



THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN ENHANCING SECURITY SITUATION IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF YOBE STATE

By

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Abstract

In recent time, Yobe State faces security challenges of Boko Haram insurgency and farmer-herder clashes which caused fatalities, mass evictions, and the destruction of critical infrastructure, including markets, hospitals, and schools which hinder economic activities and peaceful coexistence in the state. This study evaluates the role that traditional leaders play in enhancing the security situation in the state. The study is qualitative in nature and data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. The findings reveal that traditional leaders play a significant role in resolving conflicts among people and ensuring peace and stability by organizing community policing and providing intelligent information to security personnel and the government. The study suggests that government should empower traditional leaders in such a way that they can do better.

Keywords: *Traditional leaders, resolution of conflict, peace and security*

Introduction

Traditional leaders in Nigeria have been playing an important role in mitigating violence and ensuring the peaceful co-existence of the people in the country right from pre-colonial period. For example, during pre-colonial period, the traditional leaders were the repository of the executive, legislative, and judicial powers who implemented and maintained law and order, allocated land, resolved conflicts especially land disputes and ensured peace and harmony among people in their respective areas of the domain (Fatile et al., 2013). As a result, violence particularly ethno-religious conflicts, intra and inter-communal conflicts were minimal. Moreover, during the colonial period, the British colonial masters recognizing the position and the legitimacy and respect the traditional leaders enjoyed in the country, they harnessed them to maintain law and order in the country for the smooth running of the colonial administration in Nigeria (Olusola & Aisha, 2013).

Meanwhile, after the independence of Nigeria from 1966 up to 1976 were the periods when the traditional leaders continued to substantially lose their powers in the governance of local councils in Nigeria (Onyedikachi, 2016). For example, the Customary/Native courts were dispossessed by the States government while Police and Prisons were usurped by the Federal government. By 1976, a major local government reform was carried out which stripped off all powers of the traditional leaders from the administration of local government and relegated them to the background by assigning an advisory role to them (Onah & Anikwe, 2016).

However, following its independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced various forms of security challenges, such as civil war, Meitatsine, Biafran crisis, and ethno-religious conflicts which led to destruction of many lives and properties hence threatens the peaceful co-existence of the people in the



country (Hamza et al., 2019). In recent time, Nigeria faces more security challenges which ranges from the Boko Haram Insurgency in the Northern part, Militancy in the Niger-Delta region, kidnapping, armed banditry, and farmer-herder clashes which hinder economic activities and peaceful coexistence in the country (Ajayi, 2023). These challenges have also claimed the lives and properties of many people in the country. For instance, from 2009 to present, the crisis of Boko Haram has accounted for the death of about 20,000 people, displaced over two million people and caused the economic setback of the North-east and the country at large (Human Right Watch, 2022). Further evidence indicates that the crisis of farmers and herders has accounted for about 3600 lives from 2016 to 2018, and at present about 60,000 people lost their lives (Hague, 2018; Agbakwuru, 2024).

Yobe State is one of the states situated in the North-eastern part of Nigeria. The State has an estimated population of 2.6 million people according to the 2006 census. The state is one of the poorest states in Nigeria as a result of its experience with insurgency, which caused fatalities, mass evictions, and the destruction of critical infrastructure, including markets, hospitals, and schools (National Bureau of Statistics [NBC], 2022). In November 2011, Boko Haram launched its first offensive attack in Yobe state when it struck Damaturu, the state's capital (Babagana et al, 2019). Since then, the group has continued to assault other Local Government Areas in Yobe State with increasing frequency. This crisis of Boko Haram has led to the loss of lives and displacement of many people. For instance, the Human Right Watch (2018) states that the insurgency of Boko Haram in the North-eastern states of Adamawa, Yobe and Borno has claimed the lives of more than 15,000 people, displacing millions of people and the destruction of businesses.

In an effort to address these security challenges in Nigeria, government devised ways and means which include crackdown using security forces such as military, police, securities and so on. Despite efforts by the Nigeria's federal government, Yobe state government, and other NGOs, reports of persistent security issues connected to the Boko Haram insurgency continue to come from many parts of the local governments severely affected by the seven-year insurgency. (Babagana et al., 2019).

However, in recent time, government, Non-governmental organizations and the public are referring to the traditional leaders on social issues such as the resolution of conflicts and disputes (Fatile et al., 2013). This is because traditional leaders possess basic knowledge and skills of the customs, traditions, and values of their people and the indigenous patterns of conflict resolution that place them in the better position to play a role in mitigating security challenges and ensuring peaceful co-existence of the people in Nigeria (Hamza et al., 2019).

Thus, it is in light of this that, this study assesses the role of traditional leaders in enhancing security situation in Yobe State, Nigeria.

Literature Review

The concept of Traditional Leadership/ Traditional Leaders

Basically, traditional leadership is a type of institution in which the authority to rule rests in the traditions, customs, and values of the society (Sakyi, 2003). Holzinger et al (2016) defined traditional governance as “a form of governance understood and validated through narratives and procedures deemed 'traditional' by the constituents”. Palmary (2004) defines traditional leadership as an organization that evolved for the time immemorial in Africa and through which people are governed according to their customary laws. This means that for an institution of traditional leadership to be regarded as a traditional institution it should have predated colonialism. According to Peter (2014)



traditional institution is referred to “indigenous political arrangements whereby leaders with proven track records are appointed and installed in line with the native laws and customs to act as custodian of the people's norms, culture, and practices”. This shows that traditional leaders are hereditary in nature who ascribed to the native laws, customs and culture of the people and who do not ascend to their thrones through the electoral process. They enjoy the respect and legitimacy of their people because of their long social, political and economic connection with their communities.

Meanwhile, a traditional ruler has been defined “as a person who by virtue of his ancestral position occupies the throne or stool of an area and who has been appointed to it in accordance with the customs and traditions of the area and whose throne has been in existence before the advent of the British in Nigeria” (Peter, 2014). This definition connotes that only those whose institutions have predated colonialism were regarded as the traditional rulers. While in Nigeria before the advent of colonialism there were areas like the Southeast where the traditional institution of governance did not exist (Sokoh, 2018). Thus, a traditional ruler is the guardian of an ethnic group's traditions, history, and customs, and is appointed by such individuals to rule, govern, and administer justice in accordance with the people's established norms and traditions. For Baldwin (2016) traditional leaders are “rulers who have powers by virtue of their association with customary mode of governing a place-based community” (Baldwin, 2016: p. 21). This definition encompasses all sort of leaders from Asia, Latin America, Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa among others who associate themselves with the customary laws. Their association with these customary laws makes their status revered and respected by the communities. As a result, they rule villages, communities, and countries. Ademolekum (1983) refers traditional leaders to persons or group of persons who assume political leadership of the community and who are with the consent of community have powers to administer the activities according to traditions and customs of the community.

However, the powers the traditional leaders wield in contemporary time vary from country to country and so also within countries (Baldwin & Raffler, 2017). For example, empirical evidence shows that the traditional chiefs wield more powers in rural and highly ethnically community (Holzinger et al., 2016), far and less populated areas (Baldwin, 2014), and highly honoured and revered in villages in a country (Acemoglu et al., 2013).

However, some countries have replaced traditional chiefs with the elected representatives or appointed public servants while others have not (Baldwin, 2014). Boone (2003) argues that those who hold the apparatus of power in the modern government consider economic and political benefits of the traditional institutions of governance before either retaining or replacing them. Moreover, it has been argued that politicians tend to retain those chiefs who have the ability to mobilise economic resources and voters during elections (Baldwin, 2014). However, Acemoglu et al. (2013) claim that places with less ruling chiefs tend to have less development which manifests in a low level of education, unemployment, agricultural activities among others.

Traditional Institutions in Africa and Nigeria

Empirical pieces of evidence prove that the traditional leaders and their institutions of governance had existed for the time immemorial before the advent of colonialism in Africa (Sakyi, 2003). During that period, the traditional leaders were the social, political, military, economic, and spiritual leaders who played a significant role in the affairs of their areas of the domain before colonialism in Africa (Koenane, 2017). Studies, for example, Bikam and Chakwizira (2014), Mawere and Mayekiso (2014), Tonwe and Osemwota (2013), Koenane (2017) reveal that during the pre-colonial period, the



institutions of traditional leadership played important roles on the matters that affected the lives of the people in Africa. In addition, Bikam and Chakwizira (2014) posit that the traditional leaders served as the political, cultural, spiritual and military leaders of their respective domains who also performed significant functions such as allocation of lands for farming and residential purposes to their subjects, settled disputes among community members to ensure peace and harmony in their communities, and mobilised members of their communities to participate in decision making through village meetings. Meanwhile, for the traditional leaders to finance service like the construction of feeder roads, wells, market, etc. they had to generate resources from levies, royalties, donations, a tribute from vassal states (Amoateng & Kalule-Sabiti, 2011).

Like in the other African countries, traditional institutions in the pre-colonial Nigeria existed based on kingdoms, emirates, sultanate in which the Emirs, Obas, and Chiefs wielded political, social, economic, and military powers and played important roles to the development and the well-being of the people of their respective areas of jurisdiction (Peter, 2014). Their executive, legislative, and judicial powers to govern their people emanated from the aged-long traditions which were honoured and revered by the people. Moreover, studies have shown that the traditional leaders in pre-colonial Nigeria, had well-organized institutions in which they implemented and maintained law and order, settled conflicts including land disputes, provided services to the people and served as the custodian of culture, values uprightness, morality, and honesty; enforced taxes and levies; and administered justice within their areas of domain (Fatile et al., 2013; Olusola & Aisha, 2013; Osakede & Ijimakinwa, 2015; Tonwe & Osemwota, 2013).

The system of administration during that period in present-day Nigeria varied from one region to the other. For example, in the Northern and South Western Regions, the traditional system of governance was synonymous with Emirate and Kingdom systems which were a highly centralized system whereby the Emir emerges as both political as well as a religious leader while the South-eastern had a decentralized system (Osakede & Ijimakinwa, 2015).

Methodology

The study was qualitative in nature and in-depth interviews were administered on 16 participants that comprised the traditional leaders, government officials, non-governmental organization officials, association leaders, and experts who were purposively selected across three local governments in Yobe state. To ensure confidentiality pseudo names were assigned to the participants. While the secondary data involves journal articles, government official reports, news papers and magazines, and theses. In terms of data analysis, Braun and Clarke six steps of thematic analysis was employed.

Findings and Discussions

The study found that Yobe State nowadays is facing enormous security challenges that range from Boko Haram insurgency, Farmer/herder clashes and so on. Thus, the study found that traditional leaders play significant roles in ameliorating security challenges facing the state. These roles include resolution of the conflict and ensuring peace and stability in the state.

Resolution of Conflicts

The participants reveal that traditional leaders resolve several conflicts ranging from communal clashes, marital disputes, youth restiveness, and so on. For instance, TL participant 1 recounts that:

“Under our emirate council we were able to resolve more than twenty communal cases involving farmer/herder clashes, over two hundred cases involving marital disputes

and conflicts among individuals, among others resolved. This was done in such a way that the conflicting parties are brought to a meeting in which we persuade them to understand and resolve their differences amicably either through negotiation, reconciliation, arbitration, and so on. Moreover, in some instances of the clashes between farmers and herders, compensation was paid to the farmers for the damages done by the herders' cattle. This way, it ensured peaceful co-existence amongst the people in the communities. However, we had little issues of disagreement on all these conflicts that have resolved under our emirate council. On the other hand, we have a section which deals with feminine related issues headed by women traditional title holders such as Yah maira and Yah Gumsu handle feminine related cases in the Emirate". (TL participant 1)

The above narrative is an attestation to the role traditional leaders play in enhancing security in their areas of domain. Given the magnitude of such conflicts they resolved it could be deduced that traditional leaders stabilize and ensure peace and harmony in the society. Moreover, the successes recorded as indicated in the findings are attributed to the requisite skills and knowledge traditional leaders have in indigenous mechanisms for the resolution of conflicts coupled with the respect and honour people have for the resolutions and decisions of their traditional leaders.

Supporting this finding, Mohammed et al. (2017) analyse the role the traditional leaders play in resolving farmer/herder clash in Nigeria with reference to Borno State. They found out that the traditional leaders have contributed enormously to the resolution of a conflict between farmers and herders in the area by making sure that demarcation has been made between the grazing areas of the herder and farm land of the farmers. As a result, peace and harmony have been restored in the area. In a similar vein, Aliyu et al. (2016) examined the role played by Kano Emirate Council in the resolution of various ethno-religious crises that bedevilled the State in the past. Using an indigenous mechanism for conflict resolution, the Kano Emirate invested into the root cause of the crisis and found out that religion plays a significant role in crisis. As a result, they called on the religious and community leaders of both ethnic groups and tasked them to preach in churches and mosques to their people to embrace peace. By so doing, they had succeeded in resolving the long-aged conflict between Hausa and Igbos and restored a state of normalcy and cordiality between these ethnic groups in the state. Moreover, they found that people preferred the indigenous conflict arbitration by the Kano State Emirate than the courts. This is because of the level of trust and the respect people accord to the traditional institutions in the state.

Furthermore, the findings of this study reveal that the traditional method of conflict resolution is easier, accessible, speedier, and effective one to the extent that people prefer indigenous method of conflict resolution than the formal ones. It also ensures peace and harmony among parties involved in the conflicts. As a result, people nowadays prefer to come to the traditional leaders for resolution of conflicts than to go either police or courts. One of the participants recounts that:

"The traditional method of conflict resolution is easier, accessible, speedier, and effective one to the extent that people prefer indigenous method of conflict resolution than the formal ones. This is because mostly cases brought before the traditional leaders are being treated instantly unlike in the courts where processes have to be followed before the cases are heard. Moreover, it also ensures peace and harmony among parties involved in the conflicts. This is because traditional leaders do not make convictions as the courts or police do rather compensations or warning as the case may



be. And also our people think when you report them to courts or police you do not want have reconciliation with them. As a result, people nowadays prefer to come to the traditional leaders for resolution of conflicts than to go either police or courts". (TL participant 2)

In addition, for instance, EP participant 1 reveals that one of his clients urged him to withdraw their case of land dispute before the court and take it to their district head. He reveals that:

"I can bear witness that many civil cases before the courts are being referred to traditional leaders for an amicable resolution. I handle one case of my client that involves land dispute, my client urged me to withdraw the case from the court to their district head. Because he said to me that the case is taking long and he feels like he will not get justice in the court. Moreover, even the judges a times refer many civil cases to the traditional leaders for resolution".

(EP participant 1)

Aligning to this finding Osei-hwedie and Rankopo (2012) examined the indigenous conflict resolution in Ghana and Botswana and found out that the traditional leaders possess values such as honesty, integrity, and sincerity of the communities with which they resolve conflict and ensure peaceful co-existence of the people. As a result, people prefer the resolution of conflict by the traditional leaders than the courts. This is because the indigenous arbitration of conflict is speedier, transparent, understood, and accepted by the local people. Thus, indigenous conflict resolution leads to the prevalence of peace in society.

It is clear from the findings that without traditional leaders there resolving such conflicts, the society would have turned to a state of chaos. Therefore, this study establishes that traditional leaders play a pivotal role in mitigating security challenges facing Yobe State and Nigeria as a whole.

Ensuring Peace and Stability

This study found this role played by the traditional leaders as of the paramount importance in mitigating security challenges of Yobe State and Nigeria at large. The study also found out that traditional leaders play a key role in ensuring peace and security in their respective areas of domain. The role they play in this regard cannot be overemphasized. The TL participants narrate that traditional leaders play several roles that range from organizing community policing, sensitizing their people to be vigilant on security issues, and providing intelligent information to security agents. In recounting the role they play in ensuring peace and security in their areas of domain, TL participant 4 says that:

"Despite we do not have formal role in the security architecture, we informally ensure security in our areas of domain by organizing community policing in a form of vigilante group. In this hard time of security challenges, it is clear that we shouldn't rely on government alone to provide security in our community. So, we organise vigilante group who safeguard and ensure the security in our community. What we normally do is encouraging the young ones and those who are willing in our community by giving them some incentives to join the vigilante group to protect our community. As a result, we have relative peace and less security challenges in my domain. We also caution and sensitize our people on how to be security conscious and report to us any suspicious activities or persons around our environment". (TL participant 4)



As revealed in the above finding, the community policing that traditional leaders organised is informal but it really helps in safeguarding and securing communities. This is because it supports the security personnel to safeguard and secure rural areas in the state. It is obvious that the number of the security personnel in Nigeria including the case study area currently falls short of the United Nations' guideline of one police officer for every 400 people (Arisukwu & Okunola, 2013). According to Arisukwu et al. (2020) community policing spawn out of the people's scepticism and reaction to the police's incapability to protect them as well as disconnection between the police and the people in the community. Thus, organizing such community policing complements the effort of the security personnel in securing and mitigating insecurity challenges in the case study area and the country at large. This is because it is an effective way of ensuring security of an area by a concerted effort of the community and their traditional leaders (Okonkwo et al., 2019).

Apart from organizing community policing and public sensitization on security matters, this study found that traditional leaders play a key role in providing an intelligent information to the security agencies as well as the local government. In providing such intelligent information to security agencies, this study found that traditional leaders play an important role in furnishing intelligent information to both government and the security agents in their respective areas of domain. The participants revealed that they provide intelligent information to security agents that facilitates in addressing the security challenges local government is facing. Recounting his narrations, TL participant 2 posits that:

“In several occasions I furnished both local government and the security agents with vital intelligent information, for example, I gave to the security agents an information that led to the apprehension of some Boko Haram insurgent members in my area of domain. Moreover, during 2019 general election, I gave intelligent information to security operatives that led to the arrest of some hoodlums who wanted to cause havoc in my area of domain. Indeed, we furnish intelligent information to both the local government and the security agencies of any activities that they perceive as a threat to the security of their community. This actually helps security agencies as well as the local government in keeping the communities' safety and security”. (TL participant 2)

In a testimony to the above narratives, GO and NGO participants reveal that traditional leaders help a lot in ensuring peace and security in their local government area. GO participant 3 stated that without the efforts the traditional leaders make in terms of community policing (Vigilante) and the provision of information, the security situation in our local government would have been worse. He further discloses that:

“Despite the lack of formal role, traditional leaders play a vital role in ensuring peace and security by facilitating community policing and provision of information detrimental to our peace and security in our local government. I can testify that on several occasions, traditional leaders report to us vital information which help in tackling some security challenges. Moreover, with formation of vigilante group in different communities in our local government area, we enjoy relative peace and security. So, I am sure if we formally integrate them, there will be more peace and stability in the state and the country at large”. (GO participant 3)

From these findings it could be seen that traditional leaders play a pivotal role in furnishing the security agencies intelligent information which helped in averting possible occurrence of some destruction of lives and properties of the people. As seen in the findings, for the purpose of getting security



information, traditional leaders appointed informants in every group of people informant to be giving them an update of the security situation in their terrain. This intelligent information is an effective tool with which the security agents can harness to address the security challenges in the local government and Nigeria in general. For example, the Chief of Army Staff while soliciting support of the traditional leaders in providing information to tackle the security challenges of Banditry and others expressed that lack of actionable information impedes the fight against insecurity in Nigeria (Ebonine, 2022). Similarly, Abdullahi (2017) posited that in the management and administration of security in Nigeria traditional leaders are a factor for success or failure because they function at the local level of the society and connect closely with people in their everyday activities.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this research, it has been indicated that there is an existence of security challenges at all levels of government in Nigeria and Yobe State in particular which government alone cannot curtail those security challenges. Similarly, evidence shows that various mechanisms have been employed to contain the challenges yet no desired result has been achieved. Hence, the study reveals that traditional leaders who have requisite knowledge and experience in local governance can help in many ways to mitigate the excess of insecurity in Nigeria considering the magnitude of conflicts they resolved which help to stabilize and ensure peace and harmony in the society. Furthermore, as evinced in the findings that the intelligent information they furnished to the local government as well as the formation of vigilante group had a significant impact in ensuring relative peace and security in case study area. Thus, the study suggests that traditional leaders should be empowered more so that they will have muscles to continue to contribute towards mitigating security challenges in Yobe State and Nigeria at large.

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