those interested in creating political tensions in Yoruba land.

In a study conducted by Akanji (2012), he noted that the causes of the communal conflict between *Ife* and *Modakeke* are diverse, what is clearly established in the literature is that over the years, the conflicts had assumed different dimensions. These include quest for autonomy, quest to maintain group identity, and quest to freely dispose of natural wealth and resources. Specifically, the history of the conflicts shows a situation where the *Modakeke* have always being encompassed by the *Ife* community, and at the same time insisting that they hold a different identity from the *Ife*. On the other hand, the *Ife* people have always considered the preservation of the territorial integrity of the entire *Ife* land area/community non-negotiable. The perspective of the *Ife* may be gleaned from the remarks made in 1997 by *Orayemi Orafidiya*, (the *Asiwaju* of *Ife* community), when he stated that: “Nowhere is a land carved to a group of non-indigene in the area to form anything or to qualify for an autonomous local government...” (Cited by Akanji, 2012)

Akanji argued that the above statement reveals the internal self-determination undertone of the crisis. Likewise, the *Modakeke* people’s reactions, for example, to the failure of the Oyo state government to accede to their demand for a separate local council in 1981, which would have accorded them (the *Modakeke*) an autonomous status within *Ife* equally shows the connection between the conflict and internal self-determination. In response to the denial, the *Modakeke* people staged a demonstration on the 31st May 1981, carrying placards that blamed the late traditional ruler of *Ile Ife*, *Oba* (King) *Okunade Sijuawade* as well as the national leader of the ruling political party in the state; Chief *Obafemi Awolowo* of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), for frustrating their ambition (Akanji, 2012). Some of the placards read: “*Modakeke* are not *Ife* and the two communities can never live together peacefully and happily. “*Awo*, give democracy a chance”, “*Modakeke* must be free”, “Freedom is our goal”.”

He argued further that at one point, the communal conflict assumed the character of a liberation struggle with the traditional chief of the *Modakeke* community, (the *Baale* of *Modakeke*) Chief *Animasaun*, threatening that if the community was not granted a separate local government status it would struggle to achieve it. And when it seemed the dream of the *Modakeke* was almost being fulfilled in 1989, because the government placed them in a local government council area not directly under the control of the *Ife* local authority, their state of ecstasy as deduced in the expression of I. O. Ajayi (the *Otun Asiwaju Modakeke*), further revealed the strong connection between the communal conflict and the aspiration for self-determination. The *Modakeke* people’s state of ecstasy was summed up in the following words:

It is sure that we are in the Promised Land. Agitation, oppression and unhealthy rivalry between *Modakeke* and *Ife* have been solved after 150 years [1839-1989] of wars and near apartheid situation in an independent Nigeria. What an uneasy journey of 150 years towards the promised-land (Ajayi as cited by Akanji, 2012).

Therefore, it is evident that the issue of identity encapsulated in requests for separate local government was a major factor in the sustenance and escalation of the communal conflict (Akanji, 2012). Olayiwola and Okorie (2010) also confirmed that the conflict has grown and matured to the extent that it is no longer a physical battle alone, its psychological dimension has reached the extent that both parties are in cold war. Asiyanbola (2010) concluded that women that are married to the other community and particularly their children have identity crisis in the sense that some see each other as strangers and enemy, although quite a percentage of the respondents see each other as kinsmen. Therefore, it seems there is existence of segregation between the two communities in terms of marriage and even schooling most especially among the youths.

Secondly, this study discovered that some of the short comings of the past methods of managing the *Ife-Modakeke* conflict are because those who have suffered various degrees of losses were not compensated. This finding is in harmony with the submissions of Akanle (2009) that the destruction of lives and property during the *Ife-Modakeke* struggles has been wanton. Records suggest that during the 1997 crisis alone no fewer than 2,000 and perhaps as many as 5,000 people were killed. Property destruction exceeded \$42.4 million, and 10,000 farmers were displaced from *Modakeke* farmlands. Schools, public utilities, houses, and cars were burnt while over 10,000 people were internally displaced. Economic activities have been affected, as many businesses have relocated from the two communities due to the conflict. Suspicion and distrust are mutual, fuelling violence at the slightest provocation.

Asiyanbola (2010) also accounted that till date, there had been seven major wars between *Ife* and *Modakeke* –1835-1849, 1882-1909, 1946-1949, 1981, 1983, 1997-1998 and 2000. He noted that the conflict is depicted as a conflict between the *Ife* “landlords” and the *Modakeke* “strangers/tenants”. The recent crisis has caused over 2000 deaths and several more injuries. Several hundreds of people were shot, slaughtered or lynched; several houses and properties were destroyed.

Akanle argued further that a dangerous dimension is youth aggression and disorientation. Young people became the conscience of their communities during crises and unleashed mayhem beyond the elders’ control. Youth organizations have emerged, however, that have transcended the conflict and immediate post-conflict era. Some of these youth organizations include the Great *Ife*, Youth Vanguard, *Modakeke* Progressive Union, and Drivers’ Union (Akanle, 2009).

This study discovered that the roles of traditional institutions in managing the conflict and sustaining post-conflict peace cannot be underestimated. The finding attests Albert's submission that another major significant and landmark attempt to find a lasting solution to the age-long conflict between *Ife* and *Modakeke* was done by a third party intervention of USAID/OTI under the leadership of Dr. Isaac Olawale Albert (cited by Olayiwola and Okorie, 2010). This took place between 1999 and 2000.

The intervention processes employed according to Albert cited by Olayiwola and Okorie (2010) were: media campaign activity; separate community training activity; and joint training on forgiveness, reconciliation and transformative leadership of the two communities. At the end of these, a formal inauguration of the *Ife-Modakeke* inter-community Peace Advocacy committee took place at Oduduwa Hall, Obafemi Awolowo University, *Ile-Ife*, Nigeria on 16th September, 2000. Olayiwola and Okorie (2010) argued that there is no doubt that this initiative made a tremendous achievement in restoring peace between the two communities and members of both communities kept to their promises of upholding peace. But this only ends the physical dimension of the conflict. This manifest in the fact that there is no physical battle or confrontation occurring till date but the psychological bitterness still lingers. Hence, both parties are in cold war.

Conclusion

Conflict is indeed an inevitable aspect of human interaction. The fact that conflicts are an integral part of human interactions necessitated the need to learn to manage them: to deal with them in a way that prevents escalation and destruction, and arrives at new, innovative, and creative ideas to resolve them. In the case of *Ife and Modakeke* conflict, despite several methods adopted to solve the conflict, there are still cases of conflicts recorded occasionally. The methods adopted have not dealt with the major roots of the problem but just the surface. This could be typified as just cutting an unwanted tree from the branches instead of uprooting it. This is the true picture of *Ife and Modakeke* conflict.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this paper, it is recommended that:

1. For sustainable peace to be attained there is need to pursue policies that encourage social integration, as well as policies that discourage strong ethnic attachment and the spread of ethnically related organizations in the two communities.
2. A lasting solution/ agreement should be reached by both towns on what to do about those who could not go back to their land.

3. Youths are mostly engaged in the conflict; hence, adequate peace education should start from the home and in schools.
4. The federal government should endeavour to compensate those that lost valuables during the war as a form of succour to them;
5. Today, it seems adequate respect is not given to the monarchs anymore compared to the pre-colonial days; therefore, the federal government should endeavour to accord the traditional rulers their rightful respect/powers so that this will also flow to the entire citizenry.

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