THE ROLE OF *UMUNNA* IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AS AN EXPRESSION OF *IGWEBUIKE* PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract
Knowledge of the traditional ways of resolving conflict is highly needed at a time and period when people are losing and abandoning their history and tradition. We approached this article from the expository point of view, to study the role traditional institution (umunna) has played in restoring warring members of the society. The presence of modern conflict management has posed a great challenge to the existing traditional method. In this study, the term "umunna" was descriptively explained through the way in which they resolve conflicts in Igbo land, which has become an expression of Igwebuike philosophy of peace and conflict resolution. The elders, acting as arbiter, resolves conflict in umunna kindred. In this regard, they act as peacemakers and have kept the community running smoothly. The conclusion of this paper is that umunna instituion has contributed a lot to the resolution of conflict in Igbo land and their role in conflict resolution has been very interesting and effective. The knowledge acquired through this study will help appreciate and empower the umunna traditional conflict resolution mechanism in Igbo land.
Keywords: Igwebuike Philosophy, Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, Conflict Resolution, *Umunna,* Tradition

Introduction

Disputes are an integral part of human nature which dates back to the origin of man. This is so because human beings live in families, hamlets, villages and in large communities. As they interact amongst themselves, disputes are likely to occur. Since we are created differently and can hardly share the same view, there is bound to be divergent opinions as when friends or members of a family disagree, or as what countries or states hold tenaciously, views that are diametrically opposed. In traditional African society, conflicts are common phenomena among communities, families and individuals. Africa as a continent has diversity of cultural and religious practices. This diversity affects the approaches to dispute and conflict management in the traditional setting. Apparently, the approach tends to differ from the Western dispute management in several respects. Even then, in Africa itself, the approach may also differ from

one culture to another. Igbo traditional African society has a well-organized and systematic conflict resolution strategy. It is a healing process in which all stakeholders contribute positive energy. These stakeholders range from family heads, the council of elders, or chiefs, religious leaders, leaders of age-grades, *umuada* and to *umunna*. Igbo people initially had neither chiefs nor kings who would manage their conflict, and would not wait for conflict to start before they control it; they rather had institutions for managing the suppression of weaker persons from the stronger. One of those institutions that resolve conflict in traditional Igbo society to date is the "*umunna*."

This paper discusses "*umunna*" as an institution that resolves conflict in traditional Igbo society, drawing inspiration from *Igwebuike* African philosophy of peace and conflict resolution. *Igwebuike* is an indigenous Igbo philosophy, rooted within indigenous epistemologies, cultures and traditions based on the relationships and experiences of interrelationships and interconnections of the Igbo people. The study tends to commend and appreciate "*umunna*" for their great contribution in resolving conflict in traditional Igbo society.

Conflict and Causes of Conflict in Igbo Land
Conflict is part and parcel of every human society. Whenever two or more people are gathered in one interaction or another, conflict is bound to surface. Conflict is described in terms of what might have caused it, such as scarce resources, disagreement and competition. Conflicts will always occur due to ideological, political, social and economic differences which usually resulted in rivalry and competition. Conflict resolution aims at restoring social harmony, mending breached social ties, performance of rituals and offering apologies or compensation to ensure that the status quo before the dispute is restored. The pre-colonial Igbo society cannot be said to differ, as individuals and communities engaged in one form of interaction or the other - a situation which at times led to conflicts (Ezenwoko and Osagie, 2014, p. 135). Igbo peace scholars are unanimous on the causes of conflicts in Igbo land, which include issues arising from marriage, inheritance, chieftaincy tussle, land, territorial boundaries, among others. Matudi (2016) captures the sources of rift or conflict in African setting in different levels.

> In the family level; conflict ensues through interpersonal relations, marital issues and property ownership. In economic level; conflict can take shape through land encroachment, territorial dislocation, terms of trade and failure to pay tribute. In the political level; conflict can arise through tussle for leadership, especially where rules guiding selection of traditional rulers are disobeyed. Conflict can also be manifested in non-compliance to

religious obligations-violation or objection of shrine order and finally, non-allegiance to constituted authority such as elders and traditional rulers (p. 4).

Charles (2016) agrees with this when he said, "Conflict in Igbo land has always been either disputes over ownership of land, chieftaincy tussle, political authority and fears of domination and marginalization" (p.9). Thus, inter-tribal conflict over boundary and trade, marital conflict, conflict over inheritance and chieftaincy title tussle all exist in Igbo land.

The major cause of conflicts in Igbo traditional society has always been the struggle and ownership of land. Land is seen as valuable sources not only for food cultivation but also for exploitation of aquatic and other products. Land has much to do in human affairs, and whatever human beings do on the land affects the land positively or negatively, whether it is to grow food and cash crops, extract mineral resources or abode for its inhabitants. Land speculation is, therefore, an important source of communal conflicts today. According to Charles (2016), "This is because of the spirituality surrounding land in the Igbo culture as expressed in the prominence of the deity, '*ana*' and the importance of the yam crop" (p.6). Land dispute is a serious issue among the Igbos, since it touches both the material and spiritual essence of Igbo ontology. The reason why land disputes are more complex in Igbo land is that all lands are usually owned; whether it is cultivated or not, it belongs to somebody or a community. Hence, claims and counter-claims over land ownership have become the order of the day in Igbo society till date.

Geographically, there is scarcity of land among the Igbos of southeastern part of Nigeria. Subsistence farming still accounts for a major part of their occupation. So dispute on the limited available land is rampant. In addition, most of the bitter territorial disputes have erupted among communities that have had strong ties that bounded them together for centuries. Charles gave example of a famous land boundary conflict between Aguleri and Umuleri. These two communities belong to the same ethnic stock, are neighbours, have the same ancestral origin (Eri),   are in the same local government area (Anambra East), and the same state (Anambra). They have been living together, farming and intermarrying long before the coming of the white man. The major cause of the conflicts that have lasted for more than thirty (30) years is a piece of land called, 'Otuocha.' The two communities have been in court since 1920 and yet no lasting peace has been achieved until 2000 after the 1999 war that claimed many lives (2016, p. 6). Land conflict is one of the deadly conflicts in Igbo society. This is the reason why

Nwolise (2004) posits that, "It was pressure on land resulting from a combination of expropriation, monetization of land by the colonial masters, rising population density, degradation and resurgence of pre-colonial communal competition has raised land into primal "casus belli" in rural." Thus, land is something that is worth fighting and dying for. There is too much pressure on the little cultivable land and this also causes conflicts among the people, especially during the farming seasons. Land is a non-renewable resource and, with concentration of population growth, will lead to conflict.

Another major source of conflict in family setting in Igbo land is sharing the inheritance or the properties of the dead among the living children and other family members. This source of conflict can be either among the living children of the deceased person or the brothers of the deceased with the wife/children. In Igbo society, the property of a man, on his death, was inherited by his sons, while that of a woman is inherited by her daughters (Ezenwoko et el, 2014, p. 151). This is where the conflict between brothers of the deceased and the wife arises, especially when the man dies without a child or the children are still young. Since a woman cannot inherit the property of a man, then the brothers come for it.

On the other hand, in the pre-colonial period, the method by which family property was shared among the members of a monogamous family differed from the way family property was shared in a polygamous family. On the death of the head of a family, his eldest son exclusively inherited his personal "*ofo*" (symbol of authority) and other objects of worship. The eldest son also exclusively inherited his late father's Obi (the house where he lived and died), distinct plot of land known as "*ala isi obi*" or "*ani isiobi*" – a plot of land specifically meant for the head of the family (Nwogugu, 1974), furniture and dresses. The other properties, such as farm land, farming implements, economic trees, livestock, etc., were shared among his male children (Chubb, 1961). The eldest son was accountable to his other brothers. If he desired to sell or lease any of the plots of land, he had to inform his brothers who were also stakeholders. However, family inheritance generated a lot of conflicts in Igbo society because some eldest sons, after inheriting their father's property, especially landed property converted some to themselves by planting economic trees, like palm trees, on them. Attempt by the other brothers to reclaim such property from their eldest brother usually leads to conflict.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is the process by which two or more parties in conflict reach a peaceful resolution to a dispute. It is the methods and processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of <u>conflict</u>. It can also be thought to encompass the use of nonviolent resistance measures by conflicted parties in an attempt to promote effective resolution. Shedrack (2014) sees conflict resolution as a sense of finality, where the parties to a conflict are mutually satisfied with the outcome of a settlement and the conflict is resolved in a true sense (p. 94). On the question, if conflict can truly be resolved? Shedrack avers that "some conflicts, especially those over resources, are permanently resolvable." Conflict can be said to be resolved when the basic needs of the parties in conflict have been met and their fears defused. Conflict resolution can either aim at resolving or terminating conflicts in an open and predictable process in accordance with legal principles or focus on efforts to increase cooperation among the parties to a conflict and deepen their relationship by addressing the conditions that led to the dispute, fostering positive attitudes and allaying distrust through reconciliation initiatives, and building or strengthening the institutions and processes through which the parties interact.

The overall objective of conflict resolution in African society was to uphold and promote peaceful co-existence among and between community members. It is in the light of this that the following guiding principles had informed the African approaches to conflict resolution.

1) **Impartiality:** In traditional conflict resolution, no case was treated as an isolated entity. The elders tried to be as neutral and unbiased as possible, siding or supporting no party.
2) **Transparency:** All issues emanating from conflicting situations were placed at the public domain for all to see and hear.
3) **Fairness, Justice and Equality:** Traditional conflict resolution distributes equitable justice to all and sundry, irrespective of the status.
4) **Award:** Traditional African conflict resolution dreaded the issue of "winner takes it all." Conflict resolutions were aimed at stabilizing the bond of relationship in the society. This was done through celebration of reconciliation.

Umunna

Umunna is an Igbo word from the Eastern part of Nigeria. It is a compound word. "*Umu*" means children or sons and "*nna*" means father. When brought together it could mean "children of the father" or "sons of the father". *Umunna* is

translated 'kindred' or 'kinsmen', to mean the extended family of one's ancestral village. It is a form of patrilineage maintained by the Igbos, which is a male line of descent from a founding ancestor with groups of compounds containing closely related families headed by the eldest male member. So, *Umunna* simply means, sons of the same father. The *umunna* kindred are often named after the founding ancestor. *Umunna*, the cornerstone of Igbo structure, defines the arrangement of every individual in a family structure and describes their social position in the community. *Umunna*, the weekly assembly of only male members of the clan/kindred, is another traditional method of resolving conflict. The *umunna* is made up of elders and male members of families bonded by some ancestral ties. These elders have overtime stood as peace builders that built strong and virile communities that have witnessed a prolonged peaceful co-existence (Ebisi, 2016). The terms, 'village group council' and 'village assembly,' are used interchangeably to refer to the Igbo central authority, while *umunna* village-group and *ndiamala* refer to the more locally derived authority headed by the *okparas*, elders and *Ozo* title holders at the village level.

As family groups which share a common ancestry, *umunna* kindred is the next political structure above the family. The kindred assembly is presided over by the eldest *okpara*. The kindred union is similar to the family meeting, except that it ordinarily deals with issues that affect the kindred. The village union handles issues and problems that concern the entire village. Individuals can, nevertheless, take their complaints to the village union, especially if they are not satisfied with the decisions taken at the kindred union, or if the dispute is between people from different kindreds within the village. Therefore, *umunna* is another form of arbitration. Arbitration has been one of the significant methods of resolving conflict in traditional Igbo society. It has produced great level of trust, confidence and mutual understanding in traditional Igbo society. The arbiters or arbitrators, who are mostly elected leaders of the clan in conjunction with the elders, have lived up to their expectation of being impartial and interpreted the customs and norms creditably suitable to issues of conflict handled in the arbitral proceedings. In Igbo land, there is a court, if the parties have tried negotiation and mediation and it did not work, they move to the court, which might be the town hall where *umunna* meet weekly, king's palace, village square, or in the shrine (as a last resort). Supporting this statement, Charles (2016, p.7) said "Africa used council of elders, king's court, people's assemblies" in resolution of conflict. The judges in town hall, village square or market place are the elders and traditional rulers, who in judging, use the norms and belief of the land.

The eldest man in the kindred is the holder of the kindred *ofo* and acts as the chairman of the *umunna* assembly. *Umunna* village assembly is in charge of resolving conflicts between individuals from different families in the same clan and village. The *Umunna* assembly resolves conflicts, such as; land boundary and inheritance conflicts. Simple cases of fighting and stealing are treated by the *umunna,* either on their "*awurawu*", that is, weekly gathering of all the male members of the community or, if it involves a female during the moonlight, as the community gathers at the village square. As it was, the family constituted the lowest court in the traditional African system, whereas the king and his council formed the highest court of appeal. They constitute what might be called 'third party intervention' in conflict management. In traditional thought, philosophy and religion, the third party is expected to be neutral and possess the capability to diffuse tension, listen to all sides, restore peace and put social mechanisms in place for conflict management. Their task is to re-establish the energy flow within individuals, families and communities so as to re-build social harmony.

According to Matudi (2016), "Traditional African conflict resolution is embedded in the cultural heritage or values of the society." They seek to promote serial harmony or togetherness illustrated by the proverb which says that, "when people gather in the village square moonlight, it is not because they cannot see the moon in their individual houses" (Achebe, 1959). Conflict resolution in the African society by the *umunna* was a drama where there were neither actors nor spectators. The process of conflict resolution was triangular, involving the parties in conflict, witnesses and the audience. Conflict resolution by the *umunna* involves the celebration of settlement of disputes. There was no loser or winner in the conflict resolution in Igbo traditional society. Concerted efforts were geared toward establishing and sustaining ontological balance between the society and the supernatural world.

Umunna within the Context of *Igwebuike* Philosophy and Conflict Resolution

Kanu, the founder of *Igwebuike* philosophy, gave a succinct description of *Igwebuike* in this way: "*Igwebuike* is an Igbo word; one of the major dialects in Africa. It is a principle that is at the heart of African thought, and in fact, the modality of being in African ontology" (2017, p. 6). He went on to say that it can be employed as a word or used as a sentence: as a word, it is written as *Igwebuike*, and as a sentence, it is written as, *Igwe bu ike*, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space. The three words involved are:

'*Igwe*' is a noun which means 'number' or 'population,' usually a huge number or population. 'Bu' is a verb, which means 'is.' 'Ike' is another verb, which means 'strength' or 'power' (Kanu, 2016). Thus, put together, it means 'number is strength' or 'number is power;' that is, when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force. Its English equivalents are 'complementarity', 'solidarity' and 'harmony'. The preferred concept, however, is 'complementarity' (Kanu, 2017, 2018 & 2019).

However, applied to African traditional conflict resolution, Kanu writes that:

> *Igwebuike*, an Igbo-African philosophy is, therefore, employed as a system of conflict resolution which would help Africans to incorporate African traditional categories in the resolution of conflicts, promotion of peace, justice, freedom, human dignity, sustainable development and better quality of life. *Igwebuike* as an indigenous wholistic Igbo philosophy is generated to emphasize that indigenous peoples have worldviews and means of relating to the world. This worldview is rooted within indigenous epistemologies, cultures and traditions with the understanding that we are all related- each aspect relates with the whole: the dynamics of realty are based on the relationships and experiences of interrelationships and interconnections (2017, p.2).

Conflict resolution in *Igwebuike* philosophy is viewed like a person with headache which sends the person to bed. The headache is on the head but it has affected the whole body. So, unless the head stops aching, the whole body will continue to be in discomfort. Applying this to *Umunna*, the head is the one in conflict, while the rest of the body symbolizes the kindred. The kindred will never have rest when there is conflict amongst its members. It (*Igwebuike*) celebrates in a deep cultural and philosophical modality our relatedness, our interconnectedness, our common humanity, our common responsibility towards one another and for one another (Kanu, 2015a&b). *Igwebuike* is an innate human quality. For, deep in the recesses of the heart of everyone are found the qualities of and hunger for complementarity, solidarity, compassion, reciprocity, dignity and harmony (Kanu, 2017. P.7). This, in reality, is what *umunna* stands for. It gives everyone, both young and old, the sense of belonging. Kanu opines that;

> *Igwebuike* as an indigenous method of peace and conflict resolution has a community-based approach. It is an outcome of the wisdom of traditional African conflict management practices drawn from the values of host

communities, and founded on the custom and tradition of the African people which has been developed over a long period of time- it is entirely based on culture and emphasizes the fundamental part which culture plays in the lives and actions of people. It is more of a healing process in which individuals contribute positive energy with the sole aim of re-establishing the energy flow within individuals, families and communities for the purpose of rebuilding social harmony (p. 8).

In relation to conflict, *Igwebuike* philosophy does not understand conflict merely as a fracas between two persons, or two groups, it rather understands conflict as a fracas touching on the harmony of reality. Thus, it is not just about justifying the one and condemning the other, it works towards a compromise for the reconciliation of both parties and the restoration of balance or the harmony of reality. It is relatively informal and, thus, less intimidating, as those involved are at ease, and are in a familiar environment.

This is the case with the *umunna* in Igbo land, which settles conflict during the weekly gathering, which is on a particular market day, at an open family hall or "*awurawu*" of the kindred, as it is called in some parts of Igbo community. On this market day, all palm-wine tapped in the kindred belongs to the kindred. A person designated by the kindred goes round to all those tapping wine to collect the wine. At the time for the meeting, all the male members of the kindred gather at the kindred hall and the meeting begins with the breaking of the kolanut by the eldest in the kindred. After the kolanut is broken and shared, issues of the day are discussed. During this time, anyone who has conflict presents the issue with four (4) pieces of kolanuts. After he has finished presenting his case, the eldest in the kindred, who also serves as the leader, invites the second party in the conflict to give his own side of the story. This is followed by cross-examination, witness and consultation. At the end, the conflict is resolved by the most elderly member of the kindred, using words of wisdom. Shedrack (2014), avers that, "The words of our elders are words of wisdom. The wise man (or woman) hears and gets wiser" (p. 99). They sometimes receive input from other members of the community present, but the verdict comes from the elders. The aim of the verdict is to reconcile the parties in conflict, promote community solidarity, and not to blame either party. The conflict can be said to have been resolved when the parties in conflict display any of the signs of reconciliation; shaking of hands, hugging, sitting together, etc.

When all the issues of the day have been presented and treated, the palmwine that has been collected earlier are brought out for celebration of the conflict resolution, not without the eldest pouring some on the ground to appease and appreciate the gods/ancestors for their intervention in the conflict. It is a process of socialization for every male member of the community, a learning process for the younger generations. This is why younger male members do more of listening and observing of the elders than participate in contributing. This is because, in the words of Shedrack, "Indeed younger people are typically not to be heard" (2014, p. 100). It is important to note that it is not all kinds of conflict the *umunna* resolves in Igbo land, some serious conflicts are reserved for elders and elders-in-council or for the chief priest. This is so because, since the *umunna* is the gathering of all male members of the community, some conflicts are too big for the minds and ears of younger members of the community.

However, *umunna* conflict resolution is informal, cost-effective and expeditious. The parties often sit together and resolve their dispute within a sitting or two. This way, the poor and indigent clients are carried along in a system that is just and less expensive. The elders acting as arbiter resolve conflict in the kindred, knowing all the ramifications of personal relationships within their small community, for most of these important factors are not brought out in the case, but are presumed to be known to all hearers. In this regard, they act as peacemakers and keep the community running smoothly. The *Umunna* has contributed a lot to the resolution of conflicts in Igbo land and their role in conflict resolution has been very interesting and effective. Judging by the guiding principles of conflict resolution in pre-colonial Africa, elders in the *Umunna* are impartial; they display neutrality and unbiased attitude in resolving conflicts. The process has always been transparent, since all issues are placed at the public domain for all to see and judge. There is fairness, justice and equality in judgment.

Conclusion

The process of conflict resolution by the *Umunna* involves getting the parties and their families together, and getting to the root of the conflict to ensure the underlying causes of conflict are resolved and the parties reconciled. The Igbo world has many other indigenous mediatory bodies for conflict management and resolution. The family is the first in the process of conflict resolution in cases concerning the family. If the crisis is between neigbours, the families involved are required to come for a dialogue. Where the family or families are unable to

resolve their problem, the *umunna* institution comes in to help. *Umunna* is called upon where families cannot resolve their problem. The weekly gathering of *Umunna* was not only to settle or resolve conflict; when there is no conflict, the *Umunna* gather to strengthen the bond of family ties. They do a lot of conflict prevention and also take proactive measures to ensure that conflicts do not arise amongst members. The major aim of the *umunna* is to keep the brotherhood in unity. In Igbo land, drinking palm wine together is the sign of unity and friendship. It is also a sign of communion, bonding them together. Thus, the overall objective of conflict resolution in *Igwebuike* philosophy is to uphold and promote peaceful co-existence among and between members of the kindred. It has produced a great level of trust, confidence and mutual understanding in traditional Igbo society, and reconciliation has apparently been the end product of the *umunna* conflict resolution mechanism.

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