



GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL CONFLICTS BETWEEN TRADITIONAL RULERS AND PRESIDENTS-GENERAL OF TOWN UNIONS (TUS) IN ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper has investigated how financial releases and creation of care-taker committees by Anambra state government influence social conflicts between Traditional rulers and Presidents-General of TUs in some communities. About 524 respondents given the quantitative tool for this study were drawn from members of TUs within the three communities used for the study: *Nri, Isi-agu and Amansea*. Qualitative data were also derived for the study from: victims of TU conflict, members of the vigilante, government officials involved in resolving TU conflicts and community leaders. Findings showed that the state government is a pronounced source of social conflict between the institutions. It does that through her financial releases; creation of care-taker committees and fermenting conflict even in peaceful communities that are seen as her political opponents. Government officials associated with fermenting TU conflict should be prosecuted (Word count: 131).

Key Words: Social conflicts, Town unions, Presidents-General, Community leaders, Care-taker committees, Anambra state

INTRODUCTION

Town Unions are social organisations existing in many cultural areas of Nigeria. They are known by different names such as: development unions, progressive unions, people's assembly etc. They arose to advance the primordial cultural value preferences of communities having them. Their members claim a common ancestry and developmental challenge as Nigerians. As agents of social change, they have demonstrated that, through collective action, they can improve on their material conditions of existence (Azikiwe, 2001), mobilise against the out-group (Nzimiro, 2001), and defend a common cause (Nwosu, 2009). Although TUs are locally initiated, their influence and cultural appeal transcends local confines. Their members believe that, through collective action, they can modify national policies to suit local realities, needs and challenges. In pre-colonial Igbo society, it existed as a well-structured social network that guaranteed civil society participation in governance namely: the village assembly (Afigbo, 1972), council of elders (Nzimiro, 1972), the *okpala* in family and lineage administration (Ifemesia, 1980), the age grade system (Nwosu, 2009) and so on.

Through such associational life, members of a community indulge in self governance through dialogue, consultation, advocacy and consensus building. Lineages comprising a town or community are hierarchically organised. Thus, Nzimiro (2001:10), notes that "within a lineage are adopted lineages absorbed within specific lineage groups". Most of the adopted lineages suffer some social disabilities. Consequently, when a TU is assumed to have a common ancestry, its internal structure has endemic social formations that predispose its members to fission. That notwithstanding, in Nigeria, TUs have tried to assist their members from colonial days to the modern era, meet their survival needs, especially the challenges of urban life (Nnoli, 2008), rural development (Nzimiro, 2001), political mobilisation against the out-group (Nwosu, 2009), scholarship programme (Azikiwe, 2001) and relating to the state on community development matters (Okafor, 2010). As agents of community development, TUs exist as: channels through which local needs and preferences are identified, expressed and addressed. To do this, they create the enabling environment for voluntary cooperation, self-help and mutual aid efforts to thrive among their members.

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Structurally, every TU has a working constitution adopted by the members. This defines the roles, status and benefits of membership of the association (Aguda, 1998; Nwosu, 2009). TUs have male and female wings. Women's wing of TUs are those whose husbands belong to the men's wing. However, in a community like Mbieri, unmarried women who are up to 45 years can become members (Nwosu, 2009). They are structured like men's wing. Mbanefoh (1998:103) describes the *Eziowelle* women's wing as having elected officers comprising president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, financial secretary and provost. Women officers handle all matters affecting their wing, but they are expected to seek advice from the men's branch in serious matters. This expectation reinforces the subordinate position of women in Igbo society.

Traditional rulers

According to Cap (148) of 1986, which established Anambra State Traditional Ruler's Council, a traditional ruler is a recognized head of an autonomous community in the state. They are known by different names such as *Igwe, Obi, Eze* and so on. They are expected to be the gate keepers of their communities. They symbolise the collective spirit of the people they represent. When perceived as ancestors incarnate many believe they can bless and curse their subjects. Although this institution never prevailed in some pre-colonial Igbo societies, not many people today can wish it away.

Conceptualising the relationship between the government, traditional rulers and Presidents-General of TUs.

The process of acquiring, consolidating and using state power in Nigeria has been conflict-infested (Nnoli, 2012). The norm of civil society administration promotes prebendal politics at different levels of government. Co-existence of TUs, traditional rulers and state machinery of civil-society administration, is amply illustrated by the theory of two publics which face most Nigerians in their civic engagements namely: that associated with their primordial cultural preferences and that represented by the civic cultural equivalent (Ekeh, 1975). Members' inclination to the former explains why they tend to shift their loyalty from the state towards the development of their homelands, often avoid payment of taxes to the state and periodically, honour a member that has attracted public amenities from the state to the homeland (Nwoga, 1987). In this way, TUs often serve as institutional mechanisms for struggling for collective resources at the state level. The government hardly constrains many members of TU from acting out their free will on community development matters (Igun, 2006, Okafor, 2010).

Infrastructural facilities which TUs have built, through self-help exist in many communities of igboland. Because TUs are rallying points for socio-political mobilization, the govern-

ment finds them useful in public service delivery. In Anambra state, a law which makes TUs independent of traditional rulers exists. Thus, whereas traditional rulers are described as custodians of cultural values of their people, Presidents-General of town unions are entrusted with the day to day administration of their communities. Role conflict tends to arise between them often due to struggle over values (Coser, 1957).

Moreover, TUs are expected to recommend political office-seekers before they are considered at state level (Atupulazi, 2011). Also, government makes periodic financial releases to the TUs for public service delivery (Ilozue, 2010). Presidents-General of TU are members of Anambra State Association of Town Unions (ASATU), a socio-political organization where matters of state and national importance are unofficially discussed. Its members are believed to be important stakeholders in the political process of the state (Atupulazi, 2011; Ilozue, 2010). Its members can be rewarded.

Although Leadership struggle pervades many TUs (Onu, 2011), the government is not wonderfully disposed to its peaceful resolution. Government officials have been implicated in exacerbating conflicts between traditional rulers and presidents-general of TUs in communities like: *Isiagu, Isuofia, Awka Etiti* (Onwuegbusi, 2011); Aguleri (Ibeanu, 2003); Alor (ADI, 2014); Nawfia (Nwakwesili, 2012); Ekwulobia (Maduabuchi, 2013) etc. In these communities, government imposes care-taker committees to manage the affairs of communities it defines as having conflict-infested TUs their objection, notwithstanding.

Traditional ruler's involvement in TU affairs

While the TUs can be said to have evolved from the cultural preferences of the people, the traditional rulership cannot be so described. Igbo society is described as acephalous. Kings existed only in centralized polities like: Nri (Onwuejiogwu, 2001); Onitsha and Oguta (Nzimiro, 1972); Osomari and Aboh (Wandeers, 1990). It is only among these riverine Igbo people that kings existed as in such centralized polities like Oyo, and Benin, (Afigbo, 1972); Wandeers, 1990; Nwosu, 2009).

Colonial rule, through the 1916 Ordinance, created and imposed warrant chiefs on the Igbo people. The warrant chiefs were arbitrarily chosen by the colonialists. They became the channel of communication between the colonialists and the colonised. They were used in tax collection and settlement of disputes in colonial courts. The conflict and social disapproval surrounding their appointment and roles were some of the factors that led to the Aba Womens Riot of 1929 (Ananaba, 1980). The women objected to an envisaged taxation of women by the colonial masters through the warrant chiefs. Following the military coup of January 1966 in Nigeria, the

chieftaincy institution was suspended. However, in 1978, an edict was enacted reinstating it. Many families that produced the warrant chiefs saw it as their birthright. Conflict arose in many communities when many of them were resisted (Nwosu, 2009). The military was not prepared to interrogate these conflict situations. Some wealthy indigenes who were influential enough to 'buy' the position, did so. Many of them became traditional rulers. Rulers who emerged in this way were extensively used by the military to stay in power. They became one of the agents of conflict suppression under military rule in Nigeria.

Under the prevailing democratic dispensation, traditional rulers are still seen as custodians of primordial cultural values of their people. This often makes their roles to conflict with that of TU leadership. In communities like Onitsha (Azikiwe, 1976); Ekwulobia, Ogbunike (Okafor, 2010), the traditional rulers and their TUs have been in court.

Also, the government created the Traditional Rulers Council where government-recognised traditional rulers periodically meet and network with state government officials on matters of state policy and direction. In this way government manipulates local institutions at will. Government hardly investigates role conflicts between traditional rulers and Presidents-General of TUs. For example, in Ekwulobia, the traditional ruler connived with the Commissioner for Local Government and Chieftaincy Matters to proscribe their TU. He ignored an order given by the Aguata High Court to restore the TU. Also in Ebenebe, the same commissioner was said to be very reluctant bringing the President-General of their TU to order.

Although Edict 22 of 1986 expects that TUs will elect their traditional rulers according to the culture of the community, the document makes mockery of the TUs because the culture in question has no room for traditional rulers position, hence the imposition of the body on the people. Town unions are also expected to present the elected traditional ruler to the chairman of their local government who will, in turn, present the ruler-elect to the government (Nwosu, 2009). This provision is based on a false notion of representativeness. The provision little addresses endemic social arrangements that make such a selection elitist and unrepresentative of the people's value preferences and needs. The provision has created a situation where some of those opposed to a particular traditional ruler-elect, have taken to the formation of a parallel TU. Nwosu (2009:18) avers that: 'from all indications, the *eze* established by governments statutes, crowned by the government, paid by the government and removed at will by the government cannot be said to enjoy a high level of autonomy'.

Research questions

How has government's financial releases to communities, influenced the relationship between traditional rulers and presidents-general of TUs in Anambra state?

1. Has the creation of care-taker committees by Anambra state government enhanced the relationship between traditional rulers and presidents-general of TUs?

Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. *Nri* was selected through simple random sampling method from a list of 5 communities with two TUs in the state where one should exist. Likewise, *Isiagu* was selected from a list of 12 communities with care-taker committees. *Amansea* was selected purposively from list of 160 communities with functional TUs as the study locations. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from 516 respondents. The sample frame was the list of TU members as held by ward leaders in the towns. Participants were selected as follows (*Nri-128; Isiagu-204 and Amansea-184*) using simple random sampling method. Whereas 12 in-depth interviews were conducted on members of vigilante (6), victims of TU conflicts (6), 23 key informants interview were conducted on traditional ruler's representatives (6), ward leaders (15) and government officials (2) to obtain qualitative data for the study. The quantitative data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics, Chi-square test at 0.05 level of significance. Qualitative data were content analysed.

RESULTS

State Governments' financial releases as a source of TU conflict

In *Isiagu*, 75.6% of respondents saw this variable a significant source of TU conflict ($\chi^2=52.8$; $p.001$). In *Nri*, 53.3% of respondents held a contrary view but this was not statistically significant ($\chi^2.53$; $p.5$). Also in *Amansea*, 98.4% did not see the release as a source of their TU conflict ($\chi^2=39.5$; $p.001$). It can be inferred that State Government's financial releases to TUs is a source of conflict in *Isiagu* and to an extent *Nri*. Qualitative data from *Nri* upholds that:

Financial releases to communities in the state through town unions don't reach us. The road network to our section of *Nri* town is not tarred. When government gives allocation for the renovation of roads, they simply trip laterite on some of our roads and leave it to be washed by the rains (KII, Secretary Ikenga *Nri*).

Here again,

The President-General and his loyalists thought governments' financial allocation to *Nri* town should be appropriated by the town union alone. When they

discovered the palace is entitled to partake in its disbursement, they took an avoidance approach. For this reason *Eze Nri* is often compelled to go to the state government for the money (KII, community leader *Nri*).

In *Nri* therefore, the financial release is a source of conflict within members of NPU and between them and members of *Ikenga-Nri*, the parallel TU. In *Isiagu*, a school block initiated by the caretaker committee, with two million naira released to them by the state, could not be completed. Both members of caretaker committees, and elected TU officials never explained to anybody, how they spent the finance released to the TU. "Leadership of our TU has been characterized by the leaders trying to intimidate and silence those who tried to probe into how the financial releases were utilized" (KII, ward leader *Isiagu*). In *Amansea*, the financial release was not seen as a source of conflict by President-General of the TU. He contended that the traditional ruler does not get involved in the utilisation of the fund. This is at variance with what we found at *Nri* and what a government official involved in the disbursement remarked. To exclude royal fathers in the disbursement of such monies is to put cracked palm kernels in a perforated sack. Royal fathers exist to ensure the finance is judiciously utilised (KII, government official).

Creation of caretaker committee by the state as a source of TU conflict.

In *Isiagu*, 57% of the respondents saw the creation as an external source of TU conflict ($\chi^2=3.9$, $p > 0.5$). In *Nri*, 78.9% of respondents did not see such a creation as a source of TU conflict. This is not different from the responses got from *Amansea* where 79.9% did not see the creation of caretaker committee as a source of TU conflict. Thus but for *Isiagu*, where respondents were divided on this, the creation of caretaker committee was not seen as a source of TU conflict in communities without such a committee in Anambra State. The finding is not at variance with some of our respondents' view during the KII and IDI sessions. In *Isiagu*, (the only community that experienced the caretaker committee), the source of the conflict was inordinate ambition of the self-styled kingmaker to dictate how TU should be run. Caretaker was an aftermath of this quest.

In 2008 while our town union election was in progress, a very rich man from *Ebe* (one of the factions to the conflict), stormed the venue of the election with a team of mobile policemen. He was opposing a candidate nominated and presented by *Umuzo* (another party to the conflict), according to the constitution of our TU. They were asked to leave. They did. On hearing that the election had been held, the man used his connections with the state governments' ministry of local government and chieftaincy

matters to nullify the election and impose a caretaker committee on us. We challenged the government by obtaining court injunction restraining the government from imposing the caretaker committee. Government ignored this court order (KII, Community leader, *Isiagu*).

This finding shows how conflict suppression has permeated institutions for civil society administration in Nigeria. It was entrenched by colonial rule, sustained after it, perfected by the military while in power and has remained resilient virus threatening the evolution of true democratic culture in Nigeria.

Discussion of findings

Financial releases to TUs are poorly accounted for. Nigerian leadership has been criticised for being incurably corrupt (Beckman, 1985; Joseph, 1992; Nzimiro, 2001, Achebe, 2012). Nzimiro(2001)and Igun (2006), associated the corruption to the character of Nigeria's dependent capitalist economy. It is an economic arrangement that encourages skewed distribution of collectively owned resources by agents of the state. This study showed how the practice prevails at the grassroots.

Nri and *Amansea* had not experienced caretaker committee. *Nri* people attributed this to their cultural proscription of shedding human blood. Their land abhors bloodletting (Okonkwo, 2007). In *Amansea*, the traditional ruler is said to be working hand in hand with the president general.

It respected by the state government. Conflict suppression is a pronounced strategy of using state power in Nigeria. To Albert,(2003), the method is a mere expression of social conflict arising from unequal power relations.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown how two efforts of the government to facilitate community development, influenced the emergence of social conflict in the communities studied. This is partly because some top government functionaries who are expected to be objective in managing communal conflicts actually ferment the same.

At a time when most ethnic groups in Nigeria complain of being marginalized, this study has shown that identity politics prevails even within communities considered culturally homogenous. Thus even if TUs are made states, the problem of social exclusion will be far from being over. It is therefore necessary that public functionaries be made to be universalistic in thinking. This entails their de-emphasizing primordial sentiments in matters of state policy formulation and implementation.

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