

**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL CONFLICT AND
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN ABUA SINCE 1800**

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Abstract

This study, "An assessment of the historical evolution of social conflict and conflict management strategies in Abua since 1800" is an evaluation of the several indigenous mechanisms responsible for the management of conflicts in Abua. The aim of this study is to provide an understanding of how conflicts are managed in Abua. The study uses the primary, secondary, and multidisciplinary sources to generate the needed data. It adopts the use of the Relational Theory and Relative Derivation Theory as templates for the analysis. The research reveals that the main forms and causes of conflicts in Abua are land and boundary disputes, chieftaincy tussles, inter/intra communal crisis, familial crises, youth restiveness and cult related conflict. The study further shows that in Abua, there are several indigenous institutions responsible for the management of conflicts, and these includes; the kingship institution, the family institution, age-grade, women's club and the masquerade cult. The research reveals that when there are incidents of conflict in Abua, these aforementioned institutions are seldom consulted, and were necessary, they deliver verdicts based on their conviction and understanding of the matter at hand. The paper establishes that, although not all issues are effectively handled by these institutions, they, however, provide an alternative form of dispute resolution mechanism away from the contemporary legal court system. The study, thus, recommends that the government should enhance and strengthen its partnership with local indigenous institutions, establish structured collaboration between traditional and formal institutions, as well as help to preserve indigenous peacebuilding practices, as this would help in the maintenance of law and order in the kingdom. It concludes that traditional institutions in Abua play a vital role in ensuring that peace, security and tranquility is achieved among and between the people of the region.

Keywords: Traditional Institutions, Conflict, Conflict Management, Abua, Chieftaincy Tussle

Introduction

Social conflict is an enduring feature of human society, arising from competition over land, economic resources, political authority, cultural values, social relationships and access to power.

Historically, conflicts have shaped the organisation of communities, influenced patterns of leadership and cooperation, and encouraged the development of mechanisms for maintaining social order. In African societies, traditional institutions, kinship relationships, age-grade associations, community elders and religious authorities have often played important roles in resolving disputes and preserving communal stability. However, the nature of conflict and the effectiveness of its management mechanisms have varied according to historical circumstances, changes in political structures and the emergence of new economic interests (Michael, 2025).

Before and during the nineteenth century, social relations in Abua were influenced by kinship ties, family interests, community leadership, land use, fishing, farming, trade and access to waterways. These relationships provided foundations for cooperation but also generated disagreements over farmland, fishing locations, boundaries, inheritance, marriage, leadership succession and obligations among families and communities. Despite these, traditional conflict management strategies in Abua, functioned to preserve law and order in the region. Traditional methods of conflict management, including mediation by elders, negotiation between disputing parties, arbitration by recognised community authorities, reconciliation and the use of customary norms, provided culturally legitimate avenues for settlement (Eleazar, 2025).

In the contemporary period, however, social conflict in Abua is understood within the wider context of political competition, changing patterns of leadership, disputes over communal resources, youth mobilisation and the socioeconomic pressures affecting communities in the Niger Delta. Ebiede and Nyiayaana (2022) demonstrate how violence and youth cultism have influenced the emergence of political leadership and undermine the legitimacy of traditional governance structure in the wider Niger/Delta region. These developments, as the study shows, raises important questions about the capacity of customary institutions to manage disputes under changing social and political conditions. Consequently, this study examined the historical evolution of social conflicts in Abua, its causes, effectiveness, and the indigenous conflict management strategies adopted by the Abua people.

Methodology

The methodology employed for this study is both qualitative and descriptive in nature. This method became important as it affords the researcher the opportunity to explain, describe and interpret the cause(s) of conflicts, its management strategies, and their effectiveness in Abua. More importantly, the study made use of the primary, secondary, and multidisciplinary sources in the collection and collation of data. This set the tone for a bias-free interpretation and analysis of the collated data.

Conceptual Clarifications

Traditional Institutions

According to Orji and Olali (2010), traditional institutions can be said to refer to that indigenous political arrangement, wherein leaders who have proven and shown to possess integrity are appointed and installed according to the provisions of their native law and customs. Similarly, Mohammed (2006) described it as the institution responsible for safeguarding indigenous traditional practices, such as the customary regulatory bodies that oversee the daily affairs of life within a specific community. They consist of traditional rulers/chiefs, the lineage, the extended family, the nuclear family, the age grade, professional guilds, the administration of justice, court historians, court jesters, and praise singers, among others.

In the words of Awedoba (2003), traditional institutions may consist of the following: staff and council, individuals occupying positions of authority such as queen mothers and chiefs, ritual symbols including shrines and other objects, emblems of office including stools, skins, regalia,

crowns, and gowns, and staffs including the linguist staff, swords, and various paraphernalia. There were instances where properties such as land were associated with the office, and in some cases, each incumbent was expected to contribute to the office's stockpile of wealth under the direction of competent administration. It is possible to say that the office of chieftaincy transcends both the chief and the individual sovereign.

Conflict Management

According to Bouton (1990), the word conflict management refers to the process of containing conflict by bringing about settings that foster collaboration and valued relationships so as to manage the conduct of the parties involved in the conflict. Accordingly, the term refers to the entirety of the procedures, mechanisms, and tactics that a society employs in order to resolve and manage disputes that occur within her sphere of influence.

Conflict management according to Rahim (2002), does not call for the avoidance, reduction, or eradication of conflict; rather, it merely entails the creation of efficient macro-level strategies to reduce its dysfunctions and enhance its beneficial functions for learning and effectiveness in society. For Omoluabi (2001), the term "conflict management" refers to the procedures by which interpersonal communication is utilized to aid two conflicting parties in arriving at a point of agreement that is agreeable and satisfying to all parties involved. It serves as a means of preserving both peace and security throughout the world.

Theoretical Framework

Researchers often employ theories, models, and ideas to better explain why particular occurrences happen and the context in which they occur. Accordingly, Silverman (2005) distinguishes theory from other research terminology such as model, idea, and technique, defining it as a collection of concepts used to define and/or explain a phenomenon. Thus, this section outlined the theoretical frameworks through which the data of the study will be assessed. To understand the reasons for conflicts, the study analyzes two major theories: relational theory of conflict and the relative deprivation theory.

Relational Theory

The relational theory of conflict is a perspective within the broader field of conflict management developed by Paul Lederach. Lederach (2003) emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships in understanding and managing conflicts. This theory suggests that conflicts are not solely about tangible issues or differences in interests, but are also deeply rooted in the nature of relationships between individuals or groups. The theory places emphasis on individual and group behaviors, and evaluates how these behaviours affect other. According to the Lederach (2006), people and groups are seldom interdependent, thus, their actions and well-being are connected. They stressed that conflicts arise when these interdependencies create tensions, and individuals or groups perceive that their goals or needs are incompatible. For the relational theorists, unequal distribution of material wealth breeds inequality/unfairness, thus, resulting in the feeling of deprivation and subsequently, a feeling of frustration which in turn stokes tensions. According to the proponents of this theory, communication plays a crucial role in relationships and conflicts. The theory emphasizes how communication styles, patterns, and the quality of communication contribute to the escalation or resolution of conflicts. Misunderstandings, poor communication, or lack of communication skills can further exacerbate conflicts (Akinwale, 2013).

Relative Deprivation Theory

Relative deprivation refers to the tangible or perceived insufficiency of resources required to maintain an individual's standard of living, such as food, activities, and material possessions. This deficiency is observed among different socioeconomic groups or individuals within those groups and is often regarded as the prevailing standard within the group. According to this theory, social conflict arises from individuals' perceptions of inequity. In simpler terms, relative deprivation refers to the cognitive understanding that one is generally in a disadvantaged position compared to others with whom one associate and compares oneself. Thus, as Walker and Pettigrew (1984) argued, people get dissatisfied with their position when they sense a mismatch between what they deserve to enjoy and what they now experience. Accordingly, the theory emphasizes that conflict emerges when the disparity between two groups within a single population is too big, making revolt more likely. The idea is that people are obliged to think that they have certain entitlements from society, and when they are denied them, while a lot of other people in the same demographic enjoy same, unrest arises (Bayertz, 1999).

The notion of relative deprivation focuses on the value expectations that must be satisfied within a certain culture. As a result, when a society has a relatively high percentage of economic disparity, individuals are more prone to take up to violence. As Schaefer (2008) puts it, "the conscious sense of a negative disparity between justified expectations and current actualities" are the reason violent conflict erupts. Notwithstanding, while the source of the deprivation is economic, poverty does not always transform into violence. However, when individuals of a society consider themselves impoverished, they often form a collective identity, and become a political force willing to use violence to oppose perceived unfairness. Altogether, the relative deprivation theory holds that violence is caused by a person's assessment of his or her economic situation in the community. An individual's subjective assessment of his or her community standing is important to their behavior to some extent.

Study Area

The study area is Abua, located in Abua/Odual Local Government Area of Rivers State, in the Niger Delta region of southern Nigeria. The area is situated within the Orashi River Basin and is characterised by a riverine environment, fertile land, and diverse socioeconomic activities, including farming, fishing, and trading.

Origin and Evolution of Conflict in Abua

The history of conflict in Abua is closely connected with the people's migration history, settlement patterns, competition over land and natural resources, inter-community relations, political authority, and later colonial and postcolonial administrative transformations. Abua occupies an important position in the Orashi Basin of the Niger Delta, an area historically inhabited by several relatively small ethnic groups, including Abua, Odual, Ogba, Ekpeye, and the Engenni. The historical origins of the Abua people are explained through different traditions and scholarly interpretations. One tradition attributes the founding of Abua to an ancestral figure called Abua, who, together with his wife, *Egula*, settled at *Olokpogha* and became the progenitor of the major Abua lineages (Upheel, 2025). Another interpretation connects Abua with the wider migration of Delta-Cross-speaking peoples from the eastern Niger Delta and areas around present-day Cameroon. The latter interpretation emphasizes linguistic and cultural relationships between Abua and neighbouring groups such as Odual, Ogbia and Obolo (Andoni).

During the nineteenth century, economic transformation associated with the expansion of the oil-palm trade contributed another dimension to conflict in the Orashi region. The wider Niger Delta became increasingly incorporated into Atlantic commercial networks, with oil palm, palm

kernels, foodstuffs, timber, canoes and other products becoming important commodities. Dumni (2025) described Abua communities as participants in these commercial networks, supplying agricultural and forest products to coastal trading centres and interacting with Kalabari and Nembe merchants. Furthermore, increased commercial interaction produced opportunities for cooperation but also created competition over markets, trade routes, production areas and access to natural resources. In some cases, disputes emerged when people crossed established territorial boundaries or used resources regarded by neighbouring communities as belonging to them (Akari, 2025). Michael (2022), specifically records that population growth and increasing demand for farmland and forest resources intensified boundary disputes between Abua and her neighbours. Disagreements over land use consequently developed into attacks, counter-attacks and disputes involving farms, fishing ponds and forest camps. The emergence of these conflicts demonstrates that the origins of Abua conflict were substantially linked to material resources and territorial organization rather than to ethnic hostility alone. At the same time, indigenous mechanisms existed for containing disputes. Kinship relationships, marriage alliances, traditional authorities, negotiation, oaths, mediation and community elders provided avenues for settling disagreements before they escalated into prolonged violence. This explains why historical relations between Abua and her neighbours' included periods of peaceful coexistence despite recurring disputes. Conflict, therefore, represented one aspect of inter-community relations rather than the complete character of those relationships (Wariboko, 2025).

The colonial period, furthermore, introduced significant changes to the nature and institutional framework of conflict in Abua. British colonial rule brought communities that had previously operated through indigenous political structures under a centralized administrative system. Abua was thus, incorporated into the Ahoada administrative structure (Dumni, 2025). British officials, nonetheless, took an active interest in the organization and leadership of the Abua clan, including questions concerning the recognition of traditional authorities. Political authority, therefore, became increasingly connected with recognition by the colonial state, creating new possibilities for competition over chieftaincy and representation (Akari, 2025). Consequently, conflict gradually evolved from predominantly land and resource disputes toward disputes involving political authority, traditional leadership and access to colonial institutions.

After independence in 1960, the evolution of conflict in Abua became increasingly associated with local government politics, chieftaincy competition, land ownership, access to public resources and struggles over political representation. The creation and restructuring of local government areas altered relationships between communities and gave political office greater significance (Aselemi, 2025). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, conflict consequently acquired additional dimensions. Chieftaincy disputes, youth restiveness, cult activities, political crises and militancy became increasingly visible alongside older land and boundary disputes. The area became identified with land disputes, chieftaincy tussles, political crises, youth restiveness, cultism and militancy among the major forms of conflict experienced in the region. These developments demonstrate the transformation of conflict from primarily inter-community competition over land and resources into a multidimensional phenomenon involving political, social, economic and security issues (Wariboko, 2025).

Causes of Conflicts in Abua Since 1800

Conflict can be described as a dynamic where multiple social entities are connected through aggressive psychological relationships or antagonistic interactions. Conflict throughout the world arises from a multitude of factors. For Yecho (2006), the causes of conflicts are ever-changing and influenced by the socioeconomic and geopolitical conditions of the period. Accordingly, Onwudiwe (2004), averred that sociological factors such as population growth, economic migration, and the

government's anti-poor policies contribute to conflict in Africa. Corroborating the above, Rahim (2022) asserted that conflict is a widespread phenomenon that impacts various regions across the globe. It arises from the confrontational nature of one party towards the other. Conflicts are thus, a natural part of human interaction, as they arise when individuals have differing perspectives on how to approach certain situations. It inherently involves a process of polarization and reducing opportunities. The following, nonetheless, are some of the causes of conflict in Abua. They include but not limited to:

Land and Boundary Disputes

Land refers to the terrestrial area of the earth's surface that is not submerged in water. It is the primary and essential economic resource that plays a crucial role in facilitating economic progress. Land is crucial for agricultural purposes, especially in subsistence farming, and is also advantageous in urban regeneration initiatives. Nonetheless, given the vast expanse of land in Abua, one may be tempted to believe that there is sufficient land for everyone. However, as can be seen in the number of land and boundary related disputes in Abua, the desire for control and ownership of land, has become a significant catalyst for violence (Wariboko, 2025). This is because individuals have a strong desire to exert control over resources that would greatly benefit them. As Eleazar (2025), avers, land disputes play a significant role in fueling conflicts in Abua, as people or groups seldom seek to undo themselves in their quest to arrogate fertile lands for their economic and social benefits. He emphasized that despite the ample supply of land in Abua, it is rather astonishing that people and groups continue to engage in conflicts. Malambi (2024) contends that due to the vital role land plays in human life, it is not unexpected that people and groups are inclined to engage in warfare when their land (a crucial source of livelihood), is under threat.

It is noteworthy, therefore, that in Abua, land is kept in trust either by the community or by the family. At the communal level, lands are leased or transferred to individuals for certain uses, such as for agricultural or urbanization purposes. This kind of land tenure is characterized by the community being recognized as the proprietor of all lands encompassed within its jurisdiction (Aselemi, 2025). Within this sphere, communities are seen/regarded as the landowner, as such, everything pertaining to the usage of such lands must get the express approval of the community. However, within Abua, several villages also recognise private ownership of land, which in turn, confers individuals and/or families the right as to how to manage or utilize their land. Throughout the history of the Abua, land and boundary disputes have been a prominent cause of conflict. These disputes have pitched Abua and Ekpeye, Abua and Odual, Abua and Degema, as well as Abua and its neighboring Ikwerre communities (Dumni, 2025). Significant conflicts also persist within Abua, particularly around the rightful ownership of certain plots of land. These can be seen in the disputes between the Emilaghan and Omelema communities, Odaga, Omokwa and Emilaghan communities, Otari and Emilaghan communities, Okana and Amalem communities, Oghora and Arukwo communities, Omalema and Egbolom communities, Omalema and Emoh communities, Eghunugan and Obaraany communities, and Ogbogolo and Emughan communities, etc.

Chieftaincy Tussle

Most traditional African societies are caught in the mess of chieftaincy tussle, where two or more individuals or families battle for the control of political authority in their respective domains. In fact, since after the attainment of independence, post-colonial African states have been engrossed in wars of kingship. This is because, in certain African societies, the colonial lords took away certain kingship stools, and gave same to those they deemed fit/qualified (primarily, those they could easily control). This act, thus, culminated in years of war between families or communities. In Abua, as Malambi (2024) rightly observed, certain cases of kingship tussle have

evolved into a broader conflict. The kingship battle between the Obuge Royal family of Otari and the Agana Royal family of Amalem, is perhaps, the most important and intriguing kingship battle that has characterized Abua in recent times. Apart from the disagreement between the two Royal families which strained inter-personal and/or communal relationships between communities, other known cases of kingship tussle have led to serious hostility. A case in view, are those of Egbolom and Eghunughan communities.

Familial Crisis

Crises in most societies in the world mostly stem from family defects. In most homes, there are seldom disagreements that spiral into the larger society particularly when not handled properly. Family crises as Chukwu (2025) stressed, may arise when family members hold divergent perspectives or opinions that are in direct opposition. Familial conflict may arise from misinterpretation and hasty assumptions. As Edwin (2024) puts it,

Occasionally, it is customary for individuals to hold differing opinions. Intermittent discord is inherent to familial existence. Nevertheless, persistent confrontation can induce stress and have detrimental effects on interpersonal relations. Certain individuals struggle with emotional regulation and may exhibit deliberate harm, aggression, or even violence.

It is important to stress that in Abua, the family unit stands as a major source of conflict. Parental neglect and the lack of child control which apparently is the new norm in today's society, continue to impact on the larger society in such a negative light. This apparent reality is made worse when kin engage themselves in unproductive activities that in the long run counteract with their desired goal(s).

Cultism and Youth Restiveness

Cultism is another major epidemic ravaging Abua. In Abua, organized crimes are evident through the frequent clashes between rival cult groups like the Icelanders and Greenlanders, which often result in displays of supremacy. Over the past decade, numerous conflicts have resulted in a significant loss of life and forced many people to leave their homes. Within the Niger Delta region, Abua has experienced high-level armed conflict, including militias, gangs, and cult groups, all of which contribute to the intricate political landscape of the kingdom. According to Aselemi (2025), it has been noted that cult groups in Abua have extended their influence across various sectors, including communities, churches, secondary schools, primary schools, and political structures within the community. Their impact has also reached into militias and criminal organizations. Members of cult groups are seldom considered influential individuals with connections, and thus, are rarely punished when they go against societal norms. In Abua, the emergence of cult groups, mostly by restive youths, have impacted negatively on the growth and development of region (Upheel, 2025). This has thus, led to increased hardship, suffering, retardation and the underdevelopment of Abua.

Traditional Institutions and Conflict Management Strategies in Abua Since 1800

In resolving conflict in traditional African societies, indigenous traditional institutions are often referred to. This is because of the importance placed on these institutions as impartial arbiters of conflict. While mediating in a conflict, various tactics are employed to address the incompatibilities that arise during disputes, irrespective of the conflict's intensity. The outcome of conflict might vary depending on the approach employed, resulting in either detrimental or beneficial consequences. Conflict may often be creatively managed, resulting in the emergence of innovative and satisfactory resolutions. Occasionally, this involves expanding the available resources or types of influence or

achieving a more equitable distribution of power or resources. Creative outcomes are more probable when the parties involved have a mutual interdependence, allowing each side to exert influence on the other, rather than when one side is heavily reliant on the other. In Abua, the following indigenous institutions are responsible for mediating in conflicts:

Kingship (*Uwema*) Institution

The kingship institution in all of Africa is a very important one. In Africa, kings are revered and possess supreme authority, as they are seen as the representation of the gods on earth. They carry out the task of overseeing their subjects, and are responsible for the preservation of law and order in their respective domains. In Abua for instance, the kingship (*Uwema*) institution is headed by the *Oda-Abuan* (who is the Supreme leader of the Abua), and the *Uwemas* (Clan and Community Heads) of the various clans and communities making of Abua. In the event of a crisis in Abua, the kingship institution at the communal level, are usually the first to mediate on them, but when they are unsuccessful in mediation, the matter is taken to the Clan Head who then tries to intercede (Malambi, 2024). Consequently, if the Clan Head (*Uwema*) is also not able to conclude peace, the matter is further taken to the Supreme Leader – the *Oda-Abuan* – to intercede. At this level, the *Oda-Abuan* along with his council of chiefs, and advisers, interrogates the matter and after hearing from the parties involved, passes a unanimous judgement which are seldom binding on the parties involved in the conflict. Before this is achieved, however, the King (*Oda-Abuan*) may seek to know the resolution(s) of the former mediating power (*Uwema*), and if satisfied with his resolution(s), merely re-validates it. However, with the advent of the colonial court system in contemporary African society, parties to a conflict who feel dissatisfied with the outcome are seldom encouraged to seek redress in formal courts (Eleazar, 2025).

Family Institution (*Eegun-Otu*)

The family unit (*eegun-otu*) is another important mediating power in conflict in Abua. Since most conflicts in Abua stem from the family units, elders of those families (*araala-eegun*) are seldom the first to mediate on them. It is only when they are unsuccessful in the mediation process, that the matter is taken to a higher authority, usually the village or clan chiefs. At the family/compound level, the eldest man (usually the family/compound chief, otherwise the *ola-eegun*) is usually the first person to be reported to, as he is believed to possess integrity and unparalleled wisdom, thus, accorded the responsibility of mediating in conflicts affecting the family/compound.

At this level of conflict management, the offended person, may decide to report a particular matter to either his/her maternal or paternal kinsmen, particularly if they feel that the other may be biased towards them (Fubara, 2025). In delicate cases, as Wariboko (2025) observed, anyone accused of committing adultery, witchcraft or threat to life, may be required to swear an oath of innocence. Here, the family chiefs may proceed to infuse the sand of the land into a drink after certain incantations may have been made, and the accused made to drink from it with the intent of proving innocence, or with the promise of not engaging in that particular act again. These practices and others, were strategies the family unit adopted to managing conflicts in Abua.

Women's Club

The women's club, for instance – the *amariir umake* – are also integral in the management of conflict in Abua. Though not many cases were referred to this group, they did however, mediate on matters concerning the issues of women and their wards in the kingdom. They had a female chief (*ola-amariir*) who in times of crisis seldom attempted to mediate in them, and where she was not successful, reported/referred the matter to a higher and more respected authority usually the council of chiefs.

Age-grade (*Akor-Igbo*)

This group comprises men and women of youthful ages, those whose age differences are not far apart. Within many traditional African cultures, individuals of a particular age range, typically spanning three, four, or even five years, constitute an age grade (Oladipo, 2022). In Abua, conflicts regarding youths of the same age-grade were sometimes referred to the *Akor-Igbo*, who through their leadership invited the conflicting parties to a hearing and necessary mediation. In other instances, where there was a threat to the peace and security of the people, the *Akor-Igbo*, assembled themselves and effectively prepared to confront the perceived danger (Akari, 2025). As Dumni (2025) rightly observed, during the pre-colonial era, the age-grades were required to demonstrate their maturity by protecting the community from unfriendly neighbors or adversaries. Therefore, the group functioned as a vigilant organization that monitors and exposes criminal activities and wrongdoers in the community. The institution of *Akor-Igbo* had a very functional social structure that allowed them to address issues concerning the society and were very practical and influential in all of Abua (Eleazar, 2025). Notwithstanding, the institution of *Ako-Igbo*, over the past decades, seems to be an illusion of itself, as political wrangling, inter/intra family rifts, and feelings of animosity have not only made the institution lose its relevance but also made it nonexistent in several communities within Abua.

Masquerade (*Arughu*) Cult

This is about one of the very influential/revered traditional institutions in Abua. The masquerade (*Arughu*) cult, is a composition of masquerade carriers and traditional believers, whose beliefs are anchored on the fact that masquerade deities are by themselves revered and special beings, who are just and uncompromising, as such, can mediate in conflicts, since they can differentiate the good from the bad (Akari, 2025). Thus, it is natural for parties to a conflict to refer their cases to a particular masquerade deity for mediation. When this happens, the parties to the conflict are often sent summon letters to appear at the shrine of that deity on a said date, but not until a summon fee has been paid. On that date, the head of the masquerade (*Arughu*) cult ask for certain items to be presented before procession can take place. At the presentation of those items the head of the masquerade (*Arughu*) cult who is obviously the Chief Priest (*Oyil Okuru*) of that shrine, proceed to hear from both parties to the conflict. After all submissions have been made, he proceeds to find a truce to the conflict. If this truce is accepted by the warring parties, they are then made to take an oath of agreement and acceptance of the verdict, promising that none of the parties will renege on the truce reached. However, in the event that one party is not satisfied with the outcome, he is allowed to appeal to another higher authority, where the matter can be effectively addressed.

Effectiveness of Traditional Conflict Management Strategies in Abua

The effectiveness of traditional conflict management strategies among the Abua people of Rivers State, can be assessed through their contributions to social order, reconciliation, communal stability, and the preservation of indigenous institutions. Traditional mechanisms relied on the authority of elders, family heads, traditional rulers, community assemblies, customary laws, oath-taking, mediation, arbitration, and compensation. Their effectiveness depended on the nature of the dispute, the legitimacy of the mediators, the willingness of conflicting parties to accept customary decisions, and the prevailing political and economic circumstances. These are explained, albeit, briefly:

- i. **Mediation and the authority of elders:** Mediation was an important approach to resolving disagreements involving families, individuals, land, marriage, and communal relationships. Respected elders (*akor-igua*) and lineage heads (*arala-arugun*) intervened by

listening to opposing parties, examining claims, and recommending mutually acceptable settlements. Its effectiveness lay in the moral authority of the mediators and their understanding of local customs. Because disputants often belonged to interconnected families and communities, reconciliation could preserve relationships and prevent disagreements from escalating into prolonged hostility (Akari, 2025). This approach reflects the broader African tradition of negotiated settlement and community-based justice discussed by Zartman (2000). However, mediation was less effective when parties rejected the authority of elders or when powerful individuals refused to accept compromise.

- ii. **Arbitration and customary authority:** Arbitration provided a mechanism through which recognised community authorities could hear disputes and pronounce decisions based on customary principles, testimony, established practices, and claims to rights or property. In Abua, this mechanism was examined in relation to land boundaries, inheritance, family disagreements, and conflicts between community groups. Its principal strength was that it offered a locally legitimate alternative to prolonged confrontation. Decisions could be reinforced by kinship obligations, communal expectations, and the reputations of the parties involved (Fubara, 2025). Nevertheless, arbitration's effectiveness depended on the impartiality of the arbitrators and the willingness of disputants to comply. Where evidence was disputed, customary rules were contested, or political influence affected proceedings, arbitration failed to achieve lasting peace.
- iii. **Compensation, restitution, and reconciliation:** Compensation also helped to resolve disputes by requiring an offending party to make restitution for injury, property damage, or other recognised losses. Rather than concentrating exclusively on punishment, this approach sought to restore social relationships and reduce the likelihood of retaliation (Eleazar, 2025). In communities where families maintained long-term economic and social connections, restitution provided a practical foundation for reconciliation. In Abua, however, the effectiveness of compensation depended on whether the affected party considered the settlement adequate and whether the agreement addressed the underlying cause of the dispute.
- iv. **Oath-taking and spiritual sanctions:** Oath-taking (*ogrir-iyor*) and appeals to spiritual authority further served as deterrents against dishonesty, false accusations, and violations of agreements where participants recognised the authority of the relevant traditional institutions. The possibility of social disgrace, spiritual consequences, or loss of communal trust encouraged disputants to speak truthfully and comply with settlements. Such practices were potentially effective because they connected conflict resolution with shared cultural beliefs. Nevertheless, their effectiveness was limited where parties no longer accepted traditional religious authority or where fear and coercion replaced voluntary agreement (Akari, 2025).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the discourse above, the following are some recommendations proposed to enhance indigenous conflict management strategies in Abua. They are:

- i. **Strengthening Indigenous Conflict-Resolution Institutions:** There is a need to strengthen and institutionalise indigenous mechanisms for conflict management in Abua. Traditional rulers, clan heads, elders, women leaders and youth representatives should be actively involved in mediation, reconciliation and peacebuilding. Their knowledge of customary norms, kinship relationships and historical grievances can facilitate locally acceptable solutions before conflicts escalate into violence.

- ii. **Documentation and Preservation of Indigenous Practices:** The indigenous conflict-management strategies of Abua should be systematically documented and preserved. Oral histories, traditional laws, reconciliation ceremonies, oath-taking practices, negotiation procedures and community sanctions should be recorded through collaboration between scholars, traditional institutions and community organisations. Such documentation would prevent the loss of valuable indigenous knowledge and provide resources for future generations.
- iii. **Promoting Inclusive Community Dialogue:** Regular community dialogue should be encouraged among the different clans, families, youths, women and traditional institutions in Abua. Periodic peace forums can provide opportunities for communities to address land disputes, chieftaincy disagreements, resource-related tensions and other grievances before they develop into violent conflicts. Youth and women should receive meaningful representation because their participation can broaden the legitimacy of peace processes.
- iv. **Integrating Indigenous and Formal Mechanisms:** Government authorities should recognise and complement indigenous conflict-management mechanisms with formal legal and administrative institutions. Rather than replacing customary approaches, courts, local government authorities and security agencies should cooperate with traditional institutions, particularly in mediation and early-warning processes. This integrated approach can improve conflict prevention while ensuring that customary practices operate consistently with constitutional rights and applicable laws.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it can be seen that from the pre-colonial period, when disputes were largely associated with land ownership, chieftaincy, trade, interpersonal disagreements, and community boundaries, conflicts gradually assumed new dimensions under colonial administration and post-colonial governance. The introduction of modern political institutions, economic transformations, environmental pressures, and competition over development opportunities further influenced the causes, intensity, and consequences of social conflicts. However, Abua communities have continued to employ indigenous mechanisms, including negotiation, mediation, arbitration, traditional leadership, communal dialogue, and oath-taking, to resolve disputes and restore peaceful relationships.

A. Primary Source (Oral Interview)

S/N	NAMES	SEX	AGE	STATUS	PLACE OF INTERVIEW	DATE OF INTERVIEW
1	Chief Eleazar Monday Nwakarika	M	63	Compound Chief	Abua Central	21/07/2025
2	Chief Chukwu, Umore Akioma	M	69	Compound Chief	Aminigboko Community	30/11/2025
3	Chief Edwin Ikata	M	NIL	Traditional Ruler	Port Harcourt	25/07/2024
4	Chief Malambi, Osila	M	74	Family Chief	Aminigboko Community	05/05/2024
5	Dumni Okurugbo	M	NIL	Teacher/Historian	Amalem	31/12/2025
6	Upheel, Dickson	M	52	Trader	Emesu	11/11/2025
7	Wariboko, Victor	M	50	Civil Servant	Port Harcourt	20/03/2025
8	Miupiomani, Akari	M	54	Farmer	Obaraany	07/06/2025
9	Fubara, Igenewari	M	57	Farmer	Egbolom	27/03/2025

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