

Pre-Colonial Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution/Management In Ibibioland

Uwem Jonah Akpan,¹ Ime Tim Ekpoattai,²

Department of History & International Studies
University of Uyo.

Department of History & International Studies
University of Uyo.

Abstract

This paper examines the use of diplomacy and traditional methods in conflict resolution and management in the pre-colonial Ibibio society of South Eastern Nigeria. The Ibibio people like other groups of Nigeria were colonized by the British who introduced alien methods of conflict resolution and management like the police and court system to them. The influence of the modern system gradually eroded the thriving and dependable indigenous diplomatic and conflict resolution methods which were cheaper, transparent and affordable. Indeed, because of the nature of these methods, miscarriage of justice was rare in the pre-colonial Ibibio society. The alien methods of conflict resolution and management apart from being costly, and time consuming in some cases are not transparent; hence they do not satisfactorily address issues of conflict in the society because some people do not trust the operators. As a way of alleviating the challenges, there is need to revisit some of the indigenous methods which this paper has discussed and probably integrate them with the existing Western oriented methods. Such development would help in preserving some of the abandoned but needful cultural practices of the Ibibio people and engender peace and development in Ibibioland. The paper adopts an inter-disciplinary method.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Conflict Resolution, Conflict management, Law Enforcement, pre-colonial, the Ibibio, development.

INTRODUCTION

There is no human society which does not have the idea of peace and conflict. Conflict is inevitable in the affairs of men, where there are two or more people there is bound to be conflict. Conflict itself occurs as a result of incompatibility of interest. Naturally, not two persons think or behave alike and, therefore, there is always need to adjust interests to accommodate one another.

Adjusted interests bring about agreements, accord, harmony and treaties. Among the Ibibio people of South Eastern Nigeria, there have always been cases of intra-group and inter-group conflicts. Such conflicts manifest in murder, arson, adultery, theft, witchcraft, suicide, kidnapping, boundaries, and conflict over resources and infringement of the law of the land. As the people from the pre-historic period did not desire, like

other human groups to live perpetually in a state of conflict but needed harmony and peace in order to progress, there was need for the resolution and the management of these conflicts (Akpan, 2015: 180).

The Ibibio adopted diverse traditional methods of conflict resolution and management such as *mbiam* (oath) *idiong* (divination) *afia* (ordeal), *nmuk enin* (elephant tusk), *eyei* (young palm frond), *mkpok ekwong* (snail shell)/*mkpok ikit* (tortoise shell), *eyeyen* (grand-children), *ukot* (in-laws), *iman* (ally), *nka* (age grades) and *ebre/iban isong* (women's government) among other methods. For instance, *nmuk enin* (elephant tusk) was an instrument of peace and a symbol of authority of the clan head and was particularly useful in settling disputes between villages. Whenever it was sent out through the messengers of the clan head, it usually facilitated a ceasefire until the issue at stake was amicably resolved. In addition, pre-colonial diplomatic channels and media, of communication such as plants, animal products were used to warn people of impending danger and also enforce social norms. Plants such as *okono* (dracaena fragran) served as natural beacon stone that demarcates boundaries. Also diplomatic agents and personnel such as priests and messengers were widely used in conflict resolution while instruments of negotiation, bargaining, threat and rewards among others were also adopted.

The advent of European colonialism and the introduction of Christianity in Ibibioland brought alien conflict resolution and management methods which have negatively impacted on most of the traditional methods thereby making them obsolete. For instance, the Western oriented court system and some

law enforcement agencies like the Prince Force now take precedent in the area of conflict resolution and management.

The paper is divided into seven sections. Section one is the introduction, section two defines the concept of diplomacy and conflict, conflict resolution and conflict management, section three examines the Ibibio traditional socio-political structure, section four looks at some law enforcement agencies in the pre-colonial Ibibio society, section five examines some conflict resolution/management mechanisms in the pre-colonial Ibibio society, section six discusses some pre-colonial diplomatic instruments while section seven is the conclusion.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Diplomacy

Diplomacy is not a creation of the Western world, it is not even a recent practice that was introduced to Africa, rather, it has evolved distinctly in all societies including the pre-colonial Ibibio society. The basic objective of diplomacy is to enable men to live with their neighbours, a feat which requires a measure of accommodation to the interest of others (Smith, 1989: 7).

According to Eminue (2012: 122) from pre-historic times till date, states compete with each other in their relations in the international environment. They deliberately attempt to derive maximum benefit from the relations as well as reduce the occurrence of conflict, which could reduce their chance of maximizing their interest, consequently, diplomacy has always been used as the foremost instrument for the realization of such objectives. Diplomacy thus, tries to make best of a bad situation by attempting to reconcile the interests on all sides by

coin, it has two sides; positive and negative (Nwagbara, 2004: 74).

Conflict resolution means the use of different types of approaches with the aim of eliminating conflict through a constructive means. The approaches are different from management or transformation of conflict. When conflict resolution is employed in resolving conflict, it means that the sources of these conflicts are addressed and resolved once and for all such that the structures or conflict are changed to those of harmony and peace. This implies the cessation of hostilities and a state of complete transformation of conflict to that of peace and harmonious relations (Akpan, 2015: 76).

Conflict resolution refers to a situation where parties to any conflict are completely satisfied with the outcome of a settlement. But where settlement of any dispute is not on a note off finality, conflict management is resorted to. Thus, conflict management refers to a situation where a number of measures are used to limit or mute the destructive capacity of conflict. The process of managing conflict involves all parties to the conflict. Conflict management is sometimes called conflict regulation. It is sometimes referred to as conflict limitation, containment and litigation (Akpan, 2015: 182).

THE TRADITIONAL IBIBIO SOCIO-POLITICAL STRUCTURE

To understand the application of conflict resolution and management mechanisms in pre-colonial Ibibioland, it is necessary to briefly explain the traditional socio-political structure since most of them had in-built conflict resolution and management mechanisms.

The political structure of the Ibibio society was based on social organisation and consisted of six administrative divisions augmented by clubs. The first administrative division was known as *idip ete*, literally, the father's womb, but which means at this level a man, his sons, his brothers and his half-brothers, this level is similar to the Western nuclear family. The father and husband with the support of his first wife superintended over this level of the political structure. In addition, his eldest son, half-brothers and a few other capable members of the family, constituted an ad-hoc council where cases among members of the *idip* were tried. In exercising their duty the guilty was blamed and fines such as drinks, chicken and goats, had to be imposed. Their decisions were backed by the norms of the Ibibio society, and were promptly obeyed. Any recalcitrant member was liable to be ignored by the other members of the family. For example, if a refractory member of an *idip* got into trouble with a member of another family, he was left alone to fight out his own case. In extreme cases he was sold into slavery, an act that served as a deterrent to others (Udo, 1983: 118).

The next administrative unit was the *ufok*, literally a house, but also meaning a group of families with a common origin. The oldest man among the members was the head of the unit. Together with the elders of the unit constituted the council that met occasionally to exercise judicial function including appeals from the members of the unit (Udo, 1983: 118).

The third division was *ekpuk* (extended family). This unit exercised political, economic, social and religious functions. The political functions of *ekpuk* included, among others, decisions to wreak

separating commonly held interests from conflicting interests, by emphasising common and complimentary interests and by manipulating conditions so as to minimise the danger likely to flow from conflicts. All states, large and small, old and new, need to employ diplomacy maximally, in peace-and in war time, in dealing with other states, on every conceivable relation, within the international community. It is for this reasons that diplomacy has become, perhaps, the most essential part of statecraft.

Asobie (2007: 26) opines also that diplomacy is the management of relations by negotiations through the process of bargaining in order to narrow areas of disagreement, reached. In another sense, diplomacy is an instrument that involves representation, communication and negotiation that drive relations between states.

In the pre-colonial diplomatic intercourse, diplomatic officials included priests and messengers of communities, groups, families and so on. Hence, it is diplomacy that provided the special methods, techniques and tactics of verbal and non-verbal means for negotiation or securing peaceful relations (including conflict resolution and management) between groups.

CONFLICT, CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict is one term usually very difficult to define. This difficulty stems from the fact that people perceive conflict differently and besides, it can occur in many forms and settings. But the consensus is that, conflict is basically disagreement, contradiction or incompatibility. Helleiegei, Slocum and Woodman (1989: 448) define conflict as

“any situation in which there are incompatible goals, cognitions or emotions within or between individuals or groups that lead to opposition”.

From the above perspective, it appears that there are three levels of conflicts

Goal conflict: that is a scenario in which anticipated goal of states appears to be incompatible.

Cognitive conflict: that is a situation where ideas or thoughts are perceived as incompatible.

Affective conflict: that is a situation in which feelings or emotions are incompatible, people literally become angry with one another.

Another definition worthy of consideration because of its simplistic approach to conflict is offered by Wall and Callister (1995: 515). To them, conflict is “a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party”. The underlying idea in this definition is that conflict is a perception and thus, could occur whenever a person believes or feels that the other person or a group of persons are on his way to achieving a goal. This conflict situation can take the form of a mild disagreement between spouses, friends, relations or colleagues on what decision to make regarding an issue. It may be a sharp disagreement between organizations, institutions on the basis of principle and ideologies (Nwagbara, 2004: 74).

Conflict does not just happen, certain conditions give rise to it. These include, among others, attitude, culture, background, goals, unavoidable interdependence and communication inadequacies. Conflict can manifest in subtle non-verbal behaviour, verbal attacks or warlike aggression against the other person or party. Conflict is like a

vengeance on any one who committed a serious crime against any member of their *ekpuk*, seizure of lands or goats or any other property which belonged to any *ekpuk* whose member or members had committed serious offence against them (like murder, theft, adultery). Issues emanating from the family were first heard at this level before it could be taken to the village council (Udo, 1983: 119; Umo, 1991: 120).

Ichung (village) being the fourth level of political organization consisted of a collection of *ekpuk*. The village was headed by *obong ichung*, who administered the village with his council members from the different *ekpuk*. The village council members exercised executive, legislative and judicial functions. The council's judicial functions included cases involving debt, bride-price defamation of character, adultery witchcraft and so on (Ekong 2001: 112).

Beyond the village was the *ochuk*, the fifth political division in each Ibibio clan. The *ochuk* also had a council which tried cases brought from the respective villages that belonged to the group. The pinnacle of the political administrative division was the *ikpaisong* (clan). According to Udo (1983: 129) *ikpaisong* represented a collection of village groups which corresponded to what the British administrators referred to as "clan". This unit was headed by a traditional head from one of the villages. This unit also exercised judicial functions because most cases especially murder, witchcraft, that were too difficult for the lower rungs of the traditional administrative divisions of the society to handle were referred to the *ikpaisong* council.

LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES IN PRE-COLONIAL SOCIETY

Social institutions were very significant to the lives of the Ibibio people as they guided their morals, behaviour and mode of interactions. The institutions were of numerous types with their own laid down rules and regulations guiding their members. Such institutions existed for the men, women and youths. Though not all the members of the community joined these social institutions, their activities strongly affected the people as a whole. Most of these social institutions were secret in nature and included: *ekpo*, *ekong*, *ekpri akata*, *ekpe*, to mention but a few. Secret societies assisted in stabilizing the Ibibio community life. These societies were not secret in the sense of crime syndicate or under-world organizations, they were secret in the sense that they had certain rights, rituals and ceremonies which were exclusively limited to and practiced only by their members or initiates. Some of their rituals and ceremonies were even unknown to non-members and were not performed in their presence (Akpan, 2017: 4).

As an instrument of social control, all laws of the land were passed and enforced by the authority of *ekpo*. *Ekpo* also assisted in the administration of justice. *Ekpo* checked crimes such as stealing, adultery, prostitution and murder. The *ekpo* ridiculed deviants whose conduct was contrary to the norms of the society and had words of praise for illustrious members of the community. In some parts of Ibibioland, it was used as an agent for the collection of fines and debts from stubborn persons in the community. In times of war, it was the duty of the members of the *ekpo* to fight for the village or clan

under the command of the village head who was mandatorily an initiate of *ekpo*. Dictatorship in traditional governance was unthinkable because of the in-built machinery for the division of power.

In addition, *ekong* existed as a variant of *ekpo* in some villages and clans in Ibibioland. In terms of performance and character, it was stronger than ordinary *ekpo* society. Even initiates of *ekpo* society were not automatically initiates of *ekong*. *Ekong* performed duties of spies among others in Ibibioland. Also, *ekpri akata* existed as the village secret agent regarded by all as a ghost that came to the earth in the night. Whatever crimes people committed in secret each year, *ekpri akata* would reveal to everyone in the village. For example, on such nights *ekpri akata* would reveal to everyone in the village by mentioning the names of all thieves, what they had stolen and from whom. Also, *ekpri akata* would expose all the women and men who committed adultery. Since *ekpri akata* was regarded as a ghost its story or information was regarded as being true (Ekong, 2001: 157).

Ekpe was also a powerful law enforcement agency which existed in the riverine parts of Ibibioland. As a ritualistic society, *ekpe* was regarded as a mystic figure that lives in a sacred grove. From there it was brought to the village and temporarily housed in an *efe ekpe* (ekpe shed). After which it returned to the sacred grove. As an instrument of government, all important laws of the land were passed in the name and by the authority of *ekpe* and sealed by the beating of *ekpe* drum around the community. The penalty for flouting *ekpe* law was usually severe and the society had several forms of social control mechanisms. It could prohibit

the rest of the community from having any dealings with an offender, it could place an injunction on a property thereby preventing its use, it could impose a heavy fine, it could arrest an offender and hand him over for punishment, it could also confine a debtor to his house until he pays his debt or failing which would be disdained (Ekong, 2001: 148).

SOME CONFLICT RESOLUTION/MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS IN PRE-COLONIAL IBIBIO SOCIETY

As noted earlier, many conflict resolution and management mechanisms existed in the pre-colonial Ibibio society which the people adopted in their interactions. These mechanisms helped to stabilize the society. This section examines these mechanisms.

Mbiam (Juju)

Before the advent of Christianity, *mbiam* was the foremost Ibibio judicial instrument. The potency of *mbiam* was never in doubt as it kept trouble-makers in check. *Mbiam* was a magically potent object used in oath-taking and in fortifying one's property against thieves. It was believed to have supernatural ability to detect the innocent and the guilty as well as punish the offender. *Mbiam* caused the guilty to have whooping cough, paralysis, dysentery and death; it could be liquid, sacred drum, certain leaves, human blood or the Bible and cross. In other words, there were three main ways in which *mbiam* was used. These were: to fortify one's property, to settle disputes and to determine the innocent and the guilty (Offiong, 1991: 20).

According to Offiong (1991: 21), through the process of socialisation, the individual learns the “thou shalt” and the “thou shalt not” of his society. But socialisation does not always achieve its desired goal of getting the individual to conform. Even those who conform commit some deviation when an opportunity offers itself. The Ibibio ensured that thief did not get into their farms to steal through the fortification of their farmland with *mbiam*. No dispute was considered settled until the parties to the dispute have sworn to *mbiam* that they would not bewitch or harm each other. In the traditional setting, every case between two parties, whether settled at the family level or village court, ended with the feuding parties swearing to *mbiam* that during the period of the feuding they did not try to bewitch or harm in any other or any member of the feuding families, and that after the settlement of the case they would not at any time try to harm each other or try to do so through some other person.

Apart from fortifying one’s property and for settling disputes, *mbiam* was also used to determine the innocent and the guilty. Where a person was accused of any crime in the village, the only way he could clear himself was to take an oath of *mbiam*. It was generally believed that certain *mbiam* were more potent than others and it was the responsibility of the accuser to get the most deadly *mbiam*. Quite unlike in the present dispensation whereby, if for instance, two persons struggle over a portion of land, in the law court, the person with a good lawyer in addition to “paid” witnesses who can tell the most consistent lies is likely to win. But in the traditional court, all witnesses had to swear to *mbiam* that they were telling the truth and even in the final analysis, the two

disputant would be asked to take the oath. Usually at this point one party would back out and the land would be given to the other person. Where both of them agree to take the oath, they were allowed and the portion of land was divided into two. The belief here was that *mbiam* would determine the rightful owner (Offiong, 1991: 22).

After swearing to *mbiam*, the two parties were watched, should either of them fall sick, the relations must consult an *abia idiong* (a diviner) who was believed to have the knowledge to tell what was wrong with the person. Should the *abia idiong* say it was *mbiam*, he would also disclose the source. If it was the result of the falsely claiming of a piece of land, the relations would rush back to the other person, surrender the land and pay the necessary fine. The sick person would in addition purchase some ritual items like goat, ram, fowl and so on, required to neutralize its effect on the sick. So strong was the belief in the efficacy of *mbiam* that relations had to thoroughly interview their people before allowing him or her to take the oath. On the slightest doubt as to his or her innocence or ownership of any property, they would prevent the person from swearing (Offiong, 1996: 22).

idiong (divination)

Idiong was more or less a cult of sorcerer and visioners. It played religious, social and political roles in the pre-colonial Ibibio society. In his social capacity, the *abia idiong* or *abia mfa* was regarded as having the powers to see the unseen and being able to interact with the spirit world and the ancestors hence, anyone who had misfortune would approach him for advice. The *abia idiong* was also believed to have been endowed with the capacity to disclose

wrong doers thereby helping in social control and administration of sanctions (Ekong, 2001: 153).

In pre-colonial African societies, oracles were many and ranked according to their capacities. There was hardly any village without oracles and people judged their efficiency based on results. Once oracles gave convincing verdicts and at the same time sustained the practice, they were rated highly. Consequently, people from far and near would visit them for conflict resolution purposes. It should be noted that once an oracle delivered its judgement, and the parties to disputes were convinced, they had the opportunity of consulting other oracles and in an event if the verdicts were the same, the guilty would be severely punished by death, banishment, imposition of fine or being sold into slavery (Akpan, 2015: 197).

afia or *ukang* (ordeal)

The Ibibio people in the pre-colonial period had many types of ordeals. These included the boiling oil; the use of the egg; the leather mat; water in the plate and the fearful of them all was the use of *esere* beans. In Ibibioland, it was uncultural for people to lie and go without facing appropriate traditional sanction. Therefore, the society rely on the efficacy this medium to reveal the truth. It was believed that when those measures were applied, the truth must be known, and law and order in the society could be maintained. Unlike *mbiam* which killed and may destroy the whole family when it was sworn falsely, ordeal would save the lives of the guilty after they had gone through pains associated with the exercise (Udo, 1983: 146).

In the ordeal of the boiling oil, the priest would boil palm oil pot and ask the accused person to dip his hands into it in the

presence of witnesses. What was used to determine his guilt after three days was the appearance of blisters on the hand he dipped into the boiling pot of oil. If no blisters appeared, his innocence was established. In some ordeal exercises, once the guilty dipped his finger into the boiling oil, he would experience great pains whereas for the innocent, the boiled oil would be as if he touched cold water. As an instrument of conflict resolution, the decision of the ordeal was final and no human being could overturn it (Akpan, 2015: 199).

For the ordeal of the egg, the accused was required to throw a magically treated egg by the *ukang* priest on the ground. If it broke, the accused was adjudged as guilty, but if it failed, he was pronounced innocent. In the ordeal of leather mat, the accused was asked to sit on a mat which had been treated by the *ukang* priest. Once the accused person sat on the mat after the *abia ukang* had chanted some words, the mat would gum his buttock, but if innocent, he would be able to leave the mat and go away. There was also the mechanism or ordeal of water in a plate or basin. After certain concoctions were prepared and added to the water, the accused was asked to rub his eyes with the water. If the accused person was not involved in the crime he was accused of, he was able to open his eyes after the seventh round of the exercise, if he failed to open his eyes; it was believed that he had committed the crime. The ordeal of *esere* beans was mostly associated with the trial of people who were accused of practicing sorcery and witchcraft. The belief was that once a witch or wizard drank water that contained *esere* beans, he would die (Udo, 1983: 146).

***nmuk enin* (elephant tusk)**

Nmuk Enin (elephant tusk) was a powerful instrument of conflict resolution in pre-colonial Ibibio society. It was useful in stopping feuds between warring parties. In this respect, it was regarded as an instrument of peace, used by *obong ikpaisong* (clan head). Whenever an inter-village dispute occurs, *obong ikpaisong* and the elders in the clan would send the *nmuk enin*, through some messengers who acted as today's envoys to the warring communities with an order imposing a ceasefire and then a date was fixed for the hearing of the case (Udo, 1983: 148; Akpan, 2015: 201).

The use of elephant tusk automatically brought peace among the warring factions and also provided the messengers with safe-conduct passed throughout the areas. Any demonstration or disrespect to the elephant tusk by the warring parties was viewed as an act of rebellion against the *obong ikpaisong*. Such acts attracted severe sanctions.

***Eyei* (Young Palm Frond)**

Eyei (young palm frond) was used in many traditional rituals and ceremonies. Whenever it was hoisted in pre-colonial Ibibioland, it acted as command for cessation of hostilities. In civil matters like land disputes, it was used to send a message "of "no trespassing" to the parties. In such cases, its symbolism was never disregarded by people. *Eyei* was also used as a symbol of peace. For instance, if two communities quarreled, another village could act as third party to broker peace and the first step would be to send *eyei* to call for a cease fire. Thereafter, the matter was fixed for hearing (Akpan, 2015: 149).

***mkpok etwong* (snail shell) and *mkpok ikut* (tortoise shell)**

In the pre-colonial society, ~~wherever~~ these objects were conspicuously placed on farms, fruit trees, firewood, bush or ~~other~~ belongings, they provided protection to the items.

***ukod* (in-law)**

The institution of *ukod* (in-law) was a product of marriage. The marriage institution served as a vital and sacred link between lineages and villages in the traditional Ibibioland. Once there existed intermarriage among villages, members regarded themselves as *nmung ukod* (in-laws) which implied not only physical (political) relationship, but blood relationship as well (Ekong, 2001). Among the Ibibio people, *ukod* was revered and held sacred and as taboos not only by the immediate blood relations, but also by the entire communities with which they have relationships. The institution formed the link between the man's family/village and the woman's family/village. These links automatically became sacred bonds between them, to the extent that by Ibibio tradition, custom and usages, they must not kill or harm each other. If fines were imposed on *ukod*, the people were by custom not to share such fines. A breach of the customary law involving *ukod* usually resulted in death or sickness of any kind. Hence, the popular adage, *adue ukod akpa itong* (literally meaning that a person that commits an offence against his in-law must die) (Bassey 2011: 21).

Bassey (2011: 21) also opines that the unique role that *ukod* played in conflict management reflected in the fact that when there were disputes between lineages or

villages, the *ukod* handled such inter-lineage disputes and settled them amicably to the satisfaction of the parties. The decisions handed down by the *ukod* on any dispute were not only final but immutable.

Eyeyen (Grand Child)

Eyeyen is a name given to grandchildren from married daughters. When a woman married, her offspring became *eyeyen* of the place of her origin, and as such, could claim certain privileges: thus her children were *eyeyen* to her family, lineage or village. Because a grandchild was believed to share common blood with his maternal relations, he was regarded as a sacred being in the mother's side. No punishment was meted to him neither could anyone from his mother's side make any attempt to kill him. He could neither be punished nor be killed by them for any reason, nor could any member of his mother's family, lineage or village be a party to his being killed. This belief was supported by an adage *owot akpa* (meaning that he who kills a grandchild must die) (Udo, 1983: 149). Like, the *ukot*, if fines were imposed on the *eyeyen* the people were by customs not to share such fines. A breach of the customary law involving *eyeyen* usually resulted in death or sickness of any kind.

The institution of *eyeyen* was extensively used in the settlement of disputes of any kind in Ibibioland as the grand-children were usually held as impartial arbitrators. Whatsoever decisions they took in their arbitration over any matter was taken as final by disputing parties. Like the *ukot*, the decisions handed down by the *eyeyen* on any dispute were immutable. In the case of land dispute, where the disputants were not willing to reach compromise the *eyeyen* had the right to claim ownership of such land thereby putting an end to the dispute. The

eyeyen also had the right to claim ownership of land in which *mbiam* (juju) was buried by an aggrieved party and *mbiam* would not kill the *eyeyen* for taking the disputed property. *Eyeyen* were used to settle protracted land disputes between villages by being permitted to live on such boundary areas so as to separate the disputant villages (Bassey, 2011: 21).

Imaan (Alliance)

Imaan stands for alliance because of the religious belief attached to it. It was deeper in meaning and operation than any of the modern political alliances or pacts. Its usage included political, social and religious functions. *Imaan* pact was formed for various reasons. Some villages who had migrated and stayed away from the parent stock or clan and had settled near hostile neighbours, went back to form pact with the parent stock, to remind them that they belonged to one stock (Udo, 1983: 150).

In another instance, a pact was formed because of friendly attitude of one village towards another group in time of need. Those that have agreed to enter into *imaan* pact usually fixed a location for the enactment of the agreement. During the ceremony, both parties swore strong oath. Such agreement involved blood which would be mixed in the drink that they drank. Also libation was poured to invoke the spirits of the ancestors to witness the union which made them to share a common totem from that day. In some occasions *imaan* pact was enacted to earn wars between communities.

The parties concerned brought *mbiam* (juju) and served drinks, all the palm wine and *mbiam* brought, was put together in a pot. Each member present cut his hand and put his blood into the mixture, the oldest man in

the parent village of the group to be joined, poured the libation, after which the mixture was shared out to all present, to show that they had accepted the union. From that time on, they had one totem to indicate that they were indissolubly one.

Politically, when two or more villages of different clans joined themselves into *imaan* pact, they promised not to fight each other, or to be a party to any other group planning to attack any of them. Socially, an *imaan* member was free to move about and enjoy privileges that the other villagers could not enjoy. *Imaan* played a crucial role in the judicial process in the pre-colonial Ibibioland. In case of any quarrel in a village or another clan, *imaan* members from *imaan* village(s) handled the case and settled the dispute.

Nka (Age Grades)

Nka (Age grades) or age sets was an institutional device for integrating the activities of the Ibibi society to ensure social cohesiveness. Age grades formed essential link in the chain of government without which village government could be paralysed. It was from the bulk of a particular age grade that the village army was recruited; another looked after the roads and public places; another was in-charge of policing the village while the senior age grades governed the village (Noah, 1988: 11).

All the age grades had their own codes of conduct. Offences such as *ino* (theft), *efebe* (adultery), *nken imua* (flippancy) and leaking of official secrets constituted breaches of their codes. The age grades also settled quarrels among their members. The fear of offending the members of one's age group reduced the number of cases that could have gone to the village council. Offenders were

fined in extreme cases, ostracised. Appeals could be made from one junior age grade to a higher one. The judicial functions of age grade also included punishment of deviants who failed to carry out assigned duties and expulsion of members who were caught stealing. Equally, members who insulted their parents were given corporal punishment or fined in order to serve as a deterrent to others (Ukpong, 2009: 112; Akpan, 2015: 204).

According to Ukpong (2009: 111) age grade system functioned most effectively in pre-industrial, pre-literate societies where there is very little movement away from home and the overwhelming majority of the people live and die where they were born. In such societies, there was face-to face contact, everybody knew everybody and everybody was his brother's keeper. As a society develops and urbanization sets in, the relevance of the age grade system progressively withered.

WOMEN'S GOVERNMENT

The women in Ibibi pre-colonial society had two important types of associations that enabled them to undertake social, economic and political roles in the society. The associations were *ebre* and *iban isong*.

The *ebre* society was a social institution made up of married women, whose main aim was the eradication social ills that could bring shame and misdemeanour to womanhood. The entrance fee was quite high but each woman received financial help from her husband, her relations, her friends and well wishers. The organization exercised judicial role in the pre-colonial

Ibibio. Commenting on the judicial role of the organization, Udo notes that:

The judicial function of the club was very clear. The law was that no member, however, poor, must commit theft. If a member committed theft, she was caught and stripped, and her body was smeared with charcoal, after which she was paraded through the streets of the community with the stolen items tied together and hung round her neck. She was instantly expelled from the club from that day till the end of her life...she was ridiculed in songs and looked down upon by every member of the society who knew her (Udo, 1983: 152).

Another women's club was known as *iban isong* (strong-willed, heart hearted women), it was a powerful female organization or club. According to Akpan (2015: 206), when the men were engaged in battle, members of the club used to perform a ritual war dance in male attire to give the impression to the enemies that the warriors had not left the village. When a warrior was slain in battle, it was the club that carried him for burial.

Iban isong also had judicial functions. Members always sought and obtained redress for injustice meted out to women by their men folk. Any man who allowed his stray animals to destroy women's crop during the planting season could face the wrath of *iban isong*. Besides, obscene language against a woman, including one's wife, was subjected to severe penalties by *iban isong* (Akpan, 2015: 207).

Some Pre-colonial Ibibio Diplomatic Instruments

Ibibio pre-colonial Ibibio society made extensive use of plants and animal products as media of communication. Such products were used to warn people of unexpected danger. They partly helped in the enforcement of social norms. Prominent among the plant used was the palm frond – a young folded leaf of the palm, used either as a bunch or a single leaf known as *eyei* or *ekpin*. If the palm frond was tied to any object, it communicated "prohibition" in most cases. When tied across a road or a compound, it meant that the use of the road or compound as access road was prohibited. The palm frond served as a medium as well as language of communication. As a language of communication, its usage and meaning depended on how it was knotted. There was a way it was knotted to express the fact the receiver of the *eyei* had committed a serious offence and was therefore summoned to appear before the chiefs. *Eyeyi* could also communicate danger if the encircled area or object was made use of by unauthorized persons. If placed around a plot of land, it simply meant that the occupants of the plot must quit immediately (Akpan, 1994: 77).

Apart from *eyeyi*, various other plants were used for communication. The *okono* tree (*dracaena fragan*) remained the most reliable boundary communicator. The leaves, when placed at the doorsteps of any house, indicated the presence of a newly born baby in the house. There was the belief that the *okono* leaf could dispel evil from the hands of those women visitors, to the house, who have had a history of having dying babies. Among the people, using *okono* as a boundary marker there seems to be greater faith in the *okono* than even the modern boundary marker – the beacon stone. The belief could be traced to the fact that once

the *okono* stem was driven into the ground, it soon sprouts into a tree. The *okono* grows very fast and does not die very easily. Besides, like any other plant communication medium, it had some religious connotation. It was feared that tampering with the *okono* boundary indicator could cause the victim to be visited with woes by the spirits of the land. Other boundary plants included *mbritem* (ginger lilly) and *mkpatatat* (selagginella), when these plants were lined on a plot, it served as a warning that the plot of land was ready to be farmed that season and therefore nobody should defecate the land or cut trees therefrom (Noah, 1988: 13; Akpan, 1994: 78).

According to Akpan (1994: 82) many people have wondered why there was so much peace in pre-colonial Ibibio society. Stealing, for instance was not as rampant then as it is now. One of the reasons for this was the extensive use of *umwang* (restraining) order media for the protection and safety of property. Most of these media were made of animal or plants. When used as restraining order media, the materials suddenly had religious links. Religion among the people had to do with all of life – farming, dying, art, education, naming and so on. Every aspect of life was held within the unifying ambient of religion. When some vegetable or animal materials were constructed in certain ways, they carry with them spirits which were said to be capable of causing death to unauthorized users of the property the restraining order medium was expected to guard. The diseases which led to such death vary according to the way the medium was designed. *Umwang* could be designed to communicate a warning that an authorized user of anything around which the medium was placed would suffer from paralysis. *Umwang* could also stand for

scrotal hernia or hydrocele. It was the common belief of the users of these restraining order media that once the spirits were invoked into the media, they must inflict punishment on trespassers. Such punishment may be swollen body, frequent stooling, tuberculosis, stroke or pneumonia.

Another potent tool of pre-colonial diplomatic mechanism in Ibibioland was *ndukpat*, a dark sharpened customary object which was prepared from a dried piece of bamboo. It was sharpened at both ends until it became needle-like and sharp enough to incise boils. In Ibibioland, *ndukpat* conveyed symbolic messages, which when interpreted clearly means the golden rule, namely: “do unto others what you want others to do unto you”. Whenever *ndukpat* was sent to somebody, the recipient was simply asked to use the sharp edge to prick his skin and by implication his conscience and if he felt any pain he was expected to discontinue forthwith all actions considered hurtful to the sender or family of the sender of the *ndukpat*. Therefore, *ndukpat* had restraining effect and was used to resolve and manage conflicts in Ibibioland (Akpan, 2015: 204).

Akpan elaborates the point further thus:

...*Ndukpat* was a veritable traditional symbol employed in the process of managing domestic conflicts either real or imagined. For instance, if one gave out his daughter in marriage to a man and along the line the husband started maltreating the daughter through means capable of taking her life, and the matter (sic) got to the hearing of the

wife's parents, the family usually prepared *ndukpat*, which was sent to the culprit through his village head or lineage head. With it came a severe warning that if any harm happened to their daughter, they would surely revenge... *ndukpat*... was never issued alone. Obviously, there were other traditional items, attached to *ndukpat* whenever it was issued out to someone. These items included *ukai idid* (rope or twine), *mkpa* (bark of dry tree) *uchudu* (fresh local tree leaf) and *ntuen ibok* (alligator pepper) (Akpan, 2015: 205).

The message conveyed was: "eat, the alligator pepper, if your throat hurts, do not serve it to someone else". From the foregoing, it became evident that *ndukpat* constituted a veritable symbolic diplomatic mechanism employed in the process of managing potential domestic conflict situations... Whenever one party issued *ndukpat* to another, it denoted a serious breach of peace. It always indicated that *someone's life was in danger and often called for immediate summoning of the parties involved for hearing and possible settlement. On the final note, by functioning as a sort of deterrent, limiting the harshness or wickedness meted to the other person, ndukpat played a functional role in the de-escalation of potential conflict situations – be it real or imagined, impending or manifest* (Akpan, 2015: 206).

Conclusion

Like all human societies, *intra- and inter conflicts occurred in the Ibibio pre-colonial society. Such conflicts manifested in murder, arson, adultery, theft, suicide kidnapping, witchcraft and so on. Consequently, it became necessary to resolve and manage these conflicts in order for peace to be restored since peace is a major ingredient that drives growth and development of any society. The Ibibio political administrative units as discussed had in-built mechanisms that were used in the resolution and management of emerging conflicts.*

The traditional conflict resolution mechanism included *mbiam* (juju), *idiomg* (divination), *ukang* (ordeal), *nmuk enin* (elephant tusk), *eyei* (palm frond), *eyeven* (grand-child), *ukot* (in-law), *imman* (ally), *nka* (age grade), *ebreliban isong* (women's government). Since these mechanisms were indigenous and had been tried and tested for many generations, they were widely used and their verdict accepted. Pre-colonial diplomatic agents and methods such as priests, messengers, plants and animals, and dry sticks were also used to diplomatically resolve and manage conflicts in the society.

It should be noted that the pre-colonial Ibibio society would not have functioned properly without the existence and application of these relevant traditional mechanisms. Because of the peculiarity of these instruments, miscarriage of justice and undue delay in the dispensation of justice were not common in the society. However, the advent of colonialism and Christianity diluted these traditional mechanisms and methods. The Western judicial system and law enforcement agents are alien to the

Ibibio people and are not flawless. This calls for the harmonisation of some of the tested and relevant mechanisms in conflict resolution and management in the interest of nation building.

References

- Abasiattai, M. (1987). *Akwa Ibom and Cross River States*. Calabar: Wusen Press.
- Abasiattai, M. (1991). *The Ibibio: An Introduction to the Land, the People and their Culture*. Calabar: Alphonsus Akpan Press.
- Abia, O. and Ekpoattai, I. (2014). "Arbitration as an Alternative Method of Conflict Resolution Among the Ibibio of South-Eastern Nigeria". *American Journal of Social Issues and Humanities*. Vol. 4, Issue 1.
- Akpan, O. (2012). "The Logic of Diplomatic Intercourse in International Affairs". *An Introduction to International Studies and World Politics*. Ekpe, A.E., Abasiattai, M.B. and Akpan, O. (Eds.). pp.158-159
- Akpan, E. (1994). "Traditional and Contemporary Communications". *Akwa Ibom State: The Land of Promise: A Compendium*. Peters, S.W., Iwok, E.R. and Uya, O.E. (Eds.). Iagos: Gabumo Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Akpan, O. (2015). "Conflict Resolution and Management in Ibibioland". *Witness to History in Honour of Sebastian J. Umoren*. Afaha, Philip (Ed.). Abuja: Command Publishers.
- Akpan, U. J. (2016). *A History of Iman Ibom People*. Uyo: Heritage Preservation Foundation.
- Akpan, U. J. Some Aspects of Diplomacy and Integration in Pre-colonial Ibibio
- Amamkpa, E. (1974). *A Short History of Ibesikpo*. Uyo: Modern Business Press
- Antia, O. (2005). *Akwa Ibom Cultural Heritage: Its Invasion by Western Culture and Its Renaissance*. Ikot Ekpen: Abbey Publishers.
- Asobie, H. A. (2007). "Nigeria: Economic Diplomacy and national Interest". Ogwu, U.J., Olukoshi, A. (Eds.). *The Economic Diplomacy of the Nigerian State*. Lagos Nigerian Institute of International Affairs
- Dike, K. and Ajayi, J. (1969). "African Historiography". *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. London: Frank Cass & Co.
- Ekong, E. (2001). *Sociology of the Ibibio. A Study of Social Organization and Change* Uyo: Modern Business Press.
- Ekong, E (2003). *Sociology of the Ibibio. A Study of Social Organization and Change*.
- Esema, J. (2002). *Culture, Customs and Traditions of Akwa Ibom People of Nigeria* Uyo: Mocomp Print.
- Eminue, O. (2012). "Diplomacy and Inter-State Relations". *An Introduction to International Studies and World Politics*. Ekpe, A.E., Abasiattai, M.B. and Akpan, O. (Eds.). Yaounde: Book House.
- Esen, A. (1980). *Ibibio Profile: A Psycho-Literary Projection*. Calabar: Paico Press.
- Etukudo, I. (1986). "Aspects of the Socio-Political History of Ibiaku Clan (1800-1960)" Unpublished Long Essay, Department of History, University of Calabar.
- Ford, D. and Jones, J. (1962). *The Ibo and Ibibio Speaking Peoples of Southern Nigeria*. London: International African Institute.
- Hellriegel, D., Slocum, J.W. and Woodman, R.W. (1989). *Organisational Behaviour*. New York: West Publishing Company.

- Ina, K. (2004). "Ibibio Pre-colonial Political and Social System". *Journal of Research in Information and Education*. Vol. 3, No. 2.
- Nicholson, H. (1955). *Diplomacy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Noah, M. (1980). "The Role Status and Influence of Women in Traditional Times. The Example of the Ibibio of South Eastern Nigeria". *Nigeria Magazine*, Vol. 53, No. 4.
- Noah, M. (1980). *The Ibibio Pioneer in Modern Nigerian History*. Uyo: Scholars Press.
- Noah, M. (1988). *The Proceedings of the Ibibio Union, 1928-1937*. Uyo: Modern Business Press.
- Noah, M. (1994). "Early History of the People". Akwa Ibom State: *The Land of Promise, A Compendium*. Peters, S.W., Iwok, E.R. and Uya, O.E. (Eds.). Lagos: Gabumo Press.
- Nwagbara, G. (2004). "Communication Research in Conflict Management". *Communication, Media & Conflict Management in Nigeria*. Nwosu, I.E. and Wilson, D. (Eds.). Enugu: ACCE(Nigerian Chapter).
- Offiong, D. (1991). *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Magic & Social order Among the Ibibio of Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Okoko, E. (1988). *Ubiom: History, Customs and Culture*. Calabar: Paico Press and Books.
- Talbot, P. (1926). *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*. Vol. III. London: Frank Cass.
- Satow, E. (1962). *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice*. London: Longman.
- Smith, R. *Warfare & Diplomacy in Pre-colonial West Africa 2nd Edition*. (1989). London: James Currey.
- Udo, E (1983). *Who are the Ibibio?* Onitsha: Africana FEP Publishers.
- Udoma, U. (1987) *The Story of the Ibibio Union*. Ibadan: Spectrum Publishers.
- Ukpong, U. (2007). *An Inquiry into Culture: Ibibio Names*. Uyo: Dorand Publishers.
- Ukpong, E. (2009). "The Age Grade System Among the Ibibio: A Neglected Theme". *International Journal of African Culture, Politics and Development*. Vol. 4, No. 1
- Umo, B. (1991). "Government and Law Among the Ibibio". *The Ibibio: An Introduction to the Land, the People and their Culture*. Abasiattai, Monday. (Ed.). Calabar: Alphonsus Akpan Publishers.
- Unaka, G. (2004). *Diplomacy. Themes, Strategies & Techniques of Conflict Resolution and Crisis Management*. Owerri: All-Ages/Peace Wise.
- Wall, J. and Callister, R. (1985). "Conflict and its Management". *Journal of Management*, No. 21.