The Struggle for Power and Influence among Traditional Institutions in Warri, Delta State Nigeria

[1]Rilwan Abdullahi Aliyu, [2]Aruya Kingsley Joseph
& [3]Sarki Edward Khadeejah

[1,2&3]Department of Political Science and International Study,
Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria
Email: [1]Rilwanabdullahialiyu02@gmail.com, [2]kingsleyaruya@gmail.com &
[3]khadeejahsarki@gmail.com

Abstract
This paper assesses the incessant struggle for power, relevance and influence among traditional institutions in Warri, Delta State Nigeria. The paper is imperative on the assertion that diversity and scarcity of resources among the major tri-ethnic groups of Itshekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo has produced a high level of mutual suspicion this has inherently led to contestation and struggle for power, relevance and influence among traditional institutions. The study relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were generated through in-depth interview and observation. While the secondary data was sourced through textbooks, journals and articles by eminent scholars on the subject matter. The paper adopted the theory of pluralism owing to the plural character of Warri as well as the pivotal role that ethnic groups have come to occupy in the struggle for power and influence by traditional institutions. The paper avows that there is a significant level of discontent and grievances among the various ethnic groups in Warri and this has consciously conditioned the incessant and endemic struggle for power and influence among the traditional institutions in Warri, Delta State Nigeria. The paper also affirms that while traditional institutions play vital role in ensuring peace in their community, the incessant and endemic struggle for power and influence in Warri has paradoxically turned the proverbial peacemakers (traditional institutions) into the crisis trigger. The paper recommends that there is need for genuine dialogue among the traditional stakeholders of the tri-ethnic group in Warri.

Keywords: *Influence, Power, Struggle, Traditional Institutions, Warri*

Introduction

Political struggles and contestations among ethnic groups in Nigeria have been there for long. Traditional institutions are the oldest and has remained one of the most enduring institutions of governance in Africa. Indeed, traditional institutions are conceived on the foundation of native laws, culture and customs, and thus constituting indigenous social and political arrangements. Mengisteab (2005:285) suggests that African societies in the pre-colonial era had effective political and socio-economic institutions that were charged with law-making, conflict resolution, resource allocations and social control.

Mohammed (2006) proposes that comprehensively, traditional institutions should include traditional leaders, royal families, council of chiefs, traditional security members, as well as royal historians and praise-singers. As the name implies, traditional institution is simply built upon or based on history, ancestry, culture, custom, religion and values of the people, and the institution principally revolves around the traditional ruler who serves as the head and chief custodian of the culture of the people. While African traditional rulers/leaders adopt different local titles, which simply translate to "king," some monarchs specifically in southwestern Nigeria, often derive their titles from founders of their respective independent or from major circumstances surrounding the establishment of their states or communities.

Warri is a strategic city in the Niger Delta, as the second major oil city after Port Harcourt. Warri is the center of scores of oils installation and the nerve center of the operations of oil companies in the western Niger Delta. Since colonial times, traditional institutions in have struggled to assert influence and control of Warri and this has been the principal cause of lingering conflict among the three ethnic groups (Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo). The root of the tussle by traditional institutions in Warri

stem from the claims and counter-claims by the three major ethnic groups (Itsekiris, Ijaws and Urhobo) over the ownership of Warri land. These conflicting claims led to the questioning by the Ijaws and the Urhobos of the title of the Olu of Warri as the paramount traditional ruler. It is pertinent to note that struggle for power, relevance and influence by traditional institutions in Warri emanated from an action of the government of the former Western Nigeria, when it decided to change the title of the Itsekiri King from **Olu of Itsekiri to Olu of Warri** in May 1952. The change was effected at the request of the Itsekiri despite the objection of the Urhobo and the Ijaws. The Urhobo in particular felt that the title Olu of Warri would give the universal impression that the Olu was the paramount ruler or chief of the Warri Province, and this would legitimize the Itsekiri claim of the ownership of the area. The change of the title involved the Olu of Itsekiri ruling over all the people of Warri as if they were all Itsekiri. Warri is owned and inhabited by the Urhobo, Ijaw and Itsekiri ethnic groups. The change created animosity and mutual distrust between members of the Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo ethnic groups. This paper therefore assesses the incessant struggle for power, relevance and influence among traditional institutions of the Tri-ethnic groups (Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo) in Warri Delta State Nigeria.

Methodology
The study relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was generated through in-depth interview and observation. While the secondary data was sourced through textbooks, journals and articles by eminent scholars on the subject matter.

Background to the Struggle among Traditional Institutions in Warri
The roots of the modern predicament and struggle among traditional institution that has been dubbed as the Warri crisis stretch back to some five centuries. A clear historical understanding of why the problem of Warri arose at all and why it persists will require that we link the political and social development of the Western Niger Delta with the rise of the phenomenon that modern historians call the Atlantic world. That is the point at which we begin our survey of the origins of what has been branded as the Warri crisis (Ekeh, 2004).

Politically, Warri is a hot bed of tribal politics and interest which has torn the city apart resulting in ethnic struggle and the fading dreams of the once bustling city. Indeed, Warri town has been under the rivalry of three ethnic groups for decades which is said to define the politics of Delta State. The tri-ethnic rivalry involving the indigenous ethnic groups of Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw in Warri could be traced to the colonial period. The conflict grew from the struggle for group legitimacy and entitlements among the three ethnic groups.

Indeed, each of the ethnic groups claimed to be the owner of Warri and therefore should control the traditional institution of Warri. The claim over the ownership of Warri by the three ethnic groups of Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw, is a matter of great historical controversy between the indigenous ethnic groups of Warri. The Itshekiris, Urhobos and the Ijaws each claim "ownership" of the town as the original "indigenes" relegating all other ethnic groups to the status of "settlers". Each of the warring parties invokes history to buttress its claim, with each ironically accusing others of rewriting history. Unfortunately, their squabbles did not stop in war of words, but have resulted in violent communal conflict involving mostly the three communities and have claimed a lot of lives and property. Each of the ethnic groups claimed to be the first to settle in Warri and tried to support their claims with historical data. They tried to interpret historical data to buttress their justification of claim over the ownership of Warri, as each group refers to the other as settlers in Warri (Imobighe, 2002).

In clear terms, the causes of conflict among the three ethnic groups according to Oromareghake and Akpotor (2005) hinge on goals and means incompatibilities, varying from material resources to positional goods involving: dispute over ownership of Warri land and corresponding "settler" designation for "migrants"; suzerainty of the Olu of Warri. The Urhobos claim that they are the original owners and settlers in Warri, and that they only lease land to Itshekiri people to farm since they had no dry land to farm as they were occupying swampy areas of Delta. The Urhobos perceived Itshekiris as migrants whom they assisted to overcome their occupational challenge at a particular point in time in the history of their existence by leasing land to them but when their leasing period was over they refused to hand

over. Rather they cashed in on the privilege position granted them by the colonial masters to engage in dispute with Urhobo over the ownership of Warri. The Urhobo also argued that Ode-Itshekiri is the ancestral home of the Itshekiris which they often refer to as "big Warri" while Warri town the area in contest they call small Warri. The Urhobos contends and queries that how the Itshekiris could leave big Warri and make small Warri the seat of their traditional ruler if not because of social and economic advantage associated with small Warri They argued that ancestral home of the people should be the seat of their traditional ruler.

The complexities brought about because of the changed in the traditional designation of the Itshekiris from Olu of Itshekiris to Olu of Warri by the former Government of Western Nigeria inherently served as a trigger for the unholy struggle of power and influence among the tri-ethnic traditional institution in Warri with its attendant consequences.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the theory of pluralism. The choice of this theory is largely influenced not just by the plural nature of Nigeria but by the plural character of Warri and Delta at large. A plural society is a sociological aggregate consisting of distinct cultural groups and institutions which interact within and make claims on resources of a wider encapsulating society (Otite, 1990:32).

The basic feature of a pluralistic society includes: segmentation into corporate groups that frequently have different cultures or subcultures; a social structure compartmentalized into analogous, parallel, non-complimentary but distinguishable sets of institutions; often relative absence of value consensus; presence of cultural heterogeneity, relative presence of conflict between the significant corporate groups; political domination by one of the corporate group over others and non-utilitarian, affective, diffuse ties within such groups (Pierre, 1971:333).

Indeed, there is a consensus amongst scholars of pluralism that it refers to the competitive process whereby groups of organized interests strive for larger share of power either through electoral contest or by influencing policies of respective government (Yahaya 2004). Pluralism therefore connotes the existence in

modern society of heterogeneous institutions and organizations that have diversified ethnic, religious and cultural interests. Thus, political pluralism describes a society in which power is widely distributed among numerous groups arrayed in shifting patterns of conflict, competitions and cooperation (Jack et al, 1982). Furthermore, the pluralist theory has also argued that the role of government parallels that of a neutral arbitrator whose main role is to ensure that participant observes the rule of the game (Kellow, 1992). In essence the theory propounds that the politics as well as political outcome of a given environment are conditioned by the heterogeneity of its units. Most importantly the theory emphasizes on the role of people as groups in political contestations; it therefore sees the activities of ethnic, cultural and religious groups as very crucial in determining policies, resource distribution and its attendant implication (Yahaya, 2004).

The relevance of this theory is obvious, the struggle for power and influence among traditional institutions in Warri can only be comprehended within the context of group interest as well as the politics of the state. It therefore becomes logical that the sociological blocs of the state vis-à-vis the ethnic and cultural group which inhabit the area are properly examined. This is also predicated upon the fact that the boundaries of the sociological blocs also approximate with their ethnic boundaries. Thus, ethnic and cultural groups become important in understanding the tussle among traditional institutions in Warri. It is pivotal to note that the utility of these categories is not in their diverse nature but rather in how these traditional institutions have been able manipulate ethnicity to their advantage.

Power Tussle among Traditional Institutions in Warri

Historically, tussle among traditional institutions in Warri emanated from an action of the government of the former Western Nigeria, when it decided to change the title of the Itsekiri King from Olu of Itsekiri to Olu of Warri in May 1952. The change was effected at the request of the Itsekiri despite the objection of the Urhobo and Ijaws. The Urhobo in particular felt that the title Olu of Warri would give the universal impression that the Olu was the paramount ruler or chief of the Warri Province, and this would legitimize the Itsekiri

claim of the ownership of the area. The change of the title involved the Olu of Itsekiri ruling over all the people of Warri as if they were all Itsekiri. This has remained a major point of contention in contemporary Warri politics, the contest and debate over the traditional title of the Olu is historical. However, interviews held in non-Itsekiri area points to deep seated grievances and disparity over the dominance of the Olu over the other traditional institutions. Indeed, traditional leaders of Urhobo and Ijaw ethnic group minced no word in their assertion that it was clearly unjust for the leader of one ethnic group to compel others to recognize him as their own leader. In the words of one of the interviewee

> "there are many ethnic groups in Warri and for the head of one ethnic group to be seen as the head of other is a slit on the other ethnic group. It must be noted that the three-ethnic groups in Warri are very diverse not just in language and culture but also in complexion and appearance and therefore the declaration which recognized him as the Olu of Warri must be reviewed" (Interview, 2016).

Consequently, a member of the council in the Olu palace, in making his case for the Olu title postulates that:

> "Titles are not named after tribes but kingdom. Just as there is no Oba of Yorubas, Emir of Hausas or Obi of Igbos, there cannot be an Olu of Itsekiris but rather an Olu of Warri because titles are always associated to a Kingdom" (Interview, 2016).

Therefore, the contention over the title of Olu of warri has also significantly contributed to the causes of the Warri crisis. This is because most respondent believes that the dominant traditional institution consciously or unconsciously controls the City with its attendant benefits. This assertion is evident when some of the respondent from the Itsekiri ethnic group advocated that in the strict sense Warri belongs to the Itsekiris just as Burutu and Patani local government belongs to the Ijaws, while Udu and Uvwie local government belongs to the Urhobos. They justified their assertion by arguing that with the exception of Warri, there is no other major Itsekiri

settlement in Delta State. However, respondents from other ethnic group were quick to dispel the above assertion noting that the near absence of Itsekiris in other local government areas does not justify the Itsekiris ownership of Warri. In their view the Itsekiris were historically Riverine people and most of the land where they now claim possession and ownership were bought.

The struggle among traditional institutions in Warri is also propelled by contest for political relevance and the new-found status of Warri after the discovery of oil. Though, there are no oil wells in Warri town itself, with oil exploration carried out in adjourning riverine areas, oil companies such as Shell and Chevron pay royalties to communities through their leaders who are based in Warri. This made the seat of the Olu of Warri an enviable stool to be vied for by those who claimed to be citizens of or indigenes of Warri. Indeed, these royalties has made the other traditional institutions to question the dominance of the Olu over the whole of Warri.

Consequentially, the struggle among traditional institution has created a crisis situation in Warri especially among ethnic fault lines. Credence is also given to this assertion by (Imobighe, 2000:10);

> It does not really matter that the situation in Warri has assumed new dimension due to many factors both real and imagined. Rather it is very strange indeed that Urhobo and Itsekiri people as well as Ijaws, who once shared very close conjugal relationship could kill themselves without due consideration of their nuptial affinity. Apparently, their hatred to each other transcends bloodline.

This largely explains why crisis often springs off during traditional or festive procession of the various ethnic groups. In fact, some respondent argued that the relocation of the Olu of Warri palace from Ode-Itsekiri which although rural in nature is said to be the ancestral home of the Itsekiris to Ugbori which is an urban settlement is seen as a ploy by the Olu to ensure dominance.

Conclusion
Traditional institutions often serve as political and spiritual custodians of their respective

domains. Indeed, they combine legislative, executive and judicial functions as well as religious, economic and military roles. However, tussle for power and influence among traditional institutions have the tendency of mystifying this pivotal role. Therefore there is an urgent need for traditional institutions in Warri to sheath their sword so as to be able to perform their celebrated role of peace making and peacebuilding in their various domains.

References

Ekeh, P. P. (2004) 'British Treaties of Protection with the Itsekiri and Colonial Rule in the Western Niger Delta' in Ekeh P P (ed). *Warri City and British Colonial Rule in Western Niger Delta,* Urhobo Historical Society.

Imobighe, T. A. (2002). "Warri Crisis in Historical and Contemporary Perspective" In: T.A Imobighe, C.O Bassey and J.B Asuni (eds). *Conflict and Instability in The Niger–Delta: The Warri Case.* Ibadan: Spectrum. Pp: 36-54.

Imobighe, T. A. (2000). *Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria an Overview.* Spectrum Book LTD, Ibadan.

Kellow, H. (1992). *Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Mengisteab, K. (2005). '*Mechanisms for involvement of traditional leaders in the promotion of good governance'.* Symposium on Traditional Leadership and Local Government. D.I. Ray, K. Sharma and I.I. MayParker (eds.). Gaborone, 23-26 September: 40-44.

Mohammed, L. (2006). *'Traditional authorities, local government and land rights'. Grassroots Governance?* Chiefs in Africa and the Afro-Caribbean. D. I. Ray and P. S. Reddy (eds.). Calgary: University of Calgary Press: 173-226.

Oromareghake, P & Akpotor, J. D. (2005). Managing Inter Ethnic Conflicts in Niger Delta: The Case of Warri. In: Yakubu, A.M. et al (ed). *Crisis and Conflict Management in Nigeria since 1980.* Vol 2, Baraka Press Ltd: Kaduna.

Otite, O. & Albert, T. (1990). *Community Conflict in Nigeria.* Spectrum Book Ltd. Ibadan.

Pierre, V. B. (1971). "Pluralism and the Polity: A Theoretical Explanation" In: Kuper, L. and Smith M. G. (eds). *Pluralism in Africa, Los Angelis.* University of California Press.

Yahaya, A. (2004). "Ethno-religious and Political Stability in Kaduna State: A Study of February 21, 2000 Kaduna Metropolitan Conflict". *Unpublished (M.Sc Thesis*, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.