

ASPECTS OF TRADITIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AMONG THE OGONI OF NIGERIA

Christian Radu CHEREJI
Charles WRATTO KING

Abstract. *Continuing their study of traditional practices in conflict management, the authors examine specific indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms developed by the Ogoni of Nigeria, with particular references to Igirebu, Neefene, Aaba and Tua-gba-ken truth hearing assemblies. The paper reveals that the various approaches use in dealing with conflict, within traditional Ogoni society, provide unique opportunities for disputing parties to interact and reach an agreement through peaceful dialogue. It further takes into account some interesting aspects of Ogoni value systems, including the Sira-Culture, Yaa and Borgor.*

Keywords: *Ogoni, Nigeria, traditional practices, conflict management, indigenous conflict resolution, value system, Igirebu, Neefene, Aaba, Tua-gba-ken, Yaa, Sira, Borgor.*

Overview

Like any other community in Africa and indeed in Nigeria, the Ogoni are bound to experience various forms of conflicts, for which they have, over time, developed appropriate indigenous mechanisms of conflict management. Conflict arising in traditional African society has been defined by Onigun & Albert (2001), as “a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals”. With regards to conflict resolution in traditional African settings, Chereji and Wratto (2013) noted that “the ancestors of Africans may have perceived conflict as an unwelcomed evil which was a part of their daily lives, and perhaps, if they

Christian-Radu CHEREJI, PhD
Director, Conflict Studies Center, BBU
Senior editor
Email: chereji@fspac.ro

Charles WRATTO KING
Associate researcher, Conflict Studies
Center, BBU
Email: charleswratto@yahoo.com

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could do little or nothing about drought and other natural disasters, when a dispute appeared and threatened their unity, there was a need to approach it in one accord". Unlike the European idea of justice, which was and still largely based on evidence, with a view to determine right from wrong as a means to penalize the guilty party, traditional African societies implored the accused to confess in order to start a healing process of reconciliation (Fred-Mensah, 2008; Murithi, 2007).

Being an element of social interaction, different scholars have defined conflict in various dimensions. As observed by Albert, conflict is a "critical mechanism by which goals and aspirations of individuals and groups are articulated". He argues that it is a channel for creative solutions to human problems, but added that, human perception of reality is very important in understanding a conflict situation. According to him, "when two or more parties perceive that their interests are incompatible, they express hostilities or pursue interests that could damage the other parties. These include but not limited to individuals, small or large groups (Albert, 2001).

Located in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, there are a total of one hundred and eleven villages that are made up of six kingdoms within Ogoniland. These kingdoms are, Babbe Kingdom, Gokhana, Ken, Nyokhana, Eleme and Tai Kingdom. Although the Warifes or Wsissues community was once part of Ogoniland, it has recently been politically grouped with the Annang area thus still maintaining its linguistic, social and cultural roots. The Ogoni believed and worship a Supreme Deity commonly known as Waa Bari or the Female Creator and within these six kingdoms, the Earth is held in the highest esteemed for two reasons. The first and most important is the view that Earth is the dwelling place of Waa Bari; the second is the belief that all things including plants, humans and animals are from the earth (interview with Chief Babep Monday Joseph JP, historian and the traditional ruler of Babbe Kingdom, 2014). For these two reasons the libations to Waa Bari are poured on the earth, the Ogoni believing she receives them as the water or gin sinks into the earth. Similarly, Bishop Solomon, a distinguished son of Ogoniland noted that, "the plants and trees belong to the gods. Therefore, libations must be poured (on behalf of the community) by the town authorities in an effort to appease the gods before any tree is cut or harvests are made." (interview with Bishop Gberegbara S. Solomon, JP AMP, the chairman of Ogoni Church Leaders and a lecturer of Religious Studies at the Rivers State University of Education, Port Harcourt, Nigeria, 2014). The land is also home to several environmental treasures, including the third-largest mangrove forest in the world and one of the largest surviving rainforests in Nigeria.

Although Nigeria came under British rule after the 1885 Berlin Conference, the imperialist met resistance from the Ogoni who deemed the land so holy for exploitation. It was not until 1901 that the colonizers penetrated the land, a penetration which increased after 1914, when the Ogoni became too weak to resist. Regardless of foreign imported religions, colonization and globalization, many indigenous aspects of the culture and

religious beliefs of the people are still unchanged. Although Rev. Paul Kingston of the Methodist Church first introduced Christianity to the Ogoni in 1926, Bishop Solomon revealed that the indigenous practices made it almost impossible for the church to take complete control of hearts and minds of the people.

The Ogoni largely kept their traditional beliefs, such as the fact that the soul of a human has the unique ability to transform from its human form to that of an animal. Also, they see their rivers and lands not only as natural providers of their daily needs – food, medicines, building materials – but, according to Mr. Freedom, they are also viewed as gods and are worshiped by the people (Mr. Nwiodo K.L. Freedom is the Chairman/CEO of Ogoni Energy Limited). The Ogoni strongly believe in life after death and that people carry in their next lives the consequences of their deeds done in the present one.

Any immersion into the practices of the Ogoni regarding conflict management cannot be properly understood without at least a brief overview of the most important rites related to the Ogoni value system. These rites are *yaa*, *sira* and *borgor*.

Yaa or initiation into manhood is a passage rite without which, an Ogoni man, regardless of his age:

- Isn't regarded as a complete man,
- Cannot sit or debate with members of the *yaa*,
- Unfit for leadership positions and chieftaincy titles,
- Buried at the back of his house, not the front,
- Cannot reside over major disputes.

Because of the involvement of every Ogoni son and the degree to which parents are willing to support their children go through the initiation process, *yaa* is considered the most prestigious of cultural values in every Ogoni kingdom.

As narrated by Chief Monday, these rites involved staying late at night in sacred shrines of deities where many rituals are performed to ensure longevity by drinking consecrated water and going stark naked at some point. During this period of initiation that last between two to three months, it's forbidden for participants to appear in daylight. Here, they are taught how to play *geregere* and *massokpo* (xylophone & vigilante masquerades) including warrior songs and dances. Apart from initiated members, the speechless secrets learnt here are to be shared with no soul. On the last day, they are paraded around various communities for final initiation rites. Once completed, they are considered socially, mentally, physically, emotionally and intellectually fit to lead and protect their people and heritage (interview with Chief Monday).

By definition, *sira* means first daughter or trusted female child. The concept originated from rich farming and finishing communities who entrusted their first daughters or daughters they considered most loved and trustworthy with the responsibility of pro-

tecting and managing the family's property. These daughters were expected to resume such responsibilities after the death of their parents or during their old age.

It is however important to note that, on the one hand, these practices was mostly common among families looking for male children. As narrated by Bishop Solomon, the idea was for the girl to meet with any man of her choice in order to produce a male child for the continuity of the family line. Adding that, "In Ogoni, we do not believe that the family line of a man should come to an end." (interview with Bishop Gberegbara S. Solomon). Though in other cases, he stressed, she was just expected to take on the family responsibility." To become a *sira*, the girl most first and foremost be initiated into the '*sira*'-culture.

As described by Loolo (1981) and Egonwa (1994), these daughters are not given out in marriage for which bride price would be paid. Rather, a man who is interested in a *sira* would carry out the customary rites (with her parent's approval) and live with her in her father's house. On no account is she allowed to leave her parents' home. As laid down by tradition, the children from this union cannot identify with their biological father or his family. Instead, they are members of the mother's family who would take on her father's name and inherit his property after the death of their mother (Loolo, 1981; Andah, 1982 and 1988). Emphasizing on the benefits of this value system among Ogoni females, Nwideeduh (1975, 1998) notes that 'to change an Ogoni woman's mind from '*sira*'-culture would mean erasing Ogoni female folk from Ogoni tribe."

The third fundamental rite is *borgor* or initiation into womanhood. This is a process whereby a married man sends his wife into what is translated as the "fatten room" for three months. In Nigeria and much of Africa, a fat woman is considered outstandingly beautiful and pleasing to most if not every men. During this period, she is not allowed to meet with her husband, work or appear in daylight, her visitors are limited to a special few and she is well fed on the best of meals. Twice a day, camwood and palm oil are applied on her skin to smoothen it. Here, she is taught the deep secrets of womanhood that are disclosed to initiated members only. It's only after a successfully completion of this process that she is considered a real woman and when she dies, she will be buried at the front of her house and not the back.

Indigenous Conflict Resolution Mechanisms Among the Ogoni of Nigeria

Igirebu

The first and most common approach of resolving any conflict by an Ogoni is through *igirebu*. *Igirebu* entails demonstration of patience, perseverance and accommodation. In this way, according to Chief Lincoln, an Ogoni must overlook the gravity of any offence as a source of conflict. She/he is expected to accommodate the offence of others because it is an act of great virtue that breeds self-respect and mutual understanding

(interview with chief Koate Poni Lincoln, who is the spokesman of Deken Community Council of Chiefs, a distinguished Elder and a member of Gokana Council of Chiefs). No matter the level of provocation, one is encouraged to abide by *igirebu*. Despite the long history of social, economic and political degradation by the Nigerian state, as well as environmental degeneration by multinational companies, that has led to the deaths of many sons and draughts of Ogoniland, this unique practice, that distinguishes a person as a true Ogoni, is still being demonstrated in uphold.

A proof of this practice resides with the case of the famous Ogoni Nine. Following long years of exploitation and environmental destruction perpetrated by the oil companies (starting with Royal Dutch Shell in 1956) in connivance first with the British colonial authorities, then with the Nigerian federal government, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People was established, under the leadership of dr. Ken Saro-Wiwa. In 1990, it started its fight against the degradation of their land by issuing the Ogoni Bill of Rights, addressed to the Nigerian government. The document expressed the will of the Ogonis to receive autonomy, environmental protection, control of a fair share of the revenues from their resources and cultural rights (such as the use of their local languages). By December 1992, the conflict escalated to violence, due to intimidating tactics used by the federal government, who banned public gatherings and declared actions to disturb oil extraction as acts of treason. Despite these abuses, the MOSOP called for a massive mobilization by January 4, 1993, which was extremely successful, being responded by 300,000 people. As a consequence, Shell withdrew its employees from the Delta, giving the federal government reason to “restore order”.

In May 21, 1994, four elders of the Ogoni were murdered. They all belonged to a dissident party within MOSOP that disputed with the leaders the tactics used by them. The occupying force intervened in order to search for those responsible. It arrested nine leaders of the MOSOP, including dr. Ken Saro-Wiwa, together with destroying 30 villages and killing an estimate of 2,000 civilians. In November 10, 1995, the Ogoni Nine, as they were now known, were hanged by the Nigerian federal government, on charges of incitement to murder. Oha (1999) states that, regardless of all human sufferings and their brutal treatment by the Nigerian government, the Ogoni Nine were peaceful till the very end. For Chief Lincoln, Dr. Ken Saro-wiwa (one of the Ogoni Nine) wasn't just an activist who drew the world's attentions to their struggle. To him, Dr. Ken is a father figure who displayed Ogoni virtue to the new generation of Ogoni and indeed to the world.

Neefenee – Murder

Like people all over the world, the Ogoni places a high value on human life and as such, *neefenee* or murder is viewed not only as a crime but also a disturbing situation that could divide the entire community. In this regard, their traditional justice system in the

case of premeditated or accidental murder, after the truth has been established and all religious rights performed, requires the murderer to offer two of his/her children or servants to the family of the deceased as a replacement for the life that was taken. The two individuals must be a man and a woman. In the event that the perpetrator does not have children or servants, he/she is expected to take an oath and promise to provide the two individuals at a later time.

Although murder is religious and culturally forbidden among the Ogoni, unlike other regions of the world, a murderer does not receive death penalty. This is partly because their worldview of mankind can be interpreted as a single tree with various families (that make up the community) playing the roles of branches. To them, death penalty means doing even more harm to the tree. Therefore, the chiefs and elders who would “suggest” such a decision are considered murderers and unfit to lead or preserve their heritage. Additionally, in most parts of Africa and indeed in Nigeria, children are view as wealth and blessings from the Divine Creator. The more children you have the wealthier you are. To this end, the guilty giving two of his children to the victim’s family, after all incantations has been made to appease the gods and to cleanse the land, signifies:

- The accused loosing double portion of his wealth,
- The accused sharing in the painful experience of loosing a family or household member,
- Reminding others that Neefenee is a taboo and a punishable crime to all regardless or age and status.

Traditional Ogoni society had (and still has) what Nader (1997) described as “controlling processes” however; the patterns in which these processes operates are significantly different from those introduced by the British colonial administration in Nigeria. While the British acknowledged the existences of these processes on the one hand, they argued that they had to be changed due to civilization. Nevertheless, the introduction of this new civilized legal system led to the criminalization of native lives and this gave birth to substantive marginalization of African approaches to conflict resolution (Hynd, 2011).

Commenting on the issue of death penalty in British colonial Africa, Hynd recounted that “many officials argued that the death penalty was an effective method of restoring order and imposing British law on African populations, others argued that lethal violence was unsuitable for the punishment of Africans whose attitudes towards justice and the taking of human life were markedly different from European views on the subject”.

Tua-gba-ken – the Sacred Town Square

According to Chief Monday, the forefathers of their land sacrificed and kept aside these sacred places where the spirit of their ancestors can be invoked to ascertain the invisible and spiritual presence at the scheme of conflict situation. By definition, *tua-gba-ken*

means sacred town square or a place of truth. For the Ogoni, truth is the only language of their ancestors and the instrument of facilitating peace and harmony among them. Therefore, in cases such as murder, rape or theft, the traditional priest, chiefs and elders summons the accused to hear his side of the story.

The process involves establishing the truth and it takes up to thirty-five days before the accused can take an oath to prove his/her innocence or guilt. However, the accused is summoned only seven times after every five days interval. During this period, he/she is made to sit on plantain leaf without clothes on. At the end of each day's discussion, family members take the accused home where he/she is persuaded to speak the truth in an effort to avoid being put to shame if found guilty. Speaking of truth, Bishop Tutu stressed that, "the purpose of hearing a case in an African village was simply to establish where the truth rested in order to help the community restore peace and harmony" (Tutu, 1999).

On the thirty-fifth day, after ever attempt to convince the accused in telling the truth has failed, the entire community is invited to bear witness to the oath-taking rite. In many traditional African societies, the ritual as observed by Chereji and Wratto (2013), involves the mixture and drinking of bitter indigenous plants. In Ogoniland however, these processes beings with the pouring of libations and incantations to call upon the spirits of their ancestors whom they believed will:

- Oversee the spiritual dimension of the process,
- Protect the accused against every harm if innocent,
- Withdraw their protection from the accused if found guilty.

The pouring of libations and incantations are immediately followed by the accused drinking the mixture, which is giving by the chief priest. Once the oath is taken, the accused is required to go home directly, shut the door and wait for the spiritual judgment to manifest. If guilty, the Ogoni believed that the juju would strike the wrongdoer dead within a set period of time and at such; the corpse of the guilty is taken into an evil forest for burial. If innocent, the person is summoned at *tua-gba-ken* again, but this time, on the finest of traditional costume, scraped his/her hair and go on bare feet to receive blessings and prayers from the elders and chief priest. The ceremony includes playing of cultural drums, masquerade dances and celebration by the entire community around the sacred town square.

Ogoni Rites on Family Disputes

To help our readers better understand the practices regarding solving family matters, especially divorce, we will briefly begin the discussion by exploring the processes of marriage among the Ogoni. Marriage in Ogoniland, as it is in most parts of Nigeria and indeed in Africa, is a creation of deep union between two families and communities.

In Ogoniland, a man who wishes to marry first discusses the intension with his father. If the father feels for some reasons the marriage will not be possible, he would discourage his son. If he agrees, an immediate enquiries mission will begin into the family background and conduct of the girl by the kinsmen of the groom to be. There is no dating as is known in the Western cultures. Although some couples might be meeting behind the scenes, their parents and the community at large do not officially recognize such relationships. The investigations include but not limited to, virginity, witchcraft, insanity, violent behaviors, incurable or contagious diseases, immorality, divorced and theft.

After all enquiries are completed and the groom's parents satisfied, the father, through a small delegation, informs the girl's parents about his son's intention. Usually, this announcement is made with a pot of palm wine (a traditional drink made from palm tree) or a gin. Next, the girl's parents asking the delegation to return at a later time for an answer. This move enables them to find out if their daughter is interested. If she does, her family will start an enquiry on the boy's conduct and family background. These rites performed by families in traditional Ogoni society are required because:

- Marriage is an alliance between two families or clans. Therefore, these enquires are necessary in protecting and maintaining a family moral status.
- In traditional African societies and indeed in Ogoniland, virginity is held in high esteem. In most cases, the parent of such a girl receives special tribute (from the groom's family) for a successful upbringing of the girl. In addition, it would be a matter of public knowledge, which would earn her unique respect from her in-laws.
- Properties and things of value were insured to deities to prevent them being stolen. So, in an event where a person goes on to marry from a family who's member may have stolen something that was insured to a deity, that person would unknowingly invite the anger of the deity.
- It's important for both families to know more about themselves before forming an alliance through their son and daughter.

After all enquiries and both families are pleased with the results, the next step is the payment of dowry. Here, on behalf of their son, the groom's family is expected to present seven tubers of yams, a she-goat, palm wine, palm oil, fish and other valuable items as compensation to the girl's parents. They're being compensated because their daughter, who is of value, will be taken away for life, the helping hands in their home and on their farm will reduce, and finally, the girl has met all requirements for marriage. Acceptances of these items constitute approval of the marriage by her family, and this is follow by the pouring of libation and blessings of the couples by both families.

Once this is done, they are considered officially married. If the man was from another tribe, the Ogoni culture will take preeminence over his culture. This signifies the man paying respect to the culture of the lady, as after then, she belongs to his own cultural domain. Failure to do so, it could be said she was a harlot.

Aaba – Divorce

As in many traditional African societies, *aaba* or divorce is viewed as a shameful occurrence that ruins and drags a family's image into the mud. Therefore in Ogoniland, families play significant roles in the sustenance of their son's and daughter's relationships. For instance, they intervene in an effort to save a marriage in crucial cases of quarrels or crisis between the spouses that could threaten their marriage with sudden collapse or failure. The process starts by the wife's parents, or a respected elder from the community, speaking with her to result to *Igirebu* (the demonstration of patience and perseverance), or allow a peaceful settlement, while relatives or kinsmen of the husband also do the same. Once they agree, in most cases, there are intertribal or clans meetings that are focus on de-escalating the situation between them.

In other cases, the wife receives the full support of her in-laws and is invited to stay in their home until the situation is calm. Traditionally, marriage in Ogoniland is considered a lifelong contract because it is looked upon as an eternal, social, and spiritual bond between a woman, her husband, and their respective families. However, regardless of their efforts to keep marriages alive, there are three major factors that can influence an automatic divorce in Ogoniland. In an unfortunate event where one of the three occurs, there are no interventions from family members, elders or even the community as to the survival of the marriage, instead, they all advocate for a termination of the marriage or the provision of possible alternatives to their objectives.

Causes of Aaba in Ogoniland

The first we shall begin with is childlessness: among the Ogoni there is a deep conviction that children are a blessing. Therefore, lack of children is considered a misfortune, or a sign of a curse. They believed a marriage without children has not yet achieved its objectives. As Okunola (2002) expressed, procreation takes priority in marriage for an African man because a child is considered instrumental to establishing a lasting family (Osiki, 2000; Salami & Bakare, 2001).

The desire for children still remains the major element inspiring most Ogoni spouses into marriage. Also supporting this position, Harden (2004) noted that, in an event of childlessness, within an African marriage, both husband and wife might be crushed by a sense of shame, fear, and hatred. Therefore, it becomes almost impossible for them to live a happy or pleasant life. With so much emphasis placed on childbirth, one would wonder to what extent could a childless marriage survive?

Commenting on this view, Bishop Solomon stressed that not all cases of childlessness leads to *aaba* or divorce in traditional Ogoni society. As he noted, a barren wife isn't always rejected, rather her husband could seek a second wife with her approval or she could do so for him. The Bishop also added that, if the current wives were barren, there

could be a third or even a fourth wife, and if the man dies before these women, as laid down by tradition, they are permitted to cohabit with other men in an effort to produce a child that will continue the family lineage of their dead husband.

Similarly, the wife could seek a divorce if she finds out that her husband is impotent, but this is not until she returns his bride prize. Failure to do so, there might be no knowledge of her after she dies, as there will be no member of her immediate blood to remember her. Childlessness is totally unacceptable to an Ogoni. As previously mentioned, it is a fundamental principal in preserving their line of genealogy. In other words, a childless man or woman is considered dead even to him or herself, and the spouse is regarded as a disgrace to the families involved. Next to be discussed is adultery.

By definition, adultery is an act of sexual intercourse between a married man and a woman not his wife or between a married woman and a man not her husband (Miller 1991). However, for purposes of emphasis, it's important to note that sex outside marriage with the knowledge and approval of one's spouse is not regarded as adultery in traditional Nigerian society. In some parts of Benue state (mid-belt region of Nigeria), the Tiv men give out their wives to a guest as an act of kindness. They believed one should share everything with his guest and these include one's spouse. The Tiv regard strangers as gods, and in some cases, protect their visitors with their lives. In other places such as Ogoniland, the lack of children could warrant such approvals. Moving on, sex and marriage are sacred realities in most traditional African societies, and it's a taboo to discuss matters relating to sexuality in public. In many, if not all-African homes, parents are extremely reserved in their behavior before their children. In Ogoniland, sex outside marriage is considered a sin. Therefore, any one found in the act of adultery is regarded as a worthless person who has betrayed a core value of his tradition for personal pleasure. To this end, the parties involved are strongly rebuked because adultery is viewed as a direct insult to the men and women of the community.

The birth of twins is the third factor responsible for divorce in traditional Ogoniland. Though this practice has long been forgotten, it is however important to note that, despite the destructive nature of colonization, there were some unique aspects of one colonial institution (Christianity), which helped many Ogonis to have a cultural and religious rethink. As laid down by the forefathers, it was the duty of first-born males to continue the pouring of libation as well as the offering of sacrifices to the gods after the deaths of their fathers. Hence, there were guidelines for purification and one of such was the total avoidance of twin. According to Mercy, the fact that there were first-born males in most, if not every Ogoni home, made it easier for twins' mothers to be rejected by their husbands. She added that, while a woman was allowed to remarry in the cases of childlessness and adultery after the religious rites were performed; twins mothers and their babies were sent into an evil forest. They and their babies were viewed as curse and at such, unworthy of living among purified people.

The practice of Aaba

Although *aaba* practice is now extremely rare in traditional Ogoni society, the process implies a man sending his estranged wife (alongside a bottle of wine) back to her family through a respected elder of the community. Upon presenting the woman and the drink, the elder would cite the husband's reasons for starting a divorce process. He would in addition, ask for a date to be set for what is literally translated as "dowry calculation". The period before this process is known as *aaloozii* or separation, and the act of dowry calculation simply means the return of everything given by the man's family, to the family of the woman when seeking her hand in marriage.

Once a date is fixed, the parents of both parties send food and drinks through a respected elder of their choice, to the aforementioned elder's house, which is now a neutral ground for the discussions. When a deal is reached after calculation, the woman parents are told (by the elders) to return the agreed amount of items to an elder of their choice, who then returns the items to the husband and his family. The final and most important step according to our respondents is what is known as the "touching of ground".

As described by Chief Lincoln and Chief Monday, for *aaba* to be instituted, there are certain rights that must be performed:

- The woman must return to the erstwhile husband's house with a life goat, tubers of yam, plantains and so on,
- Libation will be poured and incantations would be made for the husband to perform the final rites by mixing palm oil with ash and rubbing the mixture on the woman's body,
- The husband must give her his blessings and openly state that, "as from today, the air you breathed and the food you ate, while you were here, do not count against you. When you die, you can now be buried in your father's compound, and from now on, you're free to remarry."

This same process is applied even if it was the woman seeking a divorce. The difference is that she would leave on her free will and not be sent out by her estranged husband. Until these rites are performed, they are not allowed by custom to remarry. The community dimension in Ogoniland is such that, the spouses receive strong support in moments of happiness as well as difficulties. Therefore, no one would marry either of them until the process is completed.

Our brief incursion into the traditional conflict management practices of the Ogoni ends here, without any pretense of exhausting the subject. It is only important to note, together with Thomas Spears, that the "European attempt to erase African customs, beliefs and cultures, had their own limitations. For a start, imposing the European legal system on Africans with brute force presented more difficulties than persuading them. Second, the Europeans took a long time to realize that Africans had autonomous percep-

tions of themselves, and their cultures." (Spear, 2003). African customs, especially in the field of conflict management, hold important lessons for all modern and post-modern societies and their impact should not be marginalized for lack of knowledge.

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25. Interview (2014) with Mr. Nwido K.L. Freedom is the Chairman/CEO of Ogoni Energy Ltd.