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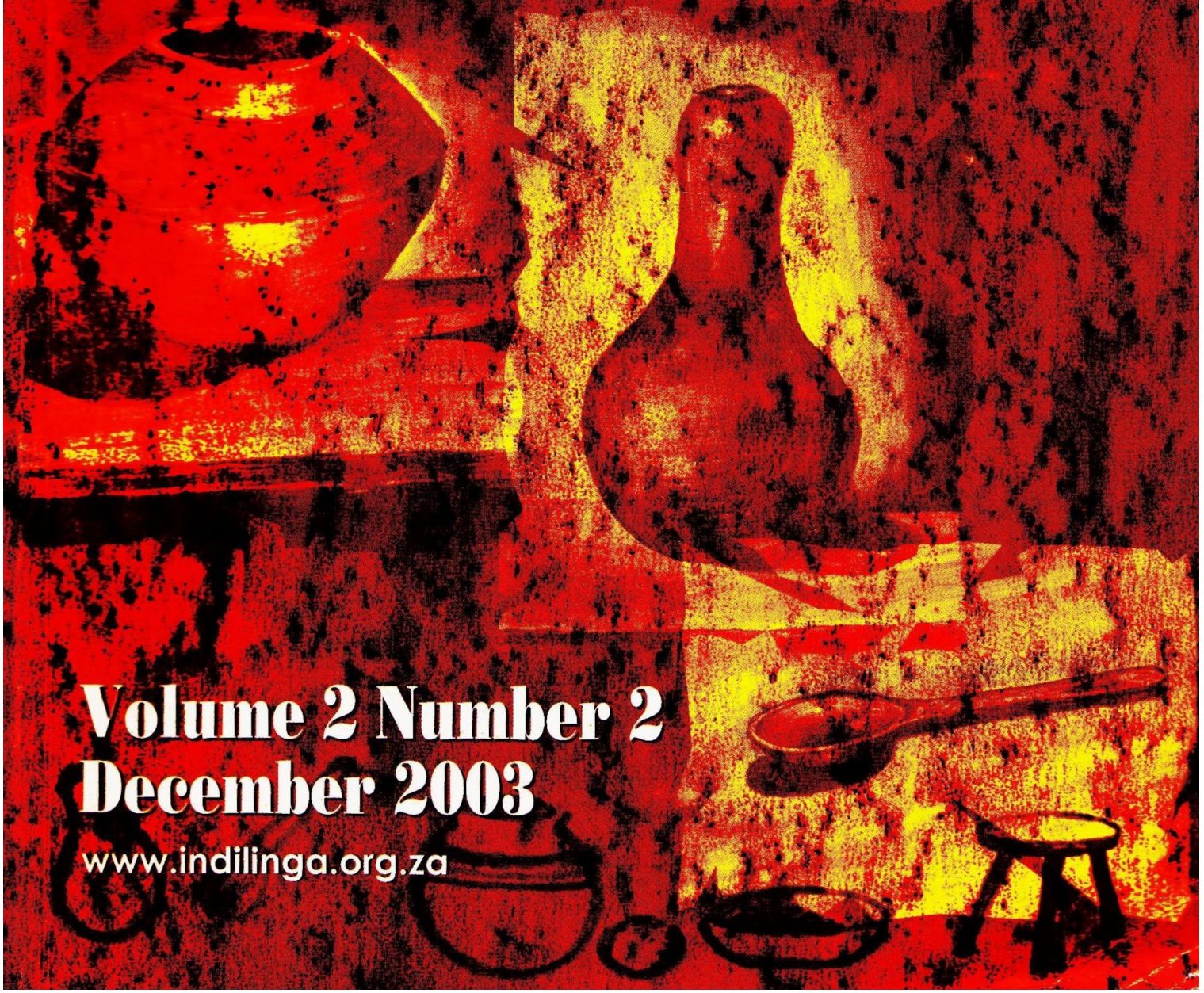

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INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND COMMUNAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION: EVIDENCE FROM NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an experience of relying on indigenous knowledge to resolve a communal conflict between two Nigerian local communities. The authors were working in one of the communities when conflict erupted, and had to initiate moves to restore peace and normality. They relied largely on information on the cultural organisation and knowledge system of the conflicting communities gathered through rapid group and individual interviews with members of the communities. Indigenous knowledge and values proved to be the golden key which unlocked the door to peace between the warring communities. The paper contends that peace facilitators in a communal conflict situation need to be responsive and sensitive to the indigenous cultural and knowledge systems and values of the communities they work with, if they are to make any sustainable impact.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge (IK) has burst upon the development scene to offer critical scope in the current search for sustainability. Defined by the late D. M. Warren (1991) as synonymous with the knowledge that local people have developed over time and continue to develop, and by Louise Grenier (1998) as the unique traditional local knowledge existing within and developed around the specific conditions of women and men in a particular geographic area. Indigenous knowledge is currently used to describe the sum total of the know-how and knowledge possessed by people in a given geographical unit. Often gained through experience, indigenous knowledge is usually passed from one generation to the next. The context of indigenous knowledge is the environment in all its social, cultural, economic, physical, natural and ideational ramifications (Brouwer, 1998; Mathias, 1998).

Until very recently however, global development efforts have tended to rely wholly on, and enhance technologies with international standards rather than support the needs of specific regions and populations (Haverkort, Van 't Hooft, & Hiemstra, 2003). Although these efforts have led to observable improvements in the livelihood realities of people worldwide, they have also led to the foisting of high-input technologies upon local people, who in most cases, have little or no understanding of how to use and maintain such (Adams, 2001; Toye, 1987). Today, there are many instances where such efforts have strained local economies, making vulnerable and moribund the socio-cultural heritage of local people, and causing extreme poverty, loss of biodiversity, ecological decline and crisis, lack of animal welfare, and the disintegration of

local communities. This is the background against which the fecklessness of blueprint development paradigms has become a doleful theme of many current social commentaries (Izugbara & Ukwayi, 2002). Consequently, a great number of recent development initiatives and programmes to address the problems of local people and communities have tended to emphasize economically feasible, socially-equitable, ecologically-sound, and culturally-sensitive development approaches and schemes. Indigenous knowledge has emerged to provide a critical entry point for the realisation of this much vaunted brand of development. Presently, the intensification of calls for 'development from below' aptly reflects the recognition of the critical value of indigenous knowledge both to the livelihood security of many peoples in the Third World and as an important source of innovation and test solution to many a development and environmental challenge (Adams, 2001).

Indeed, from being calumniated and vilified by development planners, indigenous knowledge has now been recognised and accepted as a vital knowledge resource. Consequent upon this, several enthusiastic studies have been undertaken (on indigenous knowledge-related issues) with the aim to look at local knowledge systems and practices and how they could serve the current goal of sustainable development. The vast potential of indigenous knowledge, notwithstanding, a great deal of the published assessments of its utility, has focused narrowly on the areas of health, agriculture, and environmental conservation (Rosenblum, Jaffe, & Scheerens, 2001; Liebenstein & Marrewjik, 1998; Enwereji, 1999). Yet, there is emerging evidence that indigenous knowledge has more to offer than is currently thought and known. For instance, the value of indigenous knowledge is such areas as waste management, housing, educational planning, and conflict management and resolution has yet to receive much critical scholarly interrogation (Izugbara & Okijie, forthcoming).

The present paper attempts to deepen scholarly understanding of the role of indigenous knowledge in communal conflict resolution. The paper couches its arguments on first hand empirical observations from a communal conflict situation between two local communities in Abia State, southeast of Nigeria. The authors of the paper were working in one of the communities when conflict erupted and become involved in negotiating, making, and building peace between the two local communities. The authors are of the persuasion that their arguments in this paper can inform the future of communal conflict resolution and improve the prospects of sustainable communal peace especially in developing areas.

Naming the problem: some background issues

Most writers, particularly in the popular press, use the term 'communal conflict' without any explicit conceptualisation. This has tended to suggest that there is a common sense understanding of the term when in fact there is none. A conceptualisation of the concept of communal conflict is however important at the onset of this discourse as a conflict does not just become communal by the mere fact that it is referred to as such. For the purpose of this present paper, we define communal conflicts as the tensions, disputes, antagonisms, and often violence between identity groups i.e. ethnic and linguistic groups. These conflicts may be intractable and may also occur at all levels – international, national, and local (SAIS,

not dated).

Communal conflicts are not new phenomena. Mason (2001) suggests that history is a graveyard of violent clashes among identity groups. From prehistory to the present age of socio-economic and technological globalisation, communities and people have violently clashed with each other over issues and resources. But such clashes have become widespread in the past few years causing tremendous problems and panic in many countries of the world (Agi, 1999; Mbeke-Ekanem, 2000; Okoji, 2001; Ashton, 2002). Currently, communal and ethnic conflicts are perceived to rank among the most important social concerns in many parts of the world, especially the global south. Indeed, while the problem may be less serious in the developed world, it exists sufficiently enough to evoke considerable attention in places like Africa where its intensity and extensity have assumed very alarming and depressing dimensions (Ake, Nnoli & Nwokedi, n.d; Modo, 1997). As Ashton (2002) argues, one of the remaining legacies of past colonial administration in Africa is the apparently arbitrary fashion in which national boundaries were set. Scholars (such as Otite,1990; Nnoli,1989, 1999) have identified this as a major cause of communal conflicts in Africa. Nigeria is one of the societies in which several identity groups with little or no cultural similarities were lumped together to form a political entity. This situation has tended to make the country highly vulnerable to communal clashes (Nnoli, 1994).

In Nigeria, communal clashes are very common. The country, which easily qualifies as Africa's demographic giant, has over 350 distinct linguistic and ethnic groups. The interaction among these groups has been more conflictual than co-operative (Agi, 1999; Okoji, 2001; Mbeke-Ekanem, 2000). Available statistics show that Nigeria witnesses at least 80 communal/ethnic clashes annually. Each of these clashes lasts an average of six days with heavy losses in terms of persons and property (Anonymous, 2001). In one of the most recent communal clashes in central Nigeria, a total of 1000 persons were reportedly killed and properties valued at millions of Nigerian naira destroyed.

Scholars such as Abiodum (1998), Otite (1990) and Nnoli (1994,1999) have noted that competition for access to and control over socially valued environmental and economic goods such as land, water resources, and economic trees lies at the heart of many of the communal clashes in Nigeria. Recent economic and structural adjustment programmes in the country have also tended to encourage aggressive competition over scarce resources sparking off tensions, antagonisms, and violent disputes among identity groups (Agi, 1999; Mbeke-Ekanem, 2001).

Successive governments have viewed communal conflicts as constituting a national socio-economic, political, and foreign policy problem, and have, consequently, waged a relentless war against it. There is however little evidence of victory, even pyrrhic victory. A number of factors account for the inability of the Nigerian State to deal decisively and successfully with the monster of communal conflicts (Agi, 1999). Prominent among these factors is the unsustainability of current state conflict resolution strategies which normally involve litigation, seizure of the objects of dispute (such as lands) and the use of force (army or and police)

to quell such conflicts. These strategies have failed to live up to practical accomplishments and have resulted in such conflicts festering, sometimes suffering tidal surges of hate and violence mixed with periods of uncertain calm generated by fear and fatigue.

This situation has provoked a great deal of soul-searching among scholars and policy-makers. An urgent quest for alternative communal conflict resolution strategies has thus begun. Does indigenous knowledge have anything to offer in this quest for a sustainable communal conflict resolution strategy? In this short paper, we report our experience of identifying and using indigenous knowledge and values in communal conflict resolution in Nigeria and make a case for a rethink of current conflict resolution strategies in the light of indigenous knowledge and practices.

How we become involved: from study site to war front

The People Against AIDS (PAAIDS) is a regional health NGO based in Abuja, capital city of Nigeria. In March 1999, PAAIDS commissioned the authors of the present paper to undertake a survey of local people's knowledge of AIDS among rural Nigerian communities. One of the states surveyed during the study was Abia State, which lies on the southeast of Nigeria. Ntighauzor Amairi, a relatively large Igbo community of ten patrilineal villages was one of our specific study sites. Ntighauzor Amairi lies south-west of Abia State, and is one of the communities making up Obingwa Local Government Area, a grass root administrative district in Abia State. The community is about 7 kilometres from Aba, a popular commercial town in Nigeria. The community has a population of 12,000 persons. Ntighauzor Amairi people speak Ngwa-Igbo, a language which belongs to the Kwa-sub family. Social amenities, where they exist in this community, are in very poor states. There are only two primary schools in Ntighauzor Amairi and they are both dilapidated and poorly staffed. The community healthcare centre in Ntighauzor Amairi is also in a very poor state, lacking in both personnel and essential facilities from drugs down to syringes. There are no postal facilities, electricity supply, potable water sources, or police posts in the community (Izugbara, forthcoming).

The major occupation of the people in this community is farming. They produce cassava, yam, cocoyam, maize and other food crops. Communally owned and exploited oil palms also abound and are a source of wealth for Ntighauzor Amairi people (Izugbara, 2002).

While we were in Ntighauzor Amairi researching local notions of HIV/AIDS, a communal conflict suddenly broke out between Ntighauzor Amairi and their southwestern neighbours, Abala. Abala, like Ntighauzor Amairi is a poor rural Igbo community. There are no less than 10,000 persons in this community. A farming community Abala shares several similarities with Ntighauzor Amairi. But unlike Ntighauzor Amairi, Abala people speak Ibeme-Igbo. Both Ibeme-Igbo and Ngwa-Igbo are however variants of the Igbo language and are mutually intelligible or comprehensible dialects. Historical records and oral evidence suggest that Ntighauzor Amairi and Abala have lived together for millennia if not since the beginning of time (Oriji, 1972). Several persons in the two communities

recall with nostalgia how the two communities had co-existed peacefully, helping each other ward off attacks from other groups especially the neighbouring Annang of Akwa Ibom State. For ages too, the two communities have inter-married. Yet a communal clash which claimed the lives of half a dozen persons and left dozens of others wounded, erupted between the two communities. Local resources-specifically oil palm trees were at the root of the clash. Consequent upon the current economic recession in Nigeria, socio-economic conditions in most rural areas in the country have declined substantially. Rural communities, where high population pressure has led to the over-exploitation of available environmental resources, have fared badly. Abala faces this problem. Although Abala has a landmass approximately one-quarter of Ntighauzor Amairi's, its population size is almost equal to Ntighauzor Amairi's. High population pressure has led to serious degradation of Abala's environmental resources and invariably her oil palms. Currently she has a palm density of 80-130 per hectare while Ntighauzor Amairi has a palm density of about 200-550 trees per hectare. The high level of poverty in Abala coupled with the overexploitation of environmental resources resulted in some Abala people preying on oil palms and other food crops belonging to Ntighauzor Amairi people.

Men from the two communities had met on many occasions to find a way of stopping this trend with very little success. Embarrassed by the bad name their community was earning, Abala elders sent a resolution to Ntighauzor Amairi to deal ruthlessly with any Abala person they caught stealing from their farms. Evidently, this was to deter their members from stealing from farms belonging to Ntighauzor Amairi people. Ntighauzor Amairi also formed a vigilante group to monitor activities on their boundaries with Abala. On April 7 1999, the vigilante group from Ntighauzor Amairi caught and killed an Abala youth harvesting oil palms in Ntighauzor Amairi. This resulted in a land bloody clash between the two communities.

From despair to involvement: the research process

Our first reaction to the crisis was to despair. We were already working behind schedule and further delays were not welcome. After waiting unsuccessfully for peace to return, we resolved to initiate moves to end the crisis. We began by seeking audience with the paramount ruler of our host community, Ntighauzor Amairi. We met and interviewed him on a number of issues relating to the crisis including his willingness to permit us to wade into the matter. He quickly convened a meeting of the heads of the component villages in his community. We were allowed to address the meeting. We sought their views on the crisis, its cause, ways to resolve it, and how we could be involved. We also obtained their permission to meet, hold interviews on and discuss the situation freely with members of the community.

In-depth but rapid individual and group interviews involving guided dialogue and conversational techniques and brainstorming sessions were the major tools used to probe the cause(s) of the clash, and the people's notions and views on how peace could be restored. Several elderly men and women, women and men leaders, village heads, medicine men, warriors, and youth were purposively sampled for these interviews.

The research team also constituted a delegation and went to Abala. Approaching the community, we met an indigenous security network involving the use of drums to send messages. Miles away from the centre of the community, drumbeats alerted the community to the presence of strangers. We were thus detained until we swore under oath that we were not spies. As was the case in Ntighauzor Amairi, our first port of call was the house of the paramount ruler of the community. We introduced ourselves as agents of an organisation interested in the peaceful coexistence of local communities. He was happy to see us and immediately summoned the heads of the villages under him. They were there in no time. Our meeting lasted long enough for a number of issues to be addressed. We also sought and obtained permission to chat freely with the villagers. Both group and individual interviews were also held with elderly men, younger men, women, women leaders, village heads, young people, warriors, and medicine men in Abala.

Interviews and discussions with various categories of persons in the two communities yielded a rich body of information regarding local people's perception of the crisis and possible avenues of dispute settlement and resolution. We relied on this information to settle the warring communities.

Indigenous knowledge and communal conflict resolution: our experience in Nigeria

Our interviews showed that members of the communities were particularly worried that the clash had ruined years of friendship and understanding between the two communities.

They noted that the two communities had benefited immensely from each other. The people observed that almost all the families in each two of the communities had blood relatives and kin in the other community. They also reported that over the years, the two communities had shared important facilities such as schools, market, health centres, etc. People in the warring communities were thus unhappy with the situation and many of them believed that they were unnecessarily spilling the bloods of their sisters and brothers. They generally saw this as a cultural taboo. It was also observed that in the traditional history the two communities did not fight among themselves. Interviewees were thus unhappy that it was happening in their own lifetime. Many observed that their ancestors would be unhappy with the situation and wished that the conflict be urgently resolved.

Interview results also showed us that the war had persisted simply because no side would want to be called weak. In such a circumstance, the people observed that a neutral (third) party was needed to make peace initiatives. Allowing a third party mediate conflict was accepted in the cultural worldview of the two communities and was based on the traditional belief that an embittered person does not think clearly. Thus an elderly Abala man told us:

> *"Your role as mediators is to carry our shame, to be peaceful and weak, when we all claim to be strong and violent. ... The two communities are*

aggrieved, they cannot think clearly now. You are their heads. You are to help them work out an agreement ... If you are true peacemakers no body hurts you. Nobody can kill a peacemaker, it is a serious ochu, *taboo."*

The traditional values of the two communities accord high respect to the third party in a conflict situation. We exploited this indigenous cultural facility to gain entry into the conflict situation.

From our discussions with people in the warring communities, we learnt several things about the cultural organisation and knowledge system of the two communities. Firstly we learnt that the two communities consider it a taboo to spill the blood of blood-relations (yet as at the time of our intervention, four of the person killed in the clash had various degrees of affinities with the communities that killed them. One was a grandson, another a great grandson, and the other two, indirect in-laws to the communities that killed them). Secondly, we learnt also that the two communities are ruled by old men who are rooted in tradition and culture. Thirdly, we learnt about the traditional role of indigenous women in war situations. In the communities, women could make wars end by staging their famed *ogu-bie* march. Women stage the ogu-bie march naked and may well continue until their men lay down arms. However, before the naked march is staged, the women carry out a *pre-ogu-bie* march to warn their husbands to stop fighting. The warning march comes seven (7) days before the real *ogu-bie* parade begins. Fourthly, we learnt about the symbolic meaning of the kolanut and palm frond as traditional instruments of peace negotiation and conflict resolution among the Igbo generally. These indigenous values were fully harnessed to resolve the communal clash. We also learnt that once two communities fight and make peace, they mark it somehow. The communities may decide to institute a ceremony around that period or jointly plant a tree on the last day of resolving their differences.

It was on the basis of these shared indigenous values that we began our peace efforts. Having listened carefully to each community's side of the story, we decided to talk the elderly men of one group into presenting, through us to the other group, the traditional gifts of kolanuts (*cola accuminata*) and one fresh palm frond (locally called *omu*). At its ideological pole of meaning, the kolanut, in Igbo cosmology, stands for patriliny, kinship, gerontocracy, hospitality, friendliness, unity, goodwill, reconciliation, and good luck (Nwaghaghi, 1996). The *Omu*, on the other hand stands for peace, restitution, and sacredness (Achebe, 1974). We learnt that once a community gives these to another, the receiving community is under serious cultural obligation to accept them and also to return a similar gift. While the kolanuts are shared among the elders, the fresh palm fronds are conspicuously displayed at the boundary of the warring communities.

We convinced Ntighauzor Amairi to first send their gift to Abala. Knowing full well the symbolic implications of the gift, Abala received it and promptly sent their own gift to Ntighauzor Amairi. On the same day, the two palm fronds (one from Ntighauzor Amairi to Abala, and the other from Abala to Ntighauzor Amairi) were put on display. Immediately

this happened, all arms were laid down. The cessation of hostilities created the chance for the two communities to meet face to face and talk with each other.

Recognizing that the social organization of the two communities was built around male gerontocracy, we requested the paramount ruler of each community to pick elderly men to form a negotiating team for the respective communities. As is the tradition, the two negotiating teams met in the house of the oldest man in a neighbouring, neutral community with the third party (us) present. The men met on two occasions but failed to agree on a number of points regarding compensation for their dead and proper punishment for oil palm thieves. It is important to recall that each of these meetings was preceded by the traditional exchange, communal, breaking, sharing, and eating of kolanuts and pouring of libations to invoke the spirits of ancestors.

When however the men could not arrive at acceptable decisions and did not appear too eager to do so, we decided to invoke another indigenous cultural facility for conflict resolution – women's role in war. We invited women leaders from the two communities to a dialogue – again in the house of the woman leader in a neighbouring community. The women discussed the situation together and very soon realised how urgent it had become for peace to return. We specifically alerted them to the fact that those already killed were born by fellow women and that their own children may very soon become victims if urgent steps are not taken to stop the crisis. We then implored them to use their traditional role as 'war-enders' to bring peace back. Women leaders agreed to go home and convince other women in their domains of the need to get involved in the clamour for peace by staging the traditional pre-*ogubie* protest march. Two days after this meeting, Abala woman staged their pre-*ogubie* march and a day after, Ntighauzor Amairi women followed suit.

Knowing what naturally follows this march, men from the two communities were forced to meet. And after two of such meetings, they finally reached a truce and agreed that each community:

(i) should bear the full cost of burying its dead person

(ii) should give a monthly stipend of about 20 US$ to the direct families of each of the dead persons for one year.

(iii) It was also resolved that any oil palm thief caught should be fined 10 live goats, 7 baskets of kolanuts, 5 bottles of dry gin, and 40 big tubers of yam or face ostracism in his/her community.

(iv) To signify that they had settled their differences, the male leaders of the two communities went to the boundary of the two communities and planted an oil bean tree. At the brief but culturally significant tree planting occasion, one elderly man offered an invocation;

> "*This ugba (oil bean) tree is today being planted to signify that we have made peace with our brothers. As this tree grows, the peace and understanding between our communities*

will also increase. This tree shall be a symbol to our children and children's children that peace pays. May they never fight as we did and may our ancestors not be unhappy with us for fighting... May our communities be as strong as the ugba tree, big as its branches, and useful as its fruit."

Insights from our experience

Our experience of relying on indigenous knowledge to resolve communal conflict, raises a number of critical issues for both the theory and the practice of communal conflict resolution. From our experience, the issues which cause a communal conflict are usually in place long before the outbreak of violence, and it is their escalation that often turns a situation of peaceful competition into a destructive, deadly confrontation. Every communal conflict situation will always have warning signs, early indicators which could be effectively addressed. A perceived incompatibility of interests, infringement upon the environmental rights of a group, refusal to respect well-established cultural boundaries, and lack of respect for a group's cultural and economic entitlements often serve to mobilize or rally a group around its grievances. It is often the absence of a third party to help local communities reinvent and reroutes these grievances into less violent outbursts that precedes an escalation. We are persuaded that instead of waiting until these incompatibilities burst into destructive violence, trouble spots and vulnerable areas could be identified and the time bomb of communal violence detonated before it explodes. In Nigeria, as in many other countries of the world, there are local government authorities. The identification of potential local conflict spots, the honest assessment of their causes, the mediation of such conflicts in a transparent manner and their de-escalation in time is a statutory duty that local government authorities need to take serious. Put differently, local government administrative authorities could effectively detect early signs of conflicts and detonate them through conscientious mediation between the aggrieved groups.

But when communal conflicts eventually occur and become violent, the golden key to their resolution and management in a cost-effective manner, may be indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge here refers to what the people already know and do. In the reported study, the aspects of indigenous knowledge that we exploited to achieve communal peace include indigenous cultural attitudes towards killing relatives, local beliefs about the symbolic role of the kolanut and the *omu* as traditional Igbo peacemaking facilities, cultural respect for the views of elderly males, the traditional role of a neutral third party in conflict situation, and women's indigenous roles as war-stoppers, etc.

For indigenous knowledge to be effectively used in a conflict situation however, the active participation of members of the conflicting communities is critical. In the study discussed, participation was used to facilitate indigenous knowledge as an integral part of the peace process. It encouraged the two communities to collectively reflect on their situation and also opened the mind of facilitators to the rich world of indigenous values upon which the search for peace was anchored. The hallmark of participation in the

reported study was the involvement of all critical stakeholders both as researchers and direct beneficiaries of the peace process. Thus, we interviewed, consulted, discussed, and brainstormed both individually and collectively – with various sections of the warring communities – women, men, youth, medicine persons, bereaved people, leaders, etc. This offered critical angles on the crisis, providing a pool of information on how to approach peace.

It is important to say that the key decisions which led to the truce were also participatorily arrived at. Although it took us time to arrive at them, they proved ultimately binding to all persons in the community. This was consequent upon the wide-ranging consultations we held with different persons in the communities. The consultations invariably helped to build confidence and led to strong feelings of responsibility and commitment. This worked because as Izugbara (2002) argues, the method adopted carried the communities along, fostered interest and harmonisation, promoted collective responsibility, and reinforced commitment to agreed goals.

This suggests that the peaceful and sustainable resolution of communal conflict calls for making the members of the warring groups indispensable members of the peace team. How do we make members of the warring groups members of the peace team? We do this by privileging their views. We do this by seeking their views, knowledge, and ideas about how to solve the crisis facing them. Communal peace efforts must therefore start from where the people are, what they do, and know, if sustainability is to be achieved. The search for communal peace by a mere team of outsiders lacking understanding of the dialectics and dynamics of the organization of local communities may thus fail to deliver the expected outcomes. Such outsiders may be naïve or ignorant about the societies they work with. They need the insiders' perspective, i.e. indigenous knowledge, to be guided properly.

From the results we gained critical insights, regarding what a peace team is communal conflict situation actually needs (see figure 1). Peace negotiators in a communal conflict situation need to ask and answers six basic questions, viz:

(i) How are the different identity groups involved in a conflict socially and culturally organised?
(ii) What are the peoples' views about the immediate and remote causes of the conflict situation?
(iii) What are the roles of local (gender, generational, occupational, etc.) group/stakeholder in the conflict situation?
(iv) What are the local/indigenous beliefs surrounding the conflict and its resolution?
(v) What are the roles of different local groups in the conflict resolution process?
(vi) What local values can mar or make the process of peace making?

These questions must be answered through information and observations elicited from close interaction with members of conflicting groups. Peace team members may not successfully obtain this much-needed critical information on these issues unless they

listen patiently, are open, empathic, and constructive. Local people may also not easily open up to outsiders unless they have earned their confidence, trust, and respect. The onus thus lies on the peace team to show the communities they work with that they are worthy of confidence and trust. Our research shows that local people will confide in and work with peace team members once they are assured that they are transparently neutral and or have the interest of the communities at heart.

Using indigenous knowledge as a basis for communal conflict resolution has the potential not only to restore peace but also to keep and build it. This is because among other things, it leaves critical markers. In this case, the marker was the oil bean tree, which the two communities jointly agreed to plant at their boundary to signify conciliation. From the perspective of culture, this is quite symbolic and may act as a critical reference point for the sustenance of peace and harmony between the two communities over a long time.

In many respects, using indigenous knowledge in communal conflict resolution may be quite tasking. The conflict situation may be so unexpected, sudden, and urgent that peace workers may not have enough time to gain critical, focused, and systematic understanding of the cultural organization of the conflicting communities. This may have disastrous implications for the peace process. A case in point was when one member of our team began to address a meeting while sitting down. Elderly persons from Abala, among whom it is a sign of disrespect for young persons to speak to the elderly sitting down, did not take kindly to this. So the Abala contingent stood up and wanted to go. We had to explain to them that it was not a deliberate act of disrespect. We were fined the traditional one keg of palm wine, which we provided immediately, and deliberations then resumed. We have cause to assume that we were able to gain the confidence of the people because members of the research team had some working knowledge of the dynamics of Igbo indigenous culture. Perhaps a complete outsider-facilitator thrust into such a situation, with little or no knowledge of local culture and with little or no time to investigate local cultural values may achieve much less.

Further, the behaviour of the neutral party is critical to the outcome of the peace process. We learnt that peace facilitators in a conflict situation must strive as far as possible to be transparently neutral. They must not indulge in any activity that may make the communities suspect their intentions. For example we were initially working in Ntighauzor Amairi and had developed rapport with the members of this community before the conflict situation. When we got involved in the conflict situation, word filtered to the Abala, through their daughters married in Ntighauzor Amairi, that we had the patronage of Ntighauzor Amairi and were most likely to support them. But before long, owing largely to the transparent quality of our activities, members of the two communities became convinced that we were genuinely interested in the return of sustainable peace in the communities. An Abala elder, who spoke during the last meeting we had with the two communities, aptly captured the important role we have played and the way and manner we had played it. His words remain indelible in our minds. He said:

"Thank you very much for helping us resolve our dispute with our brothers. It is only a brother that can help two brothers resolve a dispute. Strangers cannot and do not. You people have behaved like real brothers to us. We are grateful."

CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper was to illustrate the important role indigenous knowledge played in the resolution of a communal conflict in Nigeria. The paper demonstrates that indigenous knowledge presents a critical resource in the search for sustainable communal peace among identity groups. We identified and discussed a number of indigenous values which provided the golden key with which we unlocked the violent impasse between the two local communities we worked with.

We hope that our experience will stimulate further debate, enrich current communal conflict resolution initiatives and guide peace facilitators in helping the communities they work with find, build, and keep communal peace. It is indeed important however, for further research to identify and focus on volatile areas of the world and study the conflicting groups carefully for their indigenous values and organisation. Further research is also needed to develop insights about indigenous values which may be useful in the prevention of communal conflict as conflict prevention is clearly better than conflict resolution.

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Figure 1 Information needed in a communal conflict situation