

Cameroon: Traditional and Formal Perspectives of Conflict Resolution in the Balikumbat and Ndop Subdivisions

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Abstract: This paper examines traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon. Numerous historical, political, economic, and social differences ignited bloody conflicts between Balikumbat and neighboring ethnic groups, with adverse effects on the population. This explains why the use of both traditional and modern mechanisms in resolving these conflicts became imperative, as all available avenues had to be explored. At different periods and before various formal and traditional actors and institutions, diverse mechanisms were employed to resolve inter-village differences, each revealing strengths and weaknesses that had a significant impact on the processes and outcomes. Using a qualitative case study research design, the study selected a sample of 25 people who had been affected by the conflicts or had actively or passively participated in their resolution. Data were collected with the aid of interview guides. Our findings revealed that, while formal approaches, by virtue of their punitive nature, imposed solutions without promoting reconciliation, restorative traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, which were deeply embedded in the customs and ways of life of the people, continued to demonstrate their capacity to offer sustainable solutions to violent disagreements. This research therefore underscores the need to integrate modern and traditional approaches to conflict resolution in a functional juxtaposition that will enrich the actors, institutions, and processes involved and help achieve sustainable outcomes.

Keywords: Traditional, formal, perspectives, conflict, conflict resolution, integrating.

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Conflict Studies Quarterly
Issue 56, July 2026, pp. 85–103

DOI: 10.24193/csq.56.5
Published First Online: July 03, 2026

Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable component of human interaction (Akhogbai, 2026). Two people, ethnic groups, or countries with divergent political, economic, and social views cannot be expected to agree on everything at all times. This can be explained by the fact that different individuals, groups, and countries work tirelessly to meet their needs. In doing so, they engage in struggles over limited resources and opportunities, thereby creating fertile ground for conflict (Aboh et al., 2023). However, in order to succeed in pursuing these needs, appropriate mechanisms for addressing conflicts must be adopted and effectively employed. Throughout history, societies have developed diverse mechanisms to address grievances and restore social equilibrium. The chiefdoms of the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions are endowed with a multitude of institutions that embody longstanding traditions of conflict resolution. The uniqueness of these institutions, by virtue of their reliance on local actors and their capacity to produce restorative outcomes, collectively enables them to resist or, at times, even subvert the authority of the state (Mutisi, 2012). However, despite being deeply rooted in the culture and history of the people, these institutions continue to be significantly influenced by the state, NGOs, and other external organizations. The activities of the state, NGOs, private organizations, and traditional institutions have also led to the adoption of diverse methods for resolving conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions.

Objectives of the Study

- a. To critically examine and compare the structural, procedural, and philosophical differences between indigenous traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and formal dispute resolution systems.
- b. To evaluate and compare the relative effectiveness of traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms by identifying their respective strengths and weaknesses in achieving sustainable peace in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions.
- c. To examine how indigenous consensus-building mechanisms and state-sponsored judicial frameworks can be integrated with the objective of developing a scalable, hybrid model of conflict resolution that enhances community cohesion and local governance in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon.

Significance of the Study

The Balikumbat subdivision, located in Cameroon's North West Region, has experienced a prolonged, decades-long rivalry rooted in historical, economic, and political differences. These tensions have had adverse effects on the population, including the loss of life, the displacement of people, and the destruction of property. Research on traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms is therefore crucial to breaking this cycle of violence.

Entrenched interethnic conflicts have far-reaching implications for development, including a significant decline in agricultural output as conflicts prevent the use of land in disputed areas within the Balikumbat subdivision. Implementing effective traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms could substantially restore agricultural productivity and promote economic stability.

Conventional, state-sponsored legal systems and modern litigation are often adversarial, costly, and sometimes leave lingering bitterness. This research demonstrates how the formal justice system alone has historically failed to provide lasting resolutions to indigenous land tenure disputes and political conflicts. It therefore evaluates the effectiveness of indigenous institutions, such as mediation by community elders, secret societies, and councils of elders. The study highlights how these approaches prioritize restorative justice, community harmony, and forgiveness over punitive sanctions.

Rather than treating traditional and modern systems as mutually exclusive, this research provides a valuable blueprint for integrating indigenous cultural heritage with formal democratic governance. It helps policymakers understand how these approaches can be combined to resolve conflicts more effectively while addressing contemporary challenges, such as human rights and gender inclusion.

Literature Review

Several studies have explored the significance of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in various African societies. Endogenous dispute resolution systems, such as village elders, the mediation of conflicts by traditional rulers, and traditional court systems, continue to demonstrate their relevance alongside formal institutions managed by the state. However, the significant challenges faced by these traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in the modern state cannot be overlooked (Akhogbai, 2026).

Adopting a similar position, ACCORD (2019) posits that prior to colonization and the slave trade, institutional mechanisms and cultural practices existed in Africa that upheld the values of peace, tolerance, solidarity, and reciprocal respect. Consequently, family alliances among different families ensured that decisions aimed at resolving conflicts were respected.

In line with ACCORD, Fidelis et al. (2023) assert that the changes brought about by Westernization and globalization have come close to eroding African cultures, leaving behind foreign cultural influences in the domain of conflict resolution that often contradict the ethical and cultural values unique to Africa. Using the case of Nigeria, the authors confirm the existence of valuable traditions that are intertwined with the people's belief in the capacity of gods of justice to intervene and guarantee justice and moral uprightness.

Complementing this view, Olaniran and Arigu (2013) examine the invaluable contributions of Nigerian traditional rulers to pre-colonial Nigerian societies and show how the limited participation of these traditional rulers in present-day governance helps explain the

persistence of social conflicts in contemporary socioeconomic and political life. They advocate for the synchronization of traditional norms and values with modern approaches to governance, arguing that such an approach would go a long way toward reducing, if not completely eliminating, many of the problems plaguing the modern state, particularly with regard to access to justice and conflict resolution.

This view is supported by Ben-Mensah (2004), who examines the different methods used in conflict resolution in pre-colonial Africa and compares them with contemporary approaches on the continent. He reiterates that there is an apparent dichotomy, or “disconnect”, between modern and traditional conflict resolution perspectives and practices. Furthermore, he argues that the limited success of attempts to resolve conflicts at the national level has contributed to the widespread involvement of regional organizations, private military companies, NGOs, and the United Nations, albeit with limited success. He then posits that the prospects for the peaceful resolution of Africa’s conflicts can be significantly improved if the continent’s indigenous principles, skills, and methods of conflict resolution are better understood and effectively integrated with those of the modern state.

According to Jeong (2010), there are different ways of addressing the range of problems arising from competitive relationships within and between societies. The author argues that the principal mission of conflict resolution is to prevent the re-emergence of harmful conflict by fundamentally transforming hostile dynamics, since win-win solutions often result from addressing structural inequalities and unjust socioeconomic systems, which constitute the primary sources of friction. He further maintains that force is not the best method of conflict resolution because it often leaves the parties dissatisfied.

Ramsbotham, Miall, and Woodhouse (2011) pay particular attention to conflict and conflict resolution. Emphasizing the importance of reconciliation, they explain how conflicts emerge and discuss the various mechanisms established for their resolution. According to these authors, the role of a third party is to facilitate the transition from hostile and unstable interactions to nonviolent and adaptable ones. This is only possible when parties to a conflict acknowledge their responsibilities, thereby facilitating the search for solutions to their differences.

Consistent with previous findings, Bukari (2013) reveals how the creation and use of committees of inquiry, law courts, the police, NGOs, decrees, and peace enforcement measures, mainly by the government, have led to the application of methods such as mediation, reconciliation, peacekeeping, and arbitration in the resolution of conflicts in the Bawku area of Ghana. He argues that these methods have not been particularly successful, as they have only managed conflicts and prevented them from escalating to uncontrollable levels, while failing to provide lasting solutions.

Research Methodology

Research design

The qualitative case study research design enabled the researcher to gather information on traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon. Multiple data sources, such as interviews, archival documents, observations, and secondary sources, facilitated the collection of rich data and informed perspectives on the different approaches to handling violent disagreements in the area. The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of the philosophies underlying traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon and how these have continued to shape inter-village relations and social interaction.

Sources

Relevant information on traditional and formal approaches to conflict resolution was obtained through interviews, observations, archival documents, and the analysis of multiple published works. One-on-one interviews were conducted with traditional authorities such as chairpersons of traditional councils, members of secret societies, village elders, and members of village development associations in the chiefdoms of Balikumbat, Bafanji, and Bambalang. Members of cultural and development associations, as well as staff of the Divisional Delegation of Social Affairs (DDSA) for the Ngoketunjia Division, were also sampled, and relevant data were obtained.

Direct and indirect observations also provided valuable data for this study. During fieldwork in the study area, the researcher had the opportunity to observe how people in the conflict-affected communities, separated by many years of armed conflict, interacted with one another. These observations enabled the researcher to evaluate the avoidance-based conflict management strategy that had come to characterize the relationship between Balikumbat and neighboring ethnic groups.

Archival information was obtained from the National Archives in Buea and the Regional Archives in Bamenda, located in the Southwest and Northwest regions of Cameroon, respectively. Documents such as police reports, court rulings, records of official meetings, and formal complaints related to various land conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions provided primary data for this study.

Secondary sources, such as published journal articles on conflict and conflict resolution mechanisms, provided valuable insights that facilitated a comprehensive analysis of traditional and formal dispute resolution strategies in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon. Doctoral and master's theses focusing on the study area also provided useful data for this research.

Sampling

Using the non-probability sampling technique, 25 respondents were purposively selected because of their ranks and roles in the resolution of conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions. Specific interview guides with unstructured, semi-structured, and open-ended questions were prepared in advance, based on the uniqueness of each of the villages visited to gather data for the paper. In the Balikumbat and Bafanji chiefdoms, group interviews with respondents allowed the researcher to understand group dynamics and perceptions about traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms in the subdivisions under study. The sampling of staff from the divisional offices of Plan International Cameroon and the DDSA Ngoketunjia, using specific interview guides, enabled the researcher to obtain vital information on modern conflict resolution mechanisms.

Data obtained from the various villages were compared to identify points of convergence and divergence and to provide an inclusive analysis of conflict resolution mechanisms in the area. Information from interviews was also compared with archival data to ensure accuracy and objectivity.

Discussions of Findings and Results

A comparative analysis of traditional versus formal paradigms in conflict resolution

The differences between traditional and modern methods of conflict resolution lie at the level of the institutions and actors. It is for this reason that Ben-Mensah (2004) is of the opinion that there is an apparent gap or “divide” between formal and homegrown conflict resolution philosophies and practices. However, the cultural context must be taken into consideration for an effective use of either traditional or modern methods in the resolution of conflicts.

Traditional Versus Modern Actors

Indigenous resolution mechanisms use local actors in finding solutions to conflicts. At the forefront of the process are community leaders such as native chiefs, kings, priests, healers, elders and community dignitaries and often with vested authority to perform rituals in the presence of the whole community (Bukari, 2013). These local actors generally address conflicts using local beliefs, values, attitudes as well as local contexts, procedures and practices (Bukari, 2013), which are generally accepted by the community or communities. As such, they are better placed to handle the problems of the people. According to the Economic Commission for Africa (2007),

Unlike government-appointed administrators, lower-level chiefs and village leaders live in conditions largely similar to those of their communities. They share common interest and think like the people. As a result, they are better equipped to represent

the interests of their communities than are government-appointed administrators who are accountable only to the political elite (p. 23).

These traditional authorities often acted as mediators and negotiators, thereby facilitating the process of conflict resolution (Boege, 2011). For instance, most traditional authorities in Balikumbat and neighboring villages were born and raised in their village settings and consequently possess a deep knowledge of the customs and traditions of the people (personal communication, August 18, 2014). Such traditional elders therefore have extensive experience and strong skills in conflict regulation and in interpreting signs of reconciliation (Bukari, 2013). In the Balikumbat subdivision, these authorities included fons, members of traditional councils and regulatory societies, village kingmakers, as well as quarter heads.

In effect, whenever there is a point of discord, the chief invites village elders to settle the thorny issue. This often yields positive results because discussions are frank and open, and anyone found guilty is asked to pay a token fine as a symbol of admission of wrongdoing (Ngwane, 1996). Local mediation and negotiation are equally undertaken by traditional actors in the resolution of conflicts. For example, in efforts to resolve the Balikumbat–Bafanji conflict and to ensure that lasting peace was restored between the two villages, the chairman of the Balikumbat Traditional Council and his Bafanji counterpart worked relentlessly to find solutions to the problems that were creating hostilities between their chiefdoms. In this regard, the Balikumbat Traditional Council chairman personally met his counterpart in Bafanji on two separate occasions, during which they discussed how to resolve conflicts between their villages (personal communication, August 13, 2014). The Fon of Bagam, as well as the North West Fons Association (NOWEFA), also acted as mediators in conflicts between Balikumbat and neighboring chiefdoms.

In contrast to these traditional actors, modern or Westphalian methods of conflict resolution involve diverse actors such as administrative officials, workers within international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and law enforcement officers who know very little about the beliefs and culture of the people. Efforts by these modern actors, especially INGOs, do not often lead to genuine conflict resolution at the local level. This failure can be explained by the fact that most of these INGOs do not understand the local realities of these conflicts and are therefore not in a position to propose effective solutions for their resolution (Bukari, 2013).

In fact, Land Ordinances No. 74-1, 74-2, and 74-3 of 6 July 1974, by which Cameroonian law stripped the customary legal system of any role in the legal control and administration of land, paved the way for the adoption of the 1976 ordinance (Sobseh, 2011). Following this ordinance, a Land Consultative Board was established with competence to handle land-related disputes in each division or subdivision. This board was dominated by administrative authorities, including the Divisional Officer (DO) as Chair (Ministry of Territorial Administration), the Divisional Chief of Land Affairs as Secretary (Ministry of State Property, Lands and Surveys), and the Divisional Chief of Surveys as a member

(Ministry of State Property, Lands and Surveys). The village traditional chief and two councilors were only allowed to serve as members of the board, with limited ability to influence decisions (Official Gazette, 1996).

It is important to note that these administrative authorities, appointed to serve in areas where they knew very little or nothing about the customs and traditions of the people, faced significant challenges in the resolution of local conflicts. As a result, many failed to permanently demarcate boundary areas, which were a major source of tension, and this continued to fuel hostilities between Balikumbat and neighboring ethnic groups in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions.

Traditional versus modern institutions

Religious brotherhoods, ethno-linguistic groups, and local institutions remain significant in the conflict resolution process in Africa (Sobseh, 2011). These African traditional institutions have continued to play a pivotal role in conflict resolution despite their increasing domination and manipulation by governments. In the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon, traditional institutions involved in conflict resolution are varied. Prominent among them are the traditional council of elders, the Fon (traditional head of the village), Fon associations, secret societies, noble societies, and women's development and cultural organizations. Decisions taken by these institutions enjoy a high degree of acceptance and legitimacy among the people, as judgments are often based on local realities.

In the villages of Balikumbat, Bafanji, and Bambalang, for instance, the traditional council of elders plays a preponderant role in the day-to-day administration of the villages. They sometimes act as customary courts, resolving cases brought before them for judgment. This does not end at this level, as representatives from these institutions also negotiate and mediate conflicts on behalf of the village (personal communication, December 28, 2014).

This stands in contrast to the use of the court system and foreign NGOs in conflict resolution. The government, courts of law, and NGOs have become actively involved in seeking solutions to violent disagreements. The government, for example, through the enactment of ordinances, the creation of land boundary tribunals, and the establishment of committees of inquiry, has been at the forefront of addressing violent disputes in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions (National Archives Buea, 1971).

However, general skepticism toward these institutions and their decisions, which are often rejected by conflicting parties, has frequently led to further problems, culminating in violent confrontations. These shortcomings increasingly highlight the importance of traditional methods of conflict resolution today. The Gacaca courts set up to promote accountability in Rwanda must be emulated by African states and chiefdoms. These courts tried more than a million cases of genocide and crimes against humanity committed between 1990 and 1994. The positive assessment of this mechanism led to the institutionalization of traditional methods of conflict resolution within the Rwandan legal system (Mutisi, 2012).

Strengths and weaknesses of traditional methods

Strengths

The relevance of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution is vividly captured by a polar view, which affirms that traditional institutions are indispensable for political transformation in Africa since the continent's history, culture, political, and governance systems are embedded in them (Economic Commission for Africa, 2007). Thus, while the government often neglects traditional efforts at conflict resolution between Balikumbat and its neighbors, the people, on the other hand, still hold great respect for their traditional institutions and leaders and sometimes prefer to align with decisions taken by the latter in efforts to resolve conflicts.

Traditional methods open up avenues for participation and inclusion (Boege, 2011). Land in the chiefdoms of the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions is considered communal property and therefore must be protected by all. As such, when conflicts broke out between Balikumbat and its neighbors over land, everyone participated in the violent confrontations that ensued. Even women, to a limited extent, carried out war activities that had traditionally been attributed to men (Ngufor, 2007). As a result, efforts were made from various angles and by different members of the community to put an end to these conflicts. This collective search for solutions can be contrasted with most modern methods, which rely on coercive means to arrive at decisions that are often rejected by parties in conflict.

The application of traditional methods of conflict resolution does not require large expenditures and can lead to the expedient resolution of conflicts. For example, the Gacaca courts in Rwanda tried more than 1.3 million cases of genocide and crimes against humanity since 2001. The same number of cases would have taken Rwandan modern courts more than three decades (Mutisi, 2012). Similarly, modern methods of resolving conflicts between Balikumbat and neighboring chiefdoms have achieved very limited success.

Endogenous conflict resolution methods allow for the resolution of conflicts while taking into consideration local beliefs, values, and attitudes, as well as local procedures, actors, and practices (Bukari, 2013). This helps in resolving conflict while keeping intact African religious customs and traditions. These traditional beliefs and practices, which sometimes involve oaths, rituals, and libations, have generally earned the respect of the people who identify with them. As such, conflicting parties are more likely to accept the outcomes of negotiations, in contrast to modern methods and court systems, whose decisions are often rejected by disputing parties, especially in land conflicts. For instance, the people of Balikumbat have on many occasions flouted government and court decisions or complied with them more out of fear than genuine acceptance.

Traditional methods of conflict resolution are indispensable in areas where the presence of the state is relatively weak or completely absent. This often leads to large-scale conflicts, as violent groups take advantage of fragile situations (Boege, 2011). In the absence of

state-based institutions and mechanisms for the control of violence and regulation of conflicts, people resort to non-state customary ways of addressing them (Boege, 2011). As such, the administration wasted considerable time after the outbreak of conflicts between Balikumbat and neighboring ethnic groups, as troops had to be deployed from Bamenda (the regional capital of the North West region, where the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions are located), situated about 60 kilometers away.

However, by the time troops arrived, the situation had already reached uncontrollable levels, and the resulting damages increased hostility and reduced the chances of effective resolution. Under these conditions, many were encouraged to resort to traditional methods, which could bring a swift end to conflicts in the area.

Weaknesses

Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms enjoy little or no legal recognition. Consequently, decisions taken by traditional authorities in this respect are not always binding, except in situations where all parties to the conflict owe allegiance to a common god or ancestor. In recent times, many people involved in conflicts prefer to flout decisions taken by traditional authorities and take their cases to state-run judicial systems, especially in instances where these decisions are not in their favor. A glaring example is the reconciliatory meeting organized by NOWEFA after the 1995 Balikumbat–Bafanji conflict. The Fon of Bafanji neglected and boycotted the meeting and preferred to sue the Fon of Balikumbat at the Bamenda High Court (Deyeb, 2014). Had NOWEFA been recognized by law as a legal judicial organ for conflict resolution, and had its summons and decisions been binding, the Fon of Bafanji would have respected the association's call, and this might have contributed to preventing the outbreak of the 1998 Balikumbat–Bafanji violence (personal communication, December 17, 2014).

Secondly, the manipulation of traditional systems by government and politicians has equally undermined the role these traditional institutions can play in conflict resolution. The importance and applicability of endogenous conflict resolution mechanisms have been significantly weakened by political interference, corruption, and misuse of traditional structures, especially traditional chieftaincy, which has progressively compromised legitimacy in the resolution of land conflicts (Sobseh, 2011).

For instance, after the creation of NOWEFA in 1993, which brought together most of the Fons of the North-West region of Cameroon, the Fon of Balikumbat, with the alleged complicity of Prime Minister Achidi Achu, created the North West Fons Conference (NOWEFCO) as an alternative to NOWEFA. The new association sought to unite Fons who were members of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) (Fokwang, 2009). This created division among traditional rulers, thereby diminishing the impact such an organization would have had in conflict resolution in the North-West region of Cameroon (personal communication, August 14, 2014).

Another weakness of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms is the inability of traditional actors such as Fons, village mediators, elders, community leaders, clan leaders, and local religious figures to enforce decisions aimed at resolving conflicts (Fokwang, 2009). Unlike administrative officials such as governors, DOs, and SDOs, who can rely on armed forces to compel compliance, traditional authorities and associations like NOWEFA are often perceived as lacking the means to implement their decisions. This is because they do not have the necessary financial and human resources to ensure enforcement.

It is for this reason that one highly skeptical strand contends that “Chieftaincy is anachronistic, a hindrance to development and transformation of the continent, undemocratic, divisive, and costly” (Economic Commission for Africa, 2007, p. 11). As such, the peace pact signed following the Balikumbat–Bafanji conflict of 1995 contained no provisions obliging leaders of the different chiefdoms in the region to refrain from using violence as a means of resolving conflicts. The only proposal — that a “curse involving point” be included in land conflict resolution to bind the Fons to the agreement — was quickly rejected by the Fons of Mankon and Bali (Sobseh, 2011). This served as clear evidence that, under indigenous approaches to conflict resolution, parties have the power to reject any settlement with which they are not satisfied (Boege, 2011). Consequently, advice is accepted only when both parties consent.

Again, women and youths are given only subsidiary roles in indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms. Women are generally subordinate to men in much of Africa, especially in systems that practice patrilineal succession. Here, opportunities for women to participate in decision-making are limited, although there are considerable differences between communities (Economic Commission for Africa, 2007). In most of these African societies, elders are considered wise due to their age and are accorded respect and responsibility for maintaining peace within the community.

These traditional African societies and traditions often reflect male dominance, and a woman’s place is considered to be in the kitchen and in ensuring family continuity through reproduction. In this regard, during formal peace negotiations following the Balikumbat–Bafanji conflict, women played marginal roles such as cooking and dancing to entertain negotiators (Ngufor, 2014). In fact, it is commonly observed that in most fondoms of the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions, women are excluded from most socio-political decision-making traditional institutions.

Youth, who make up the majority of the population in the different chiefdoms of the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions, are often relegated to the background on the grounds that they are too young to understand important societal issues, including conflicts. This is ironic, considering that many of these youths in rural settings are involved in agriculture and are therefore directly affected by land-related issues. This neglect of youth continues to be a major setback for indigenous methods of conflict resolution.

In addition, the efficacy of traditional methods is mostly felt in intra-chiefdom conflicts, as opposed to the difficulties encountered when applying the same methods in

inter-chiefdom conflicts (Sobseh, 2011). This is especially true when the conflicting villages have different cultures, traditions, and values. In such situations, methods such as sacrifices, rituals, and libations are set aside, and other methods, which may be less effective, are prioritized. For instance, after the 1995 Balikumbat-Bafanji conflict and during efforts to resolve it, the Fon of Bafanji refused to swear an oath in Bamunka to determine who had caused the conflict (personal communication, August 11, 2014). This was because he did not feel any obligation toward the gods to whom the oath would have been sworn. Had it been an internal conflict, the villager(s) would have been obliged to take the oath to resolve the matter. The limitations of traditional actors and institutions of conflict resolution are captured in the following assertion by the Economic Commission for Africa (2007):

Many of Africa's nationalist, first-generation leaders such as Houphouet-Boigny, Sekou Toure, Leopold Senghor, and Kwame Nkrumah, saw Chiefs as functionaries of the colonial State and Chieftaincy as an anachronistic vestige of the old Africa that had no place in the postcolonial political landscape. African nationalist leaders, therefore, often pursued policies to Africanize the bureaucracy without indigenizing the institutions of governance (p. 8).

Another weakness of traditional approaches to conflict resolution is their variation from place to place. There is no "one size fits all" approach when it comes to traditional methods of conflict resolution. In fact, every African society or community with a specific history, culture, and customs possesses its own methods of conflict resolution (Boege, 2011). These traditional approaches function in relation to the specific context of the people concerned. This marks an important difference between traditional and Western approaches, the latter aiming at universal application (Boege, 2011).

Consequently, it becomes difficult to apply traditional approaches in situations where the two conflicting parties possess different cultural values and beliefs, since what is considered taboo in the traditions of one village may be acceptable in another. To make matters worse, most African societies have forgotten aspects of their cultures, values, and ethics (Bime, 2012). In fact, African forefathers, for various reasons, left behind elements of their culture, including art, music, dance, sports, religion (Bime, 2012), and conflict resolution. These shortcomings can be addressed if, and only if, there is some form of codification of African customs and traditions, along with the general recognition of certain practices by different African communities on the continent, especially those that are constantly affected by conflicts.

Strengths and weaknesses of modern conflict resolution mechanisms

Strengths

Modern methods of conflict resolution, with their multiplicity of actors, provide opportunities for third-party intervention. The third party may not always have a direct interest in the conflict, thus paving the way for a transparent and trustworthy conflict

resolution process. This is contrary to traditional methods, where the main actors — who are most often traditional authorities — believe they are right and are not always ready for compromise. This partly explains why Plan International Cameroon was the first NGO to bring the people of Balikumbat and Bambalang to the negotiation table after the violent confrontations in 2011 (DDSA, 2011).

Modern actors and institutions of conflict resolution, such as administrative authorities and state-run judicial systems, enjoy legal recognition and are not only able to carry out their activities in full legality but are also capable of taking decisions that are binding on conflicting parties. These modern actors and institutions often represent the state, which is a supreme and autonomous structure insofar as it makes rules and laws that all actors operating within its territory are required to obey. The decisions taken to resolve conflicts are considered law, and any violation of such decisions is punishable. Thus, any decision taken — whether it suits the whims and caprices of the disputing parties or not — is often respected, albeit more out of fear than compromise.

Again, state-run judicial systems, the government, and NGOs often possess the necessary resources to ensure effective conflict resolution. These institutions often have state resources at their disposal and can use them to support conflict resolution processes. In effect, the continuous relegation of traditional actors and institutions to the background has greatly undermined their role. This has pushed some traditional rulers into other income-generating activities that neither suit their status as traditional authorities nor please the indigenous people who hold them in high esteem. As such, people have begun to question the credibility of these authorities in effectively resolving their problems. This explains why NGOs such as Plan Cameroon, thanks to their goodwill gestures in the form of humanitarian aid, were able to win the trust of the villages of Balikumbat and Bambalang and bring them together to discuss and resolve their differences (personal communication, August 14, 2014).

Thirdly, modern methods of conflict resolution are generally recognized and used by the different institutions involved in conflict resolution. Methods such as mediation, negotiation, moderation, adjudication, arbitration, and conciliation are applied, and specific outcomes are expected. This is contrary to traditional methods, wherein mechanisms differ from one ethnic group to another. Thus, while chiefdoms with strong attachments to their customs and traditions might have the strong conviction that oath-taking, rituals, and libations may determine the culprit in a conflict and lead to its resolution, other chiefdoms with characteristics of Western culture and beliefs may not think in the same direction. For instance, while the Fon of Balikumbat called for the swearing of an oath to determine who started the Balikumbat-Bafanji conflict of 1995, the Fon of Bafanji rejected the idea and preferred to take the case to a modern court of law (personal communication, August 11, 2014).

Gaps in Modern Resolution Mechanisms

Western methods have not been able to effectively address all cases of conflict in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon. Following the outbreak of conflicts in this area, representatives of the government and other conflict resolution experts quickly intervened with alien and often tardy solutions, which sidelined local realities and indigenous conflict management mechanisms. Decisions taken by administrative authorities are often marred by corruption, as they sometimes ensure that conflicts are resolved in favor of a particular party for personal gain or use the resolution process as a means of taking revenge for presumed damages inflicted on them. For example, the Acholi and neighboring populations of Uganda, who had suffered civilian atrocities at the hands of the Lord's Resistance Army, challenged the decision of Yoweri Museveni, who took the issue to the International Criminal Court in 2003. They preferred Mato Oput, a traditional Acholi voluntary peace and justice process involving recognition of wrongdoing, compensation, mediation, restoration, and trust-building (Wasonga, 2009).

Similarly, in the Balikumbat-Bafanji conflict, and following the judgment of the Buea Federal Court, which had ruled in favor of Bafanji in 1971, the Balikumbat people claimed that their land had been unjustly taken away from them by the Prime Minister of West Cameroon, Hon. Muna, because the Balikumbat people had supported Bali Nyonga in their land dispute against Widikum in 1952 (the place of origin of Hon. Muna) (Simo, 2011). This frustration was further exacerbated when an appeal by the Balikumbat people before the Supreme Court was rejected. This left many Balikumbat diehards disgruntled (Ngwochu, 2005). The resulting grievances were a determining factor in the outbreak of the 1998 conflict between the two villages.

Secondly, modern methods sometimes run contrary to cultural values and priorities in Africa. These methods, which were adopted by African states at independence, were based on alien systems and often failed to take into consideration the milieu and cultural context of conflicts (Bukari, 2013). Consequently, they are often perceived by most indigenous people with suspicion, fear, and distrust. Decisions taken are therefore disregarded, as people see no reason why they should accept decisions from institutions that contradict values with which they have identified for a very long time (personal communication, August 12, 2014). This confirms the fact that "when policy neglects history, culture and social context, huge amounts of effort and resources can be wasted on poorly conceived initiatives" (Economic Commission for Africa, 2007, p. 11).

Inadequate resources and capacity are also major impediments to the use of modern methods in conflict resolution. Unlike traditional methods, which do not require many resources since negotiations are often conducted at the village level and involve local actors, the procedures used by modern conflict resolution mechanisms are often lengthy and expensive. For instance, the post-independence conflict in Congo between the governments of President Kasavubu and Prime Minister Lumumba on the one hand, and other politicians such as Moïse Tshombe from the mineral-rich province of Katanga on the

other, led to the creation of a United Nations force by Hammarskjöld. This intervention was enormously expensive and nearly brought the UN to bankruptcy (Peacock, 1982).

Such exorbitant financial requirements make the resolution process difficult, especially due to the fact that parties are sometimes required to pay large sums of money to support the progression of cases. This was the case with Balikumbat and Bafanji, who were instructed by the land boundary tribunal to pay the sum of 138,000 FCFA each to facilitate investigations into the land boundary disputes between the two villages. The Bafanji people complied immediately, but their Balikumbat counterparts failed to pay the said sum on time. Even after the case had been resolved by the land boundary tribunal in favor of Bafanji, the Balikumbat people could not accept this loss, as they demanded a refund during the deliberations of the Balikumbat-Bafanji land conflict at the Buea Federal Court of Appeal (National Archives Buea, 1970).

Integrating Traditional and Modern Methods of Conflict Resolution

With the advent of colonialism, African institutions of governance were radically changed, with the subsequent fundamental restructuring of African political entities and socioeconomic systems (Zartman, 2000). As such, African traditional conflict resolution methods have continued to face significant challenges in the face of new realities. This has led many to believe that the prospects for a peaceful resolution of Africa's conflicts can be improved considerably if the indigenous principles, skills, and methods of conflict resolution on the continent are understood and harmonized with those of the modern nation-state (Ben-Mensah, 2004). It is within this context that effective collaboration between traditional institutions and the modern state becomes not only observable but also imperative.

Such moves toward integrating traditional and modern institutions have already gained ground in countries like Rwanda, whose government passed Organic Law No. 31/2006, which recognizes the role of Abunzi, or local mediators, in the resolution of disputes and crimes (Mutisi, 2012). In the same way, traditional authorities and associations have sometimes worked hand in hand with the state and NGOs in the resolution of conflicts between Balikumbat and neighboring chiefdoms.

The composition of the actors who made the very first real attempt at the resolution of the Balikumbat-Bafanji conflict reflected a hybrid of traditional and modern actors (personal communication, August 18, 2014). In effect, on the instructions of the Prime Minister of West Cameroon, the Fons of Bambalang, Baba I, Babungo, Bamali, Balikumbat, and Bafanji, Hon. Mukong, and the District Officer of Ndop decided to look into the dispute. These authorities accordingly met on 27 February 1967 near the Balikumbat new market and set up a committee to examine the matter (National Archives Buea, 1969).

In fact, the political will expressed by the Cameroonian government in involving traditional actors more and more in the resolution of inter-chiefdom conflicts cannot be

overemphasized. The 1972 ordinance on handling conflicts related to land tenure is a clear example. The hybrid consultative board it created, composed of both administrative and traditional authorities, led to the adoption of a more holistic and comprehensive approach to resolving land-related disputes (Deyeb, 2014).

Such a hybrid composition often allowed conflicts to be resolved while taking into account local specificities, while at the same time affirming the authority of the state. This demonstrates that the state has come to acknowledge the indispensable role that traditional actors and institutions continue to play in the resolution of conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon, where people remain strongly attached to their culture, customs, and traditions.

NGOs have also increasingly come to recognize indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution and now consider them indispensable partners in resolving conflicts. These NGOs, which did not always use methods aligned with those of most indigenous people in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions, found it increasingly difficult to effectively resolve inter-village disputes (personal communication, August 11, 2014). This is probably because these methods had been tested in other continents and proven successful. However, Africa has its own specificities and history, and any method intended to bring a definitive end to violent disagreements must take the African context into account (Bukari, 2013).

For instance, in the resolution of conflicts between Balikumbat and Bambalang, Plan International Cameroon, in collaboration with the Divisional Delegation for Social Affairs (DDSA) for the Ngoketunjia Division, facilitated negotiations between the two villages. This was done in line with the political configuration of the concerned villages, which recognizes the important role institutions such as the village traditional council play in pacifying affected populations after conflicts. The chairpersons of these traditional councils were therefore granted the opportunity to present their respective sides of the story, with the goal of finding mutually acceptable solutions.

However, much still needs to be done toward integrating traditional and modern methods of conflict resolution. This is because, even though the state has continued to recognize the indispensable role of traditional authorities in conflict resolution, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms still face serious problems of legal and political neglect. Hence, Fons' associations, which would have been very instrumental in resolving conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions if given legal prerogatives in this domain, have been relegated to the background and placed below modern courts of justice, which have proven to be ineffective in resolving culturally sensitive inter-chiefdom conflicts in the area.

Conclusion

Various traditional and modern methods were used in the resolution of conflicts that plagued Balikumbat and neighboring chiefdoms in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon. The differences in these mechanisms at the level of actors, institutions,

and outcomes generally determined their degree of effectiveness. This is because, while traditional methods are generally embedded in the customary practices of the parties in conflict, their relevance within the modern state and its governance system is in steady decline.

Conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions, which often began as simple misunderstandings, turned violent in subsequent years. In an effort to find solutions to these violent differences, formal conflict resolution mechanisms were employed. As such, administrative authorities, the forces of law and order, law courts, and NGOs worked relentlessly to find solutions to these disputes. The methods used generally included mediation, force, conciliation, adjudication, and arbitration. Even though these methods were credited for the possibilities they created for third-party intervention and the opening of new conflict resolution avenues, many are of the opinion that the processes were often marred by bribery and corruption. Again, the use of force often created antagonism and fear in the hearts of the disputing parties and increased their resistance to decisions taken to resolve disputes.

Ethnic groups in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions are endowed with rich traditional socio-political institutions that perform various religious, political, and social functions. Thanks to these institutions, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms were extensively used in the resolution of conflicts in the area. In this regard, rituals, libations, oath-taking, local negotiation, and mediation undertaken by local authorities became useful, especially when modern methods failed. These methods, however, have continued to lose value as many people have increasingly minimized their potential impact on conflict resolution processes and outcomes. This is principally because the people of Balikumbat, Bafanji, and Bambalang, like most other indigenous populations in Africa, have continued to develop the perception that everything about Africa is negative and should be replaced.

Recommendations

Modern conflict resolution actors, who often possess the necessary financial resources for resolving conflicts, could help build the capacity of traditional institutions through training programs on traditional methods. If this is done, the knowledge required for seeking indigenous solutions to conflicts in the area of study and beyond will be ensured. This may prevent the degeneration of conflicts into uncontrollable proportions through more expedient resolution. Building the capacity of traditional institutions could equally be facilitated through research, education, and the dissemination of knowledge about these methods to people with traditional responsibilities in the area. This will enlighten them and provide the required skills for resolving conflicts.

Further, the governments of different African states, including Cameroon, should put in place a dual system that recognizes both traditional and modern institutions. The example of Rwanda, with its legal system that recognizes traditional Gacaca courts alongside

modern institutions, should be emulated by other African countries. This will help decongest already overburdened modern courts, which cannot cope with the increasing number of conflicts they handle. Again, such a dual system would allow for more effective conflict resolution, as cases affecting indigenous people and their various chiefdoms could be resolved in local courts that enjoy greater legitimacy.

In addition, certain traditional institutions can be granted legal authorization. This would give these local bodies *locus standi* to adjudicate and take important decisions aimed at bringing conflicts to an end. NOWEFA, for example, which brings together most traditional rulers of the North West Region and which has made significant efforts in resolving conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions, could be given legal recognition. If this is done, its proximity to the people of the region, both geographically and culturally, could lead to more expedient resolution of conflicts that might take modern courts much longer to handle.

Furthermore, it is common knowledge that young people in different regions of Cameroon generally look up to successful elites from their respective areas as role models and therefore accord great respect to them. As such, role models can be put to good use in the conflict resolution process in these subdivisions. Similarly, important religious figures could be highly instrumental in resolving conflicts. This is because many of these religious leaders are held in high esteem, and their experience could be effectively used to ensure that the conflict resolution process is acceptable to those in conflict.

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