

# Examining Traditional Leaders' Role in Managing Political Conflict and Peace Building in Zambia

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**Abstract-** *Inpre-modern societies, conflicts were often managed and resolved through a council of elders or eminent individuals within a traditional setting. Currently, conflict management seem to be complex due to the interdependence of actors that underlie varying interests leading to disputes which has to some level underrated the role played by the traditional leaders in disagreement meditation. This paper examines the role of traditional leaders in managing political conflict for peace building at national level in Zambia. Using qualitative approaches and a case study research design, data was collected through semi structured interviews with 30 key informants who were purposively sampled. The study was also shaped by secondary sources of data and desk reviews. The data was analysed following a thematic approach. The results of the study confirm that traditional leaders have influence in political conflict management and peace building processes. This paper has revealed that the role tradition leaders or chiefs played a significant role in the nationalist movement. Their positive contribution manifested itself from economic growth to political and social development before and after Zambia's independence. It is clear in this study that the effect of tradition leadership in countries like Zambia is still active with considerable amount of leverage on the political direction of a country and chiefs in chiefdoms, who have the power to mediate various forms of conflicts including political disputes.*

**Indexed Terms-** *Chiefs, conflict, peace building, politics, traditional leaders, Zambia*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Conflict management refers to the management of conflicts by which parties of a conflict come together to solve their conflict or differences [1]. Traditional

leaders have long been involved in mediation by creating a balance in the process of mediation and tribal disputes and in some cases led in restoring peace and reconciliation ventures. Traditional leaders have been given prominence in mediation of disputes especially in Africa and Asia and are often perceived as leaders with wisdom to navigate conflict negotiation processes, they are also highly valued and regarded in our African institutions as important part of the African culture however, this is just in theory since their input in solving conflicts is not put in practice at national level[2, 3].

From the crisis in Angola, to the post genocidere conciliation process in Rwanda and Liberia, traditional elders have played an important role, however their role in conflict management has arguably not been well documented within the realm of national peace initiatives. The success of traditional leaders in solving inter-clan or tribal conflicts stems from the fact that they form the core of society and socialization process in many African countries. In the olden days, when traditional leaders were engaged in conflict resolution by the colonial masters, their input was arguably not taken into consideration [4]. As a result, peace outcomes negotiated were not accepted or implemented successfully by people who were intrinsically webbed in clan leadership as they did with internal state peace agreements. Therefore, it can be argued that social strands of many African nations are weaved within traditional tenets, making it necessary that any attempted effort for conflict resolution and reconciliation considers traditional leaders in conflict management, mediation and peace building [5].

In modern state settings, the roles that traditional authorities can play in the process of good governance can broadly be separated into three categories: first, their advisory role to government, as

well as their participatory role in the administration of regions and districts [6]. Second, their developmental role, complementing government's efforts in mobilizing the population for the implementation of development projects, sensitizing them on health issues such as sexually transmitted diseases, promoting education, encouraging economic enterprises, inspiring respect for the law and urging participation in the electoral process; and third, their role in conflict resolution, an area where traditional leaders across Africa have already demonstrated and shown success in traditional setups [7, 8, 27].

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of traditional leaders in managing political conflict for peace building at national level in Zambia. The paper is divided into four main sections: first it establishes the different forms of managing political conflicts and peace building. Second, it assesses the capacity that traditional leaders have in the dispensation of their roles in political conflict situations. Third section examines the level of influence of traditional leaders in political conflict management and peace building processes. The fourth part gives a conclusion on the major issues discussed in the paper and makes some suggestions on points of further enquiry and action in the subject area.

- Traditional set-ups and political related disputes:  
A theoretical view

Political conflicts especially during elections are a common feature of Zambia's rural and urban communities [2, 9]. How these politically motivated and ethnicity driven conflicts in Zambia are managed from a traditional form of leadership remains under-researched. Thus, ways of resolving such conflicts among citizens with divergent views and differing political affiliations under the same chiefdom needs to be studied. In rural communities, traditional leaders play an upper role in solving such conflicts [10].

The connection between political conflict, peace building and role of traditional leaders in managing political conflicts at national level needs to be examined. Political violence is a problem that Zambia has faced especially during elections and the extent to which traditional leaders abide by their

traditional roles and duties in resolving politicised conflicts from the local to the national level must be explored. There have been relatively few studies examining whether traditional institutions perform comparatively worse than alternative institutions in providing individuals with rights and protecting them from exploitation [11]. In Liberia, women in disputes with men tend to opt out of the customary system if they are given access to legal aid and they are happier with the results of their cases when they do [12]. Similarly, in Papua New Guinea, the creation of community police as an alternative method of dispute resolution is viewed more favorably by women than by men, and women are more likely to exit the traditional justice system when given the option [13]. The creation of gender-inclusive village development committees improve citizens' attitudes toward women's political participation compared to communities where they do not exist [14].

Most of the reviewed studies here suggest that conflict resolution in regard to marginalized groups, women in particular, are weaker under traditional governance institutions compared to progressive institutions. However, in other settings, customary institutions have been found to perform better than existing alternatives in protecting and handling conflict matters and establishing rule of law. For example, in Afghanistan, citizens express stronger support for conflict resolution matters for women in villages where traditional consultative councils are strong. Afghani citizens also expect customary councils to perform better than elected councils in reducing social divisions and further in reconciliation, suggesting traditional institutions may in some instances outperform alternatives in providing rule of law. These latter findings indicate the problem with frameworks that assume traditional institutions always perform worse than alternative institutions in protecting rights of subjects in regard to conflict management. Their relative performance will depend on both their own quality and the quality of the alternative systems. Traditional authorities are not always regressive, and modern alternatives are not always egalitarian [15].

## II. METHODOLOGY

The case study research design which was purely qualitative in nature was used in this study and provided the guiding framework for this study. This is so because the study principally focused on one traditional leader; Chieftainess Nkomeshya of the soli people in Chong we district of Lusaka province. The study targeted a population of village heads, elders, protocol personnel and traditional leaders of the chiefdom. Nonetheless, for feasibility and practicality considerations a purposive sampling method was used and a sample of 30 participants was recruited.

Data was collected through semi structured interview schedules. To ensure valid and reliability of the data that was collected, a pilot study was done. Five participants were picked for the pilot so as to test and refine the instruments (interview guide and testing the effectiveness of the Dictaphone). This study used both primary and secondary data. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were useful in this research because they allowed the researcher to probe further for more issues from participants, something that is not possible in a questionnaire.

The data that was collected was examined in order to find comparisons between the study and the outcomes from the review of written materials or contents [11]. The researcher used content analysis which helped to identify key content across findings and strengthen the study arguments and conclusions. The data obtained was also analyzed through the use of descriptive statistics that were computed mainly using excel and manually. The values emanating from the data analysis was presented using some descriptive statistics backed by narrations. The data that has been presented here gives a contrast analysis using themes of the role that traditional leaders play in managing political conflict and peace building in Zambia.

## III. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study got ethical clearance from the University of Zambia, ethics committee [REF No. HSSREC-2021-FEB-009]. The following ethical issues were taken into consideration. Information sheets that

show the details of the study were given to participants beforehand. The traditional leaders were informed of the purpose of the study and why the study was being conducted. All participants were asked to consent to participate in the research beforehand. They were given full information about what the research is all about.

The participants were not compelled to participate in this study but they were free to withdraw at any time. This made them to freely decide to be part of the research or not. The participants were accorded free and conducive atmosphere to participate in the study. The names of participants were kept anonymous and in other circumstances names were not required. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld and care was taken to ensure that identities of individuals, organizations and places are not reviewed.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

- Different forms of managing political conflicts and peace building

This study established the different forms of managing political conflicts and peace building. It was reported by participants that they are many ways of understanding the term conflict resolution. Most of the participants understood the term conflict resolution as the process of attempting to resolve conflict. Conflict resolution must be seen as comprising of an agenda that aims at setting to assist parties in conflict or dispute so as to establish a common ground, given certain guiding principles or conditionality's for peaceful co-existence between families, villages and nations at large [12]. Thus, it covers conflict management which is the process of becoming aware of actual or potential conflict, diagnosing its nature and scope and employing appropriate methodology to diffuse the emotion energy, involved and enable disputing parties to understand and resolve their differences in the society or community setting [13].

Furthermore, majority of the participants demonstrated awareness about the various forms of resolving conflicts among community members. A total of 83% of study participants indicated that they knew the forms of resolving conflicts among community and only 17% of the participants stated

that they did not know any form of resolving conflicts among community members. The traditional leaders stated that a lot of conflict does happen in their areas and they get involved in settling them as the disputing parties bring such matters to them to reach resolutions. The traditional leaders also stated that they know these forms of resolving conflicts among community members because they go to seminars where they are taught on how to settle home domestic matters and civil matters among their subjects by various non-governmental organisations such as Zambia Women's Lobby Group, Chapter One Foundation and Zambia Governance Foundation.

Different forms of managing political conflicts and peace building among community members exists. The establishment within the traditional leadership systems help intervene as third party which brings in the issue of mediation. According to Acemoglu, and colleagues shows that mediation refers to the reconciliation of two opposing forces within a given society [14]. This way of understanding mediation considers the notion that as an intervention, a third party (traditional leaders in our case), serves as a facilitator of communication between the parties and as a catalyst for reaching an agreement between the opposing interests, the parties become active participants in the dispute resolution process, and help forge the terms and conditions of their own settlement [15].

It is clear that traditional leaders are important in mediating and resolving political conflicts in Africa [16, 17]. Traditional conflict management practice is a part of the social system which has been proven over time to be efficient in reconciliation since it improves social relationships by restoring balance, settling disputes and managing conflict because it is deeply rooted in the customs and traditions of Africa.

Bring conflicting parties together through mediation promotes good communication between the differing parties by acting as a buffer zone thereby reducing unnecessary tension and suspicion [18]. Mediation does create a bargaining structure without the parties conceding defeat to each other since it supports their own efforts to manage the conflict with the presence

of a third party [19]. This can be seen in the Somali conflict which lasted for a longtime because of constant fear, anger and suspicion among the warring parties leading to various negotiations to no avail but deteriorating humanitarian crisis. However, when mediation starts between the parties by the traditional leaders their perceptions started to change because of the understanding of the consequences of the violent conflict and the acceptance by the parties to end the conflict [20, 21].

- Traditional leaders' capacity and roles in handling political conflict situations

This study found that the capacity of traditional leaders is useful in the delivery of their roles in political conflict situations. In assessing the capacity that traditional leaders have in the dispensation of their roles in political conflict situations, participants were about how they understood phrase 'political violence'. The findings show that most of the participants understood the term political violence as a situation where the party cadres intimidate the other people to join their party. It was generally agreed by participants that every person has the right to join the party of their choice, no one force people them, but the disagreement of two parties in politics who can't agree on one thing in terms of political views is what causes political violence in most cases.

The issues around cause of political violence in their traditional areas, were reported as being linked to members of the political parties perceive the others as their enemies. The youths are the ones usually involved in such vices. In some cases, the traditional leaders stated that political violence can occur if traditional leaders are actively involved in being members of political parties and choose to side with a political party instead of staying neutral. Thus, in this many villages traditional leaders do not allow the youths to perpetrate political violence, those that are found to be perpetrating the vice are sat down by the village elders to talk to them to stop the vice, if they continue, they are taken by village security men and taken to police to be dealt with regardless of who they are in the communities they belong.

The participants talked about being involved in resolving political conflict among members of their community. A total of 67% of the participants

indicated that they had been involved in resolving political conflict among members of their community and a small number 33% of the participants indicated that they had not been involved in resolving political conflict among members of their community.

The participants that indicated that they had been involved in resolving political conflict among members of their community stated that they discovered that most of the times the politicians want to use the youth to perpetrate political violence by making them drink beer, when they are drunk, they reach an extent of fighting youths they perceive as enemies within the same party or from other political parties. The participants that indicated that they had not been involved in resolving political conflict among members of their community stated that they had never experienced political violence in their areas among the youths or among their subjects in their communities.

Further, the participants that indicated that they had been involved in resolving political conflict among members of their community were asked to state how they resolve conflicts on differing political views among community members. It was reported in this study that to resolve conflicts on differing political views among community members, the traditional leaders invite section leaders of the two parties in conflict and invite the people who were in conflict from both parties and bring them together and sit them down and talk to them to resolve the conflict. The traditional leaders stated that they talk to the people who perpetrate conflicts on differing political views and make them understand that at the end of the day they come from the same village and community and thus they are one people and must observe peace among themselves. Indicating in their own opinion on what the best way of resolving political conflicts could be, the traditional leaders stated that there must be respect for the right of every person to belong to any political grouping of his or her choice without intimidation or threats from other political groupings as is the case at the moment, if this way is adhered to people will be able to move live and coexist together without causing harm to one another even if they have differing political views.

In further assessing the capacity of traditional leaders in the dispensation of their roles in political conflict situations it was reported that, this mainly depends on whether the conflicting parties do heed to what the traditional leaders' advice as means of ending such conflicts.

Though the majority of participants were of the view that the when a problem is established, conflicting parties do heed to what the traditional leaders' advice as means of ending such conflicts. A total of 80% of the participants indicated that the conflicting parties do heed to what the traditional leaders' advice as means of ending such conflicts. In contrast only 20% indicated that the conflicting parties do not heed to what the traditional leaders say as means of ending such conflicts.

In stating the specific period of the year in which political conflicts mostly occur, the traditional leaders indicated that political conflicts mostly occur during election years or when there are by-elections being conducted in the area. And after elections things get back to normal. The majority of participants reported that they have received informal and formal training in resolving political conflicts. From the sampled population, 72% indicated that they had received training either informal or formal in resolving political conflicts. Contrary, 28% of the participants reported that they have not received any training on political related conflicts. Those who indicated that had received training informal or formal in resolving political conflicts stated that there are people who go to train them and have workshops with them from non-governmental organisations such as Zambia Women's Lobby Group, Chapter One Foundation and Zambia Governance Foundation Others stated that they do discuss ways of resolving political conflicts at village zone meetings as headmen, headwomen and village elders.

The majority of the participants at had trained others or passed on the knowledge in political conflict resolution. A total of 76% of those who received training further reported that they had cascaded or passed on the knowledge on political conflict resolution to others and only 24% of the participants stated that they had not shared what they know [22]. Traditional leaders are respected as seasoned

mediators depending on traditions, personalities and circumstance of the conflict. They gave examples of the pastoralist societies of Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda and South Sudan where cattle rustling is a mayhem, they state that it is the clan elders who are called upon by their respective communities to intervene and find solutions with the help of the conflict managers. This shows their ever importance in mediation in a society where they are believed to be experienced in conflict resolution mechanisms. Another example is the Kpelle people of Liberia who convene ad hoc local meeting called *Moots* where parties to a conflict reach a mediated settlement while the Ndendeuli of Tanzania look at mutual agreements and pressurizing parties to compromise in instances where conflicts are complex in finding a win – win solution [3, 23].

Further, in countries such as Malawi, Rwanda, Kenya and Zambia, traditional authorities play a prominent role as mediators of conflict [10]. It is in this regard that the penalties, instituted usually focus on compensation or restitution in order to restore the status quo of maintaining peace, rather than punishment. During the colonial and in pre-colonial Africa the traditional leaders' forum in a number of societies assumed a more adjudicatory role for the most serious crimes such as murder and witchcraft [24]. In such cases capital punishment would be considered. Their role as chiefs was and has been to bring disputing parties together and to create an atmosphere in which they can resolve their differences. Thus, Banch off observes that the traditional leaders have the capacity to act as facilitators in conflict resolution [25].

- Traditional leaders in political conflict management and peace building processes

The majority of the participants indicated that traditional leaders do not participate in political processes. A total of 80% of the participants mentioned that they do not participate in political processes, while 20% of the participants indicated that they participate in political processes. The traditional leaders who indicated that they do not participate in political processes stated that as traditional leaders they are required to be neutral and side or support any political party. They stated that they are required to take a non-partisan stance to keep

the peace among their subjects because if they side with a political party and their get to know of it, it would breach the peace as those who may choose to support a different party from the one the traditional leader supports may be treated as enemies by the subjects who support the same party with the traditional leader.

It was a commonly held view that traditional leaders are not considered in resolving political conflict at national level. A total of 67% participants were of the view that traditional leaders are not considered in resolving political conflict at national level and 33% talked about some engagement of chiefs in resolving political conflict at national level, especially during general elections.

The traditional leaders stated that they are not considered in resolving political conflict at national level because as traditional leaders they are required to be neutral when it comes to politics and that traditional leaders are not politicians, they required not to side with any political party although they are required to work with the government of the day on national governance and development issues.

The majority of the participants stated that they are not influenced by political leaders to make decisions in resolving political conflict. Seventy percent of the participants indicated that they are not influenced by political leaders to make decisions in resolving political conflict and 30% of the participants mentioned that they are influenced by political leaders to make decisions in resolving political conflict. The findings further show that traditional leaders have managed to resolve political conflicts among members of their community that involve themselves in political violence and political conflict. However, when it comes to participating in political processes, traditional leaders are not involved as they are required to stay neutral and not side with any political party.

The study further reveals that in modern Zambia, the chiefs provide a forum for the exchange of views and experiences. The government attached considerable importance to all the chiefs. He shows that chiefs helped to improve the quality of leadership and guidance which people needed for their daily

activities because chiefs are part and parcel of the Zambian government. They are paid by the government from public funds for the work they are expected to do. In his book Kaunda stipulates with clarity that chiefs were important units of governance because they are directly in contact with the people on the ground especially in the rural areas. During Zambia's independence and after 1964, traditional leaders through the house of chiefs represented people in their various areas; this facilitated for good governance in the nation, enhanced education systems and they gave government feedback on the needs of the people thus this helped government to foster development in all parts of the country [26, 27].

### CONCLUSION

It has been found and discussed by this study that the commonest forms of managing political conflicts and peace building among the traditional leaders is sitting the conflicting parties down and talking to them to find a resolution to end such conflicts. The findings also show that traditional leaders resolved most of the conflicts through sitting down the conflicting parties and talking to them to find a resolution to end the conflicts. Traditional conflict management practice is a part of the social system which has been proven over time to be efficient in reconciliation since it improves social relationships by restoring balance, settling disputes and managing conflict because it is deeply rooted in the customs and traditions of Africa.

Traditional leaders shape political conflict management and peace building processes. Chiefs in Zambia have managed to resolve political conflicts among members of their community. However, when it comes to participating in political processes, traditional leaders are not involved as they are required to stay neutral and not side with any political party. The findings further show that the traditional leaders are not considered in resolving political conflict at national level because they are required to be neutral when it comes to politics and that they are not politicians and thus they are not required to support any political party although they are required to work with the government of the day on national governance and development issues.

Government through its relevant agencies like ministry of chiefs and traditional affairs should formulate policies that will facilitate the training of more traditional leaders in conflict management skills so that they can effectively resolve all forms of conflicts (political, civil, land and marital disputes) among their subjects in their traditional areas. Further research on traditional leaders in managing conflict and peace building in Zambia should focus on how traditional leaders resolve conflicts that base on suspicions of witchcraft among their subjects. As such conflicts are common among elderly subjects in the village setup, the research should consider investigating the method traditional leaders use to determine whether the witchcraft suspicions and accusations of the elderly in the villages are true or false and how they resolve such conflicts to bring peace among the conflicting parties.

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