

## Indigenous Methods of Conflict Resolution in Oron During the Pre-Colonial Era.

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### Abstract

*Some Eurocentric writers asserted that African societies before the coming of European were perpetually at war with itself, "It had no movement or development to exhibit". But historical evidence abound that such views were erroneous without verifiable historical fact. Like other parts of African societies, the Oron pre-colonial era had ways and means by which they settled conflicts which arose among them whether in their families or in the course of interactions with one another in larger settings. The people devised means to live in peace and harmony with each other by reducing injustice and settled disagreements through their indigenous methods of conflict resolution. This paper examined the various methods of conflict resolution during the pre-colonial period and drew from both primary and secondary sources. These sources were interrogated through critical and analytical method for historical reconstruction. The study found out that the adoption of indigenous methods such as their different units of political organization and administration, socio-cultural milieu and religious belief system in conflict resolution facilitated peaceful coexistence, unity and development of the society. It therefore, concluded that rather than fanned the embers of war or promote occurrence of conflict, deliberate efforts were adopted to enhanced cordial relationship, through fair play and confidence in the people and about their society.*

**Key words:** Indigenous methods, Conflict, Conflict Resolution, Oron, Pre-colonial era

## Introduction

In every human relation in a society conflict is bound to occur, hence it is inevitable. Disagreement between individuals or groups over contentious issues are common occurrence in human affairs. Like other societies where this occurred, Oron was not excluded during the pre-colonial era. Oron is on the west bank of the estuary of Cross river, bounded in the north by Uruan and Nsit of Ibibio land; in the South by Atlantic Ocean and Akpabuyo of present Cross River State; in the west by Ibeno, Esit Eket and Nsit Ibom Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom State. At present for effect grassroots development, Oron is split into five (5) Local Government Areas namely Oron, Uduunguko, Mbo, Urueofong/Oruko and Okobo, all in Akwa Ibom State. Incidentally, a substantial portion of Oron populace in the riverine areas have been lumped with Cross River State in the recently created Bakassi Local Government Area. The Area provides the ocean gateway for Nigeria to Cameroon, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. However, there were ways and means rooted in the people's tradition, socio-cultural institutions and belief system, for peaceful resolutions of conflict which ensured satisfaction and harmonious relationship between the contending parties.<sup>1</sup>

Oron people before the coming of Europeans lived more peacefully with each other whether as brothers, sisters or neighbours. However, this does not suggest that there were no differences or disagreements among the people. Indeed, there existed people who oppressed or exploited others and deprived them of their rights. The pre-colonial Oron people recognized these facts and accordingly devised methods through which anyone who felt deprived or aggrieved could sought and obtained redress. These indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolutions were evolved to foster mutual understanding, unity of purpose and development. These methods were also guided by the principles of transparency, pragmatic dynamism, trust and confidence.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this paper therefore, is to examine the indigenous methods of conflict resolution in Oron during the pre-colonial era. For better analysis and understanding of the issues involved, the paper is divided into four parts, part one examines conflict and conflict resolution and part two discusses types of conflicts. The focus of part three is on methods of conflict resolution and part four is conclusion.

On his part, Sani Shehu stressed that conflict occurs in the "best" of human societies and conflict index includes image of misunderstanding, hostile utterances, actions, and resources that seek to put the interest of the other party in a disadvantaged position<sup>6</sup> In other words, conflicts exist when at least two or more person have incompatible aims or interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Effiong O. Uye, 75+, Village Head, Stadium Road 14<sup>th</sup> January, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Oyokunyi Idiokune, 70+, Clan Head, Ekim, 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2024

<sup>3</sup> Wright Quincy cited by Adenyika T. Ajayi and Lateef Buhari, "Methods of Conflict Resolution in African Traditional Society", (Ethiopia: African *International Multidisciplinary Journal* Vol.8 (2)2010),140.

<sup>4</sup> Otoabasi Akpan, *The Niger Delta Question and the Peace Plan*, (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd. 2011), XXV.

<sup>5</sup> Morton Deutsch, *Resolution of Conflict: Constructive Processes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 10

Ordinarily, conflict is usually seen in the negative or disintegrative dimension. Although some conflict assumes these forms but, in some situation, conflict can symbolize as well as lead to positive development for individuals, groups or the society as a whole. Therefore, conflict may be a corrective signal or warning. Besides, it can be an integrative, progressive occurrence that can be development driven. In this context, Isaac Olawale Albert emphasized that there is nothing wrong with conflict rather it is a critical mechanism by which goals and aspirations of individuals and groups are articulated, it is indeed a channel for a definition of creative solutions to human problems<sup>7</sup>.

However, conflict whether it is conceptualized with negative or positive connotation; “constructive and destructive elements” given its nature, characteristics and effects, it is unproductive for it to be left unresolved, hence the need for conflict resolution. In the words of a renowned scholar and author, “whatever way conflict is conceptualized, it is worth noting that the pursuit of mutually exclusive interest leads to conflicts as the occurrence of conflict is natural and conflict itself is inevitable in the affairs of men, mankind cannot live perpetually in an environment of conflict if his civilization must continue”<sup>8</sup>. For avoidance of perpetual conflict situation human societies evolved various means of conflict resolution.

Against this premise, a number of methods are adopted to resolve conflict as they evolved to stem the tide of degeneration into harmful consequences. Commenting on this, Christopher Miller succinctly states that conflict resolution is the use of “variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems”. He added further that by conflict resolution, it is expected that the deep-rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved, and behavior is no longer violent nor attitudes hostile any longer<sup>9</sup>.

For Shedrack Gaya Best<sup>10</sup> “conflict resolution connotes a sense of finality, where the parties to a conflict are mutually satisfied with the outcome of a settlement and the conflict is resolved in true sense”. From the foregoing analysis it means conflict resolution aim at the termination of conflict through the adoption of constructive problem-solving mechanisms and the disputing parties are satisfied with the settlement of the hitherto issues in conflicts. In Oron pre-colonial society, there were cases of conflict which needed the adoption of indigenous method for settlement and resolution. Sometime the word conflict is used interchangeable to mean dispute.

### **Types of Conflict in Oron during the Pre-colonial era.**

In Oron during the pre-colonial era, different types of conflict existed. A reputable informant informed that about seven types of conflict existed at the period in question as follows: Land; Marriages; Witchcraft accusation, inter-family; inter-village; inter-clan and domestic/family conflicts.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sani Shehu, *The Killings Fields: Religious Violence in Northern Nigeria*, (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd. 2007), 120.

<sup>7</sup> Isaac O. Albert, *Introduction to Third Party Intervention in Community Conflict* (Ibadan: John Aruners Pub. Ltd. 2001), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Otobasi Akpan, “Conflict Resolution and Management in Ibibio Land”, in Philip Afaha (ed), *Witness to History in Honour of Sir Sabastian J. Umoren* (Abuja: Command Pub. 2015), 182.

<sup>9</sup> Shedrack Gaya Best (ed). *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies in West Africa: A Reader* (Ibadan Spectrum Books Ltd. 2017), 94.

<sup>10</sup> Best (ed). *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies in West Africa*. 94.

<sup>11</sup> K.B.E. Abia, 62, A Retired Civil Servant, Oron Town, 8th August, 2005.

Before examination of different types of conflicts as enumerated above, it is pertinent to state that these conflicts were not resolved by the adoption of the same method rather different approaches were employed based on the nature of the conflict in issue. For instance, as we shall analyse later in the course of this paper there were some which were settled in the immediate family-*Udip*, extended family-*Efak*, Village-*Udung* or clan-*Afaha*. Besides, some involved the use of *Ekpe* and deity-*Olukhu* among other methods.<sup>12</sup> Also, the approaches differed as one moves from one level of conflict to another. In this context, they were variants in conflict involving property, land and communities.

Moreso, in all these methods, the adoption of certain procedures was very paramount. At the meeting summoned for settlement of conflict, the members of council at various level would make declaration to investigate the matter, deliberate and resolve same without sentiment, bias or prejudice. In some instances, libation would be poured inviting the ancestors to come and lead them in resolving the dispute. At the end of settlement, some forms of measure would be ensured to enforce acceptability of the decision by the disputants or contending parties. In some cases, the parties would either swear by the Almighty God, *Abasi Odung Oyong* or by *Olukhu*, deity stating that they would accept the terms of settlement and they would not act in any evil manner against any person in connection with the resolution of the conflict. It has been emphasized that the invocation of the ancestral spirit, in each circumstance was “to buttress the links Africans maintained with their ancestors”.<sup>13</sup>

However, periodically, for some reasons, lands were shared among the sub-lineages *Efak* in order of seniority. In turn, the sub-lineage heads *Ofong Efak* allocated the land to each family head, *Ofong Ufok* his share of the communal land. Gradually, although communal ownership of land held sway, there were avenues of transfer and acquisition of land which include inheritance, long occupation, mortgage and purchase. Hence, as the people evolved overtime, land could be inherited and transferred without community sanctions. Consequently, the changes in pattern of ownership of land often led to some conflict, as land cases erupted. Conflicts over land were not limited between individuals as some communities engulfed in land conflicts in the Oron precolonial society. Some communities quarreled and fought over land. This led to some skirmishes, mutual distrust and on rare cases war which represented the highest stage of conflict. For example, land dispute between *Udesi* village and *Oruko*; and the conflict over land between the villages of *Oduonim* and *Eyoabiasang*. These two land disputes degenerated into war *Ukio*<sup>15</sup>.

### Land Conflict.

Among the Oron people, land occupied strategic importance. It was the main stay of their pre-colonial economy, a means of survival and sustenance. Little wonder, Oron pre-colonial society, like other societies in pre-colonial Africa “valued land more than other earthly property”. Land was communally owned and the “communal land was held in trust by the leaders of a given group usually male”<sup>14</sup>. Since villages were important unit of the socio-political organization, the village head *Ofong Udung* was the custodian of village land.

<sup>12</sup> I. U, Iyanam “Traditional Rulership as a Symbol of Oron Unity” in O. E, Uya (ed) *The Oron Nation in Contemporary Nigeria* (Calabar: Commercial and Technical Supplies Ltd. 1999), 44-46.

<sup>13</sup> Best (ed.). *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies in West Africa*. 98.

<sup>14</sup> O. E Uya, *A History of Oron People of the Lower Cross River Basin* (Oron: Manson Pub. 1984), 58.

### Marital Conflict

Another important type of conflicts were on marital issues. This varied, as it could involve husband and wife, and even co-wives. In most instances, this was as a result of unfaithfulness of either spouses. It was also due to assault on the wife by the husband. On this a source avers elsewhere that “though both sexes committed acts of adultery in traditional Ibibioland, it was those of women that the society felt such acts were repugnant to justice and good conscience”<sup>16</sup>. This scenario was also applicable in Oron pre-colonial society as the society was dominated by men. For example, it is recorded in Oron oral tradition of a woman who because of marital conflict with the husband sought for divorce. The woman named, *Adiaha-Abang* from *Okiuso* village decided to divorce her husband by carrying a big pot and dancing around so as to secure a divorce which was an uphill task in Oron pre-colonial society. The dance called *Abang Nkin Ebi* caused the marriage conflict between the couple to be settled in favour of the husband while the wife was nicknamed *Adiaha Oro*<sup>17</sup>.

It should be emphasized that an act of adultery between a married women with another man if known to the husband of the culprit usually led to marital conflict.

### Witchcraft Accusation Conflict

This was also a very serious issue of conflict among the people. Their belief system recognized the existence of witches and wizards. These were believed to be a manifestation of mystical forces variously referred to as psychic power, vital force or universal, old-pervading and supersensible energy.<sup>18</sup> The witches are either born with it or it is given to them by someone who already has it, usually through food or drinks. Among the Oron pre-colonial society and even thereafter, witches and wizards were associated with the power to inflict every harm on their victims and to be capable of killing them. This often led to conflict between individuals and families when an investigation was carried out through findings, *Idiong*. The person who was guilty was made to face the wrath of the traditional justice system. A typical example was the case which happened in the family of Ofong Osung Atangang in Udung Uko village.<sup>19</sup>

### Inter-family Conflict.

This type of conflict involved two or more families. It could be where members of different families have disagreement or quarrel over boundary or ownership of land. In addition, interfamily dispute arose in event of manslaughter if proper explanation on how the death of such person occur were not satisfactorily given. Also, the subject of this type of conflict could be struggle over property. Besides, sources of these conflicts could be deceit, false claim, character assassination and cheating. For instance, the dispute between Eyo-uso Otu and Eyo-Uwe Okere families in Udessi was because of land.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> O. E Uya, *A History of Oron People of the Lower Cross River Basin*, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Akpan. “Conflict Resolution and Management in Ibibi Land”, 187.

<sup>17</sup> Effiong Effiong Ibia, “The Traditional Methods of Settling Disputes in Pre-colonial Africa: A Case study of Oron People” Unpublished B.A Project, Department of History and International Studies, UNIUYO, Uyo, 51.

<sup>18</sup> N.O. Ita, “Religion and the Development of the Oron Nation” in O. E. Uya (ed.) *The Oron Nation in Contemporary Nigeria*. 92.

<sup>19</sup> Ita Oboho, *A History of Eyo Atai, Udung Uko* (Uyo: Wonder world, 2018), 39.

<sup>20</sup> Edeke Luke Edeke, Interviewed by Effiong E. Ibia, “Traditional Methods of Settling Disputes in Pre-colonial Africa”, 42.

**Inter-Village Conflict**

Inter-village conflict usually occurred between two or more villages. Again, this could be as a result of death of a member or struggle over boundary and ownership of land. The pronounced cases in this context include the conflict between the villages of Oduonim and Eyoabiasang, and the villages of Udesi and Oduonim which we earlier mentioned in this paper. Similarly there was inter-village conflict between the villages of EyoEkung Inyang and Ekim over the death of an EyoEkung Inyang man who was inadvertently killed by the servant of Otoyoy of Ekim.

**Inter-Clan Conflict.**

Conflict occurred between clans. The cause of such conflicts may not be land but as a result of support given to other villages which belonged to the same clan. There were cases where a whole clan would support a member in war *Ukio* over land.

**Domestic Conflict**

This kind of conflicts were very common in Oron during the pre-colonial era, it was usually between brother, sisters, cousins, nephews etc. over domestic issues at the family level.

**Indigenous Methods of Conflict Resolution in Oron during the Pre-colonial era**

As earlier stated, different types of conflicts occurred in Oron which needed to be resolved for the interest of peace, harmonious relationship, progress and development of the society, consequently different methods of conflict resolution were evolved by the people as “no society could develop and progress in an environment of unresolved conflict”. It should be emphasized before analysing the different indigenous methods of conflict resolution that they, were generally focused on mediation, reconciliation and restoration of peace between disputants within the families or communities. There was preference for dialogue over retribution which ensured that conflict which arose did not degenerate into prolonged acrimony or animosity rather social cohesion and integration were facilitated. The methods of conflict resolution in Oron pre-colonial society were rooted in different units of political organization and administration of the people, their socio-cultural milieu and religious belief system. The political organization and administration were anchored on five administrative structures and each of these structures functioned as an instrument of conflict resolution beside other roles, which included political, economic and religious affairs. They political structures of governance which served as instruments for settlement or conflict resolution were: the *Udip*, family; *Ufok*, extended family; the *Efak*, lineage group; *Udung*, Village and *Afaha*, Clan as we shall analyze. However, it should be noted that at each of these units of political organization and administration, the chiefs and elders were regarded as the custodians of the tradition, norms and values of the society. Hence, they were highly respected for their wealth of knowledge and wisdom. They also enjoyed the trust and confidence of their people. And their unbiased sense decisions and amicable resolution of conflict were highly treasured:

*Udip*, immediate family was the smallest unit of socio-political organization and consisted of a man and his wife or wives as the case may be, and his children. The father was the family head who was responsible for the resolution of conflict in the family. The family head had the authority to settle all cases in the family, usually, at this level, which was the first point of settling disputes, the family head handled domestic conflicts which arose between brothers and sisters or sometimes between the husband and wife.

The family head brought the parties involved together, resolved conflict and ensured the parties continued to live in peace with one another. For instance, if there was marriage dispute between a wife and husband, if the latter was innocent the wife would be made to apologize to the husband and cook him a special meal. Resolution of conflict among family members did not involve *Olukhu* that is oath taking, given the bond of consanguinity. Rather at the end of settlement the parties as a way of acceptance of the resolution, were made to share a cup of water blessed by the head of the family. Besides the head of each family was traditionally empowered to maintain discipline and order, foster love and unity within his household.

At the *Ufok*, extended family level, the oldest male among all parent of their constituent groups was *Ubuhu Ufok*, meaning the head of the house. It should be noted that Oron was and still a patrilineal society, hence the head of *Ufok* exercised authority and handled conflicts which arose within his jurisdiction “in consultation with other male parents as well as the female elders of the family”.<sup>21</sup> At the extended family there was the family council, usually at the compound of the *Ubukhu Ufok*.

The family council met periodically and their functions included “settlement of disputes between members of the *ufok*” and they heard appeal from members of different *Udip*<sup>22</sup> that made up the *Ufok*. Therefore, in conflict resolution, the family council acted in two capacities, namely as court of first instance and as an appeal Court. Hence, the family council handled unresolved matters referred to it by the first political structure that is

*Udip* and that which arose within the *Ufok*. Such cases could be on theft and adultery among others. Largely family council handled civil matters.

*Efak*, the lineage was and still is a collection of *Ufok* which traced their origin to one ancestral father. Like the first two levels of political structures discussed above, *Efak* had *Ofong Efak*, that is, the head of the lineage with its common meeting place, *Obio Efak*, which served to emphasize the cohesion of the unit. The *Efak* was also an instrument of conflict resolution in cases between members of the lineage. Appeals which arose from unresolved matters at different *Ufok* were transferred to the *Efak*.

Members of the *Obio Efak* were heads of the *Ufok* and elders with *Ofong Efak* in the helm of affairs. "He presided over the lineage meetings especially for settling of inter family squabbles".<sup>23</sup> At this level, cases transferred to them from the *Ufok* were handled, besides they imposed fines on people who were found guilty of offences which ranged from drinks, goat, chicken, and plantain etc.

*Udung*, village was another political structure and comprised of a number of *Efak* that shared a common leadership. In each village there was a royal family from whose stock the village head usually emerged. Therefore, chieftaincy in pre-colonial era at Oron was not an all comers affair and was devoid of tussle. This is illustrated by the Oron tradition which holds that: "*Ofong osi ufok*" which means, chieftaincy is hereditary. Commenting on the qualities of the holder of village head, O.E, Uya emphasized that "The *Ofong* was thus expected to be a man of transparent honesty and integrity, in corruptible and above board in all respects"<sup>24</sup>. Hence, the village head was the custodian of his village and regarded as "*eti udung*" (the father of the village). Given the revered status of the village head, when any party in dispute disagreed with settlement at the *Efak* level, he/she had the right of appeal to the village head and the village head in-council heard such matters. An author stressed that "the most important source of inter village feuds was dispute over land boundaries"<sup>25</sup>.

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21. Iyanam "Traditional Rulership as Symbol of Oron Unity", 45.

22. E. A. Udo, *Who Are the Ibibio?* (Onitsha: Africana-Feb, 1983), 118.

23. Uya. *A History of Oron People*, 40-41.

The village council was made up of *Ifong Efak*, *Ubuhu Ufok* and *Ofong Udung* as the head. Besides, some reputable community leaders and elders were members of the village council. There were procedures for settlement of dispute reported to the council. Where it was land dispute for instance, either between families or individuals which the family or *Efak* could not settle. The village head, *Ofong Udung* would detail one of his council members who was an *Ekpe* initiate to place traditional in junction visibly in the disputed land. This, traditionally meant that both parties in dispute were restrained and must stay clear from the land until the dispute was settled. After that, a messenger was sent to inform the other party of the development concerning the land; a date would then be fixed for hearing of the case. On the scheduled date, both parties would be present, the village head would ask the complainant to repeat what he/she had earlier told the village head or the village head-in council.

When the complainant had finished with the presentation, the defendant would be asked to defend himself or herself. After hearing both sides, a time would be created for cross examination of the parties, both the accused and the complainants.

The council members also questioned both parties to ascertain the veracity of their claims. After that the village head would appoint some prominent elders known for their outspokenness and impartiality to go for investigation of the land in question “*use isong*”. During the time of *Use Isong*, (investigation) both parties would be present to show their boundaries<sup>26</sup>. On returning, they would inform the village head in council of their findings. The same representatives would enter into a committee, *Odu* that was consultation. When they returned, they would appoint one of them to deliver their verdict subject to ratification by the village head in-council who would pronounce the judgement. If such a land dispute was minor one, they could be settled by going back to the disputed land to redraw the boundaries. If a major case, the council could advise the complainant to administer oath or *Olukhu* to the accused person and where the latter took oath, the matter would be resolved.

It should be noted that in other types of conflict resolution, similar procedure would be taken by the village head in-council except land investigation, *use isong*, before the resolution of the dispute. Usually, both parties would be asked to present drinks, *mmi ubire ikpe*, that was drink for acceptance of the resolution taken.

*Afaha*, clan was the last and the highest indigenous political unit of organization and administration in the period under review. *Afaha* was and still a group of related villages, united to protect each other and traced their descent to common ancestor, the founder of the *Afaha*. The headship of *Afaha* was called *Ofong Afaha*. In the words of a reputable elder in Oron, Chief Iyanam U. Iyanam, “the *Ofong Afaha* was a very important personality in those days, usually the oldest and most enlightened”. The clan had vested right to decide on conflict referred to it including cases which *ifong udung*, “village heads” failed to settle. The clan council was composed of *ifong udung* of the various villages that made up the clan. The clan council also settled conflicts between villages either within the same clan or from other clans. Besides, the clan could entertain cases between clans. Such dispute could be on land or murder, largely the clan council resolved conflict which involved criminal issues.

At the clan council presided over by the *ofong Afaha* with *ifong udung* as members any dispute before the council would be investigated, the parties interrogated and the elders usually made use of proverbs to drive home their point. In the resolution of any conflict before the clan, emphasis was for the parties in dispute to live in peace, accept the terms of settlement in good faith. In some instances, *olukhu*, deity could be introduced and the parties swore in order to ascertain the person who was right or wrong. The decision at the clan council had element of finality as that was the final court of appeal in the traditional settling.

Besides, resolution of conflict through the mechanisms of the different political units of organization has analysed above, there were socio-cultural institutions and religious agencies that were employed traditionally in the resolution of conflict. These included *Ekpe*, *Iban Isong* and *Olukhu* deity and we shall turn our search light on these indigenous methods of conflict resolution also;

*Ekpe*. In the precolonial Oron society, *Ekpe* was a traditional institution of governance and administration. It performed various functions. Asuquo O. Anwana avers that “politically *Ekpe* represented the highest institution of government having with it the supreme power of life and death. It was the physical representation of the people’s civil government in traditional communities”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup>. Uya, *The History of Oron People*, 45

<sup>25</sup> Iyanam “Traditional Rulership as Symbol of Oron Unity”, 48.

<sup>26</sup>. Ibia “Traditional Methods of settling Disputes in Pre-colonial Africa: A Case Study of Oron people”, 45.

<sup>27</sup>. Asuquo Anwana, *Ekpe Imperium in South Eastern Nigeria, 1600-1900*. (Calabar: African Pentecostal Communications 2009), 137-140

*Ekpe* title holders were celebrated officers and astute administrators versed with the emergent quagmires and problems associated with governance. They adjudicated on cases. Therefore, the *Ekpe* title holders resolved conflict brought before them. Also, *Ekpe* intervened in conflict between communities either at the villages or clans as well as settled conflict over debt recovery.

When any conflict was reported to *Ofong Ekpe*, head of *Ekpe*, he would send a message through his messenger to the other party involved in the conflict. If the person received such message he would appear before the *Ekpe* council, *Obio Ekpe* on a date fixed for the matter. On the sitting of *Ekpe* members and chief at *Obio Ekpe*, presided by *Ofong Ekpe* to settle dispute the two parties or disputants would be requested to present some indigenous drink, *ufofo*. After that the complainant would ask to repeat his complainant.

Thereafter, the defendant would take his turn. After the disputant might have stated their cases, cross-examination would be done, witnesses, if any would be interrogated also. At the end, settlement would be declared and the terms of settlement must be respected. Indeed, it was an offence to violate or ignored the resolution of *Ekpe* on any matter. On this a source observed that, “dispute and hostility no matter the extent would end immediately *Ekpe* stepped in”.<sup>28</sup> It should be emphasized that *Ekpe* membership became an alluring attraction for early European traders before the establishment of British rule in Oron was because of the advantage of settling conflict over debt. On debt recovery through the mechanism of *Ekpe* O.E. Uya states that

Creditors would seek the aid of *Ekpe* to get their debt. They would take 4 brass rod to the *Ofong Ekpe* of their village and if the debtor did not pay his debt after receiving a message from *Ekpe*, would go to his compound and play there and collect sufficient property to liquidate the debt.<sup>29</sup>

*Iban Isong*. This was women guild. The women had an Association exclusively for the women folks known as *Iban Isong*. It protected the integrity of women, trained them in moral and domestic responsibilities as well as upheld the traditional norms and values of the society. Although in the precolonial era, Oron was male dominated society but women through the agency of *Iban Isong* exercised some influence and authority over certain matters “they regarded as exclusive to women”. Among other laudable functions, *Iban Isong* was also an indigenous mechanism of conflict resolution during the pre-colonial times. The Association played prominent role in mediation and adjudication of conflict which involved women. Such cases include marital conflict, theft, wife battery/assault of women and sexual violence against women. For instance, where a woman desecrated a fellow woman, the accused would be summoned before *Iban isong*. The matter would be adjudicated and the accused, if found guilty would be ordered to perform some “cleansing” traditionally, an act which was a prelude for amicable resolution of the dispute.

The power of *Iban Isong* in the settlement of conflict was not limited to cases between women but men who committed offence against any woman including his wife could be summon before the Association. Thus, an obscene language by a man against his wife was subjected to punishment by *Iban Isong*. With regard to this, Edet Akpan Ukpong’s comments on the Ibibioland are a fair representation of what happened in Oron society, he states that “the penalties could include severe beating, forcing the victim to look at the private part of women, house arrest, curses and derision songs, material and monetary fines and so on”<sup>30</sup> Therefore *iban isong* resolved conflict which involved both women and men, and the Association was highly respected in the traditional Setting.

**Socio-Religious Methods.** The socio-religious institutions such as *Olukhu*, deity, *Idiong* (divination) and *Efie* (ordeal) also served as indigenous methods of conflict resolution.

However, while *Idiong* and *Efie* were largely employed in conflict resolution as means to determined and discovered hidden facts or evidence which either of the disputants may have concealed, *Olukhu*, deity on the other hand played an elaborate role in conflict resolution as we shall analysed below. Before the advent of Christianity, the Oron people in their traditional setting believed in the potency and efficacy of *Olukhu*, deity. Therefore, besides the belief in *Abasi Odung Oyong* Supreme God regarded as the creator of the universe, they people also belief in *Olukhu*. Commenting on this N.O. Ita writes that:

<sup>28</sup>Uya A *History of Oron people*, 45.

<sup>29</sup>Uya, A *History of Oron people*, 45-46

<sup>30</sup>Akpan. “Conflict Resolution and Management in Ibibioland”, 207.

The *Olukhu* pantheon occupies a very important place in Oron traditional religion. They were very many so that every village has it *Olukhu* with its own name; its symbol, shrine and priest. For instance, there is *Otokpo Udesi, Abanga Nlak Umume, Isemin Ekim, Okpekim Odiko, Atiabong Ukuko* etc.<sup>31</sup>

These village *Olukhu* were used to detect crimes, settled disputes between individuals and families. Given the general belief in the potency, efficacy and impartialities of *Olukhu*, it became a mechanism for conflict resolution in some instances. First, where a person felt aggrieved by action of another, resort could be sought by consulting the priest of any particular *Olukhu*. Usually, the complainant would be required to offer some sacrifices, after which *Olukhu* will sooner or later attacked the wrong doer. Such attack could take the form of sickness or death of the wrong doer or a member of his family. The sickness or death may be repeated within the family until restitution had been made. Secondly, consultation of *Olukhu* could be done through the third party. At this instance, where a serious dispute especially over land between two people, families or communities and the arbitrators were unable to resolve the conflict peacefully, *olukhu* was generally resorted to as a means of resolving the conflict. In this second instance, a source states:

One of the contestants will be required to swear on an *olukhu* that the land or whatever is in dispute belong to him and that if he swear falsely, the *olukhu* should attack him and his family. Once he does that, he will be adjudged the owner of the land.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, in the precolonial times, the Oron people believed that conflict or dispute was not finally resolved in some complex cases if the parties to such conflict did not swear by *olukhu*. It should be emphasized that while *olukhu* was involved more in the aspect of resolving conflicts, *Efie* (ordeal) and *idiong* (divination) are comparable to the western world system of investigation used in the ascertainment of the truth, facts and build confidence, and thereby the avoidance of miscarriage of justice in dispute resolution.

### Conclusion

The Oron Society during the pre-colonial era valued and cherished peaceful, cordial and cohesive existence as these were the harbinger of unity and development. Although, there were different types of conflict which occurred as we have analyzed in this paper, concerted efforts were made not to allow these conflicts to remain unresolved or degenerate into catastrophically dimensions and engulf the society at large. In resolving the conflict at different levels, various indigenous methods rooted in their traditional institutions, socio-political organization and administration headed by various traditional rulers and elders were employed. Besides, their socio-cultural and religious institutions also played vital roles in conflict resolution. These indigenous methods focused generally on mediation, reconciliation and integration were very potent and effective mechanisms of conflict resolution.

Given, the common believed by the people in communal values, respect for the chief, elders and community leaders engaged in conflict resolution processes, the lingering of resentment and acrimony were reduced. The restoration of relationship and integration emphasized as part of terms of settlement of conflict, received acceptance of the disputants. The indigenous methods of conflict resolution in Oron precolonial society have discussed in this paper, it should be mentioned were less costly, swift and flexible. Indeed, a better option to modern day system of litigation with its adversarial nature among other shortcomings as method of conflict resolution in court.

Therefore, the indigenous methods of conflict resolution are still, in our considered view, viable and recommended mechanisms in resolving conflict among the Oron people as it were in their traditional setting.

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<sup>31</sup> Ita, "Religion and the Development of the Oron Nation", 89-99.

<sup>32</sup> Ita, "Religion and the Development of the Oron Nation", 99.

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