

TRADITIONAL RULERS AND COMMUNAL CONFLICTS AMONG THE TIV PEOPLE OF BENUE STATE

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Abstract

The global community, especially Sub-Saharan Africa has progressively become a battle field for communal conflicts overland resource affiliation involving incompatible interest and uses. This paper examines communal conflicts within the context of the remote and proximate causes and the role of traditional rulers towards achieving sustainable solutions to identify the remote and proximate causes of communal clashes in Tivland within the context of population growth. As well as to examine the role of traditional rulers in reducing/ending communal conflicts among the Tiv people. The paper, which is anchored on primary and secondary data administered 400 structured questionnaire on respondents. Purposively sample from traditional rulers, community leaders, youth associations and the general masses drawn from Gboko and Katsina-Ala LGAs, which are administrative areas of two of the three senatorial districts of Benue State. The study embraced Geographic Information System (GIS) to produce bar graphs to analyze demographic data. Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis using percentages and Pearson correlation were employed to test hypotheses. Result revealed that communal conflicts in Benue State have strong positive correlation with exponential population growth. The result also revealed that traditional rulers have made spectacular landmarks in the quest for sustainable solutions but these have yielded little fruits. In conclusion, the study highlighted the pivotal role of traditional leadership in resolving communal conflicts in Tivland, identifying population growth and land scarcity as drivers of conflicts, disrupting the balance between land demand and supply. The study accordingly recommends aggressive population education for the masses, strengthening the institution of traditional leadership and modern techniques of production. The study finally recommends that the command structure of security architecture in all states and local government levels should be based on indigene-ship to beef up allegiance to traditional rulers.

Keywords: Traditional rulers, Communal conflicts, Benue State.

Introduction

The human society is highly characterized by communal conflicts, which often transform to violent clashes. These conflicts, which are substantially rooted in exponential population growth on limited fixed land areas have progressively rocked social security and livelihoods thereby intensifying poverty particularly in rural localities, (Asaasuen T. Idyorough, S.M, Akaan R. (2025). It is interesting to note that the entire global community is progressively becoming a battle field for communal conflicts built around differentials in spatial land structures based on socioeconomic affiliations of ethnicity, religious and cultural

backgrounds, which tend to produce incompatible mix-ups in the natural and socioeconomic articulation of land areas, (Feng, 2024).

According to Dutt et al (2024), this scenario has culminated to widespread conflict that eventually escalated into violent clashes among communities in Southeast Asia. The Cambodia and Thailand, Myanmar crisis 2021 and many more are typical examples of conflicts in South Asia, in which extreme hardship was suffered and traditional rulers played significant roles in finding solutions which have yet to fully actualize.

Across Africa and Nigeria, communal conflicts have increasingly witnessed an expanded scope of geographical spread over the past decade. Until recently, the Mopti Region in Mali has been outstanding for its status as a battle field for farmers and herders due to the persistence of incompatible agrarian and livestock breeding systems on fixed land sizes that increasingly get pressurized by exponential population growth, increasing demand for arable lands coupled with harsh climatic realities of drastic shortfalls in amount and distribution of annual rainfall, (Stephan & Katariina, 2023).

Elsewhere in Africa, the Rwandan genocide of 1994 in which approximately 850,000 people were brutally killed is a typical communal conflict of ethnic affiliation, which erupted between the minority Hutu and the majority Tutsi tribes, in which Africa witnessed its most catastrophic human casualty, (Davey & Fox, 2025). Similarly, the Nigerian Landscape has an age-long history of home-grown conflicts among framers themselves on one hand and between them and nomadic pastoralists. It is worthy to note here that while the native farmers are predominantly Christians, the migrant pastoralists are substantially Muslims. This development according to Aghenenu, (2025), highly characterized by multiple undertones ascribed to religion, ethnic identities, cultural and political power play. This position is shared by many scholars of contemporary research. There is therefore a call to question, as to why the conflict scenario in Nigeria tends to heighten especially from 2014 to 2025 with the native farmers fleeing their fatherland for dear lives, while the migrant pastoralist expands their spectrum of aggressive land colonization and massive killings of farmers through their military superiority over farmers, (Asaasuen et al, 2024). Sharing the same view are others who also believe that the services of meetings between traditional rulers and other critical stakeholders like the Farmers Association of Nigeria and the Cattle Breeders Association, the Miyetti Allah are mere slogans from elite classes who are not sincerely committed to ending the communal conflict and its devastating effects on livelihood of the masses, (Olumba, 2022).

Beyond Benue State and Nigeria, communal conflicts have also erupted through explosions in the population size of the people. In a study on the Rwandan genocide in East Africa, Davey and Fox (2025), using population gazette and content analysis from published sources, reported that there is strong positive correlation between communal conflicts and growth in the size of population with the population of the Hutu and Tutsi tribes of the country under reference. On the other hand, communal conflicts also result through natural causes Ba (2023) studied communal conflicts in Mali between farmers and herdsmen using 400 questionnaires administered on farmers and herdsmen in the Mopti Region the study which adopted the scarcity theory basis for explanation reported strong positive correlation coefficient of 07.3 between climate change and communal conflict in the region, where reduced rainfall and drought caused a forceful migration of herders to locations of moderate rainfall, water and pasture.

The foregoing shows that communal conflicts in Tivland, just like in many other parts of Nigeria has multiple issues which factor its phenomenal occurrence.

Within Benue State territory and the study locality, the status quo remains the same with incredible architectures of conflicts that have assumed monstrous dimension involving periodic nocturnal and brutal

attacks of farming communities by terrorist herders, who wield their pervasive weapons in brutal massacre of the same, (Aule, 2015). Meanwhile the aftermath of such deadly attacks always seems to be one that favours peaceful coexistence among the warring factions, which then informs.

For instance, across Tivland, the scenario over the last three decades has been one of many communal clashes, (Utile & Tarnongo, 2024). The Shorov people in Buruku LGA engaged Ipav of Gboko LGA in early 1990 with series of socioeconomic destruction including killings. Also, the people of Kusuv locked heads with Ikyurav-Tiev in deadly communal clashes, which consumed lives and property worth millions of Naira between 1992-1993 and between 2004-2007. Elsewhere in Tivland, the people of Shitile in K-Ala LGA and Ikyurav-Tiev of the same Local government area clashed in 2020, putting relationship between them under strain. Lately, Etulo and Mbagen people clashed, while Mbagen later engaged Ukan of Ushongo LGA in mid July 2017, (Amasekaven & Ugal, 2025). These clashes all brought traditional rulers of the affected communities to the round table in talks that yielded positive results the need for a tripartite meeting, that usually involve the traditional rulers of both warring factions, government security agencies and other critical stakeholders of development including Non-governmental Organizations, (Utile & Tarnongo, 2024).

The foregoing paints traditional rulers as critical stakeholders of conflicts resolution in their domains, being part and parcel of the communities, they preside over. Furthermore, their phenomenal involvements in past and present peace moves in communities have made them indispensable in the scheme of true commitment to amicably resolving communal clashes not only in Benue State but also in the whole of the Nigerian State and the global community at large, (Kiffle & Mekonnen, 2024). It is therefore against this background that this study focuses on the role of traditional rulers in resolving communal conflicts in Benue State.

Statement of the Problem

For over a decade, Benue State has experienced persistent and escalating communal conflicts, many of which have assumed violent dimensions and resulted in widespread loss of lives, displacement, and socio-economic hardship among rural populations. Scholarly studies attribute these conflicts to a complex interplay of factors, including environmental stress, competition over land and agrarian resources, farmer-herder relations, cultural identity, religious differences, and political power struggles (Akinwale, 2020; Alubo, 2023; Tonah, 2021). These conflicts have been particularly pronounced in agrarian communities where increasing population pressure and land scarcity have intensified competition and communal tensions.

Within this volatile context, traditional rulers have continued to express concern and intervene at various stages of conflict escalation, drawing on customary institutions and indigenous conflict-resolution mechanisms. However, despite repeated interventions, tangible and sustainable breakthroughs in conflict resolution have remained limited. Studies suggest that while traditional rulers are often positioned as mediators due to their cultural legitimacy and proximity to the grassroots, their effectiveness is constrained by factors such as political interference, erosion of traditional authority, lack of enforcement power, and perceptions of bias (Arowosegbe, 2021; Maijama et al., 2025). As noted by Asaasuen, Idyorough, and Akaan (2025), the continued recurrence of communal violence in Benue State raises critical questions about the capacity of traditional institutions to manage conflicts effectively under contemporary socio-political pressures. Consequently, this study undertakes a systematic investigation into the roles of traditional rulers and the challenges they face in the discharge of their conflict-management responsibilities in Benue State.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the remote and proximate causes of communal conflicts in Tivland within the context of population growth.
2. To examine the role of traditional rulers in reducing/ending communal conflicts among the Tiv people.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between communal conflicts and population growth in Tiv land of Benue State.
2. The Traditional rulers have not made significant impact on resolution of communal conflict among Tiv people.

Literature review

Scholars argue that traditional rulers continue to play pivotal roles in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in African contexts, leveraging indigenous institutions and culturally embedded mediation mechanisms to manage communal disputes effectively. For instance, Maijama et al. (2025) demonstrate that traditional rulers in Taraba State employ local practices such as layered reconciliation and ritual restitution, though political interference and lack of formal recognition undermine their impact. Other Nigerian studies similarly emphasize the strategic role of traditional institutions in preventing and resolving conflicts and advocate for constitutional support to strengthen these roles. In a broader African context, research also affirms the relevance of traditional conflict resolution strategies, while noting contemporary pressures that constrain these institutions' contributions.

Agbhenenu (2025) examined the role of traditional rulers in the context of communal conflicts between the Amai and Umuebu communities of Eastern Nigeria. Using structured questionnaires and frequency distribution tables, the study reported that traditional rulers made significant contributions to conflict management. However, their role was described as having dual dimensions, functioning both as mediators and, in some cases, as contributors to conflict escalation. This finding aligns with Okoye (2024), who observed that although traditional rulers often facilitate dialogue and reconciliation at the grassroots level, perceptions of bias, kinship loyalty, and elite interests can undermine their neutrality and inadvertently intensify communal tensions. Similarly, Maijama et al. (2025) noted that traditional rulers employ culturally embedded mechanisms such as mediation, arbitration, and symbolic reconciliation, but their effectiveness is constrained by political interference and limited formal authority. Evidence from Benue State further indicates that while traditional institutions remain central to communal conflict management, challenges such as lack of cooperation from disputing parties and overlapping responsibilities with state institutions reduce their overall effectiveness (Iornenge & Aondover, 2024). Collectively, these studies support the present study's findings that traditional rulers operate at the intersection of customary practices and formal governance, navigating complex social and political pressures as grassroots representatives alongside state institutions.

Remote and proximate causes of communal conflicts

Scholars have documented how demographic pressures and heightened competition for land and natural resources play significant roles in the escalation of communal conflicts in Nigeria and across Africa. Population growth increases demand for farmland, grazing areas, and settlement space, often resulting in

land-use disputes and resource scarcity that exacerbate tensions among communities. In northern and central Nigeria, environmental degradation and changing land use patterns have forced pastoralists and farmers into contested spaces, further intensifying clashes and competition for limited land resources.

In a related position, Ujoh (2014), and studied population growth within the context of its contributions to communal conflicts in Tivland. The study which used population census figures of 1953, 1991 and 2006 conducted by the National Population Commission as bases for its statistical technique of ANOVA, (Analysis of Variance), reported significant variation in size of forest land, bare ground and built-up, where land use, land cover changes intensified with increasing size of population for the respective census periods.

Traditional rulers and conflict resolution

The role of traditional rulers in conflict resolution is increasingly becoming indispensable, by reason of their stakeholder ship as community-based leaders at the grassroot level, where inter-personal relationship among members of the community is more closely linked, (Duursma & Gamaz, 2023). In a study of traditional institution against the background of their impact on conflict resolution, Adepeju and Oyebode (2025), using respondents in Ijebuland of Ondo State reported that traditional rulers have made significant impact on resolving communal conflict of land resource utilization, being key stakeholders as third party after the warring factions.

In another study, Aghenenu, (2025), studied the role of traditional rulers within the context of the case of communal conflicts between Amai and Umuebu communities of Eastern Nigeria. The study based on structured questionnaires and the use of frequency distribution tables reported significant contributions by traditional rulers, whose role, the study described as having double faces both as escalators and mediators. This review relates positively with the situation in the study locality where the role of traditional rulers navigates through customary practices and formal governance as they operate as grassroots based representation alongside government or state institutions.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the conflict theory by Karl Marx, which views society as a complex area with competing interest over limited resources. The 19th Century political philosopher putting the theory in 1867 contends that the endowments of nature are not uniformly distributed and the human society by reason of its continuous increase in population tends to compete over the resources, which leads to conflict among communities, ethnic identities and nations.

The phenomenal choice of this theory is by reason of its focus on societal dynamics as a struggle for limited earth's resources, relative to the study's framework which revolves around communal conflicts orchestrated by increasing magnitude of resource shortages.

Methods and Materials

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design and was conducted in Tiv land, Benue State, Nigeria, covering the Tiv Traditional Headquarters in Gboko and selected districts in Katsina-Ala, Kwande, and Buruku LGAs.

The study population comprised traditional rulers and members of the general public within Tiv land. A total of 300 structured questionnaires were administered using purposive sampling: 200 to traditional rulers

from the Tiv Traditional Headquarters and district/kin-based rulers, and 100 to members of the general public.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires and focus group discussions. Demographic data were analysed using bar graphs, while Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was employed to test the study's hypotheses. Qualitative data from focus group discussions were analysed thematically.

Ethical considerations included voluntary participation, informed consent, and the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. Data collected were used strictly for academic purposes.

Results and Analysis

Demographic and socioeconomic profile

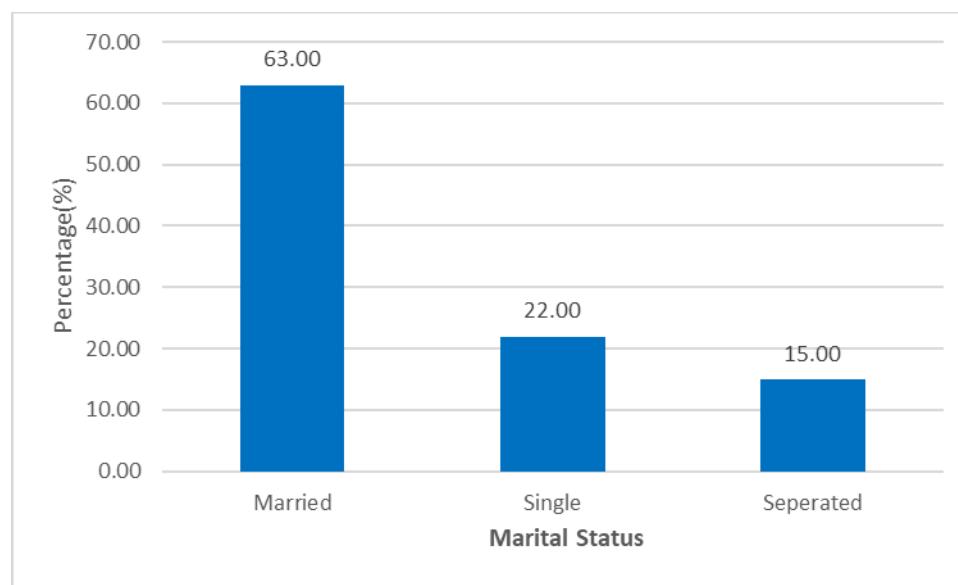


Figure 1: Bar graph showing marital status of respondents.

Figure 1 shows marital status of respondents with the married proportion making up 63 % of the sampled respondents, while 22 percent and 15 % were single and separated respectively.

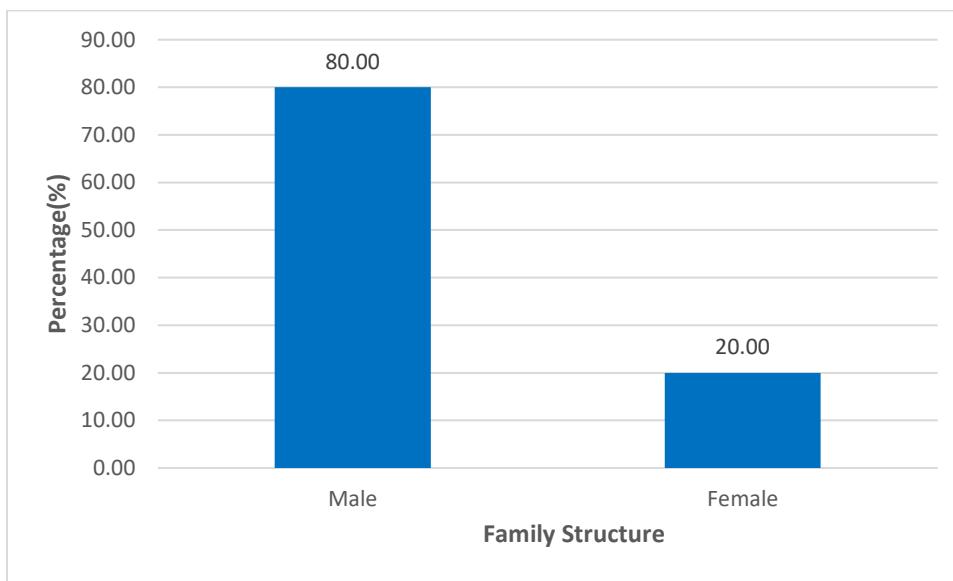


Figure 2: Bar graph showing Gender of respondents.

Figure 2 indicates that 80 % of the sampled respondents were male and 20 % were drawn from the female gender.

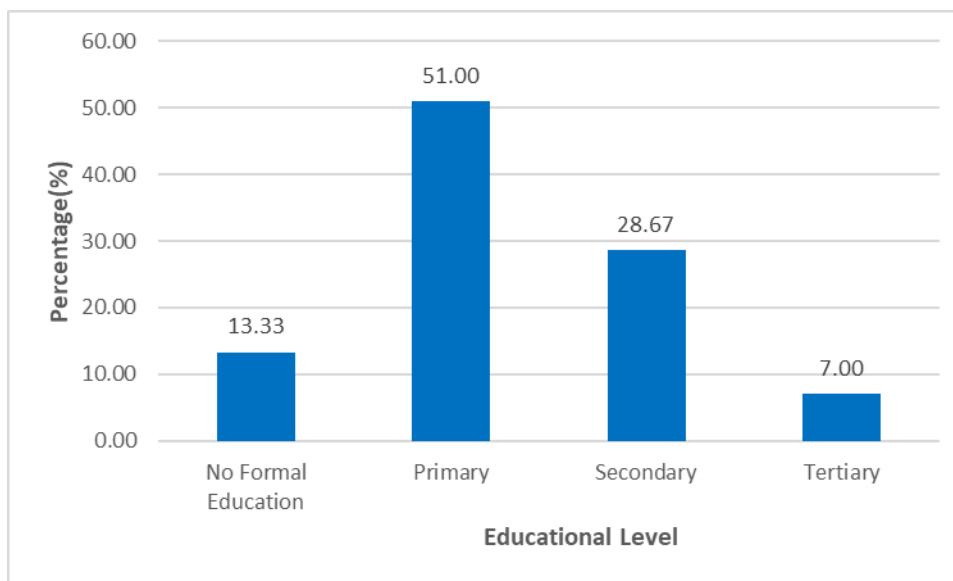


Figure 3: Bar graph for educational attainment of respondents.

Figure 3 indicates that 13% of the sampled respondents were without formal education, while 51% of the sampled respondents had attained primary school. The table also indicates that 26.67 % and 7 % respectively attained secondary and tertiary level of education.

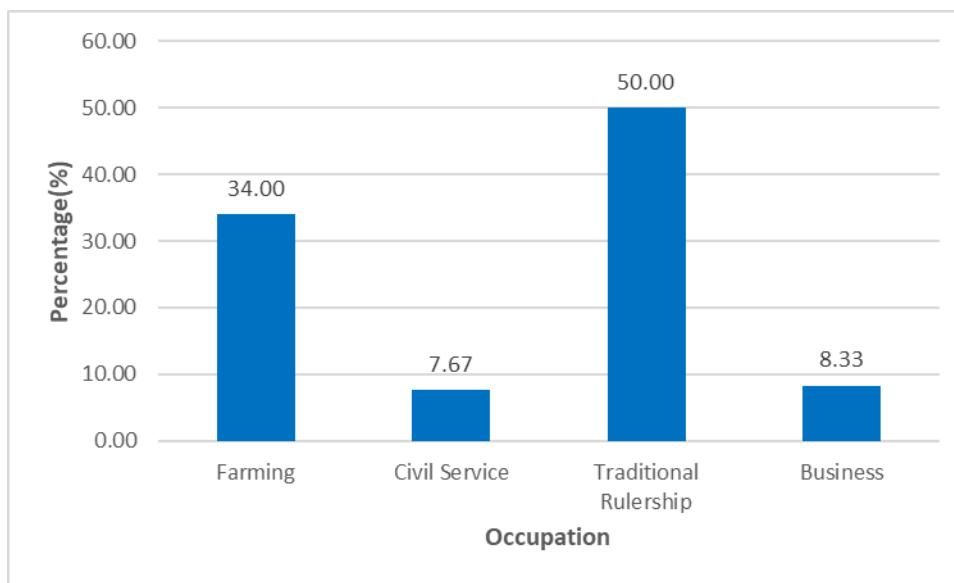


Figure 4: Bar graph showing occupation of respondents.

Figure 4 indicates that 34 % of the sampled respondents were engaged in farming, 7.67 % were civil servants and

50 % of them were engaged in traditional leadership institutions, while 8.33 % were engaged in business.

Table 1: Test of relationship between communal conflicts and population growth

Variables	N.	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2 Tailed Test)
Population growth	300	0.445	0.000
Communal conflicts			

The correlation is significant at 0.01 level, (2 tailed).

Source: Field survey. May, 2025.

Table 1.3 indicates a positive correlation coefficient of 0.445, which implies a significant relationship between the two variables indicating that communal conflicts and population growth move together in the same direction at all times. Thus, increasing growth in the size of population leads to significant rise in communal conflicts in the study area. Therefore, the hypothesis, which denies the existence of a significant relationship between the communal conflict and population growth, is hereby rejected in favour of an alternative hypothesis, that there is a significant relationship between the two variables. It is however to be noted that the significance level the test indicates that there are possibly other factors behind communal conflicts in the study area, which can be another study area.

Table 2: Test of relationship between traditional ruler ship and communal conflicts resolution among Tiv people

Variables	N.	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2 Tailed Test)
Traditional rulers	300	0.737	0.000
Communal conflicts			

The correlation is significant at 0.01 level, (2 tailed).

Source: Field survey, 2025.

Table 2 indicates a strong positive correlation coefficient of 0.737, which implies a significant relationship between the two variables indicating that the role of traditional rulers is paramount in conflict resolution in

Tiv land. As the correlation coefficient of 0.737 implies that the role of traditional rulers and the phenomenon of conflict resolution move together. This means the more the traditional rulers intervene in conflicts resolutions, the more the resolution works. Therefore, the hypothesis, which states that traditional rulers have not made significant impact on resolution of conflict in Tivland is hereby rejected and in its place, an alternative hypothesis that traditional ruler ship institutions have made significant impact on communal conflict resolution in Tiv land.

Hypothesis 1 “There is no significant relationship between communal conflicts and populationgrowth in Tivland of Benue State

Hypothesis 2 The traditional rulers have not made significant impact on resolution of communal conflict among Tiv people.

Discussion of findings

This study examined the role of traditional rulers in conflict resolution in Tivland within the context of remote and proximate causes and the positive impact played by traditional rulers relative to conflict resolution. The study found that exponential population growth over time on fixed land areas against the background of widespread land use and land cover changes were the major causes of communal conflict conflicts in Tivland of Benue State. This finding collaborates with earlier findings by Tsuwa and Adorowa ([2023](#)) in their study of communal conflict in Bonta community of Konshisha LGA of Benue State, in which they reported that there was significant correlation between population growth and changes in land use and land cover, whereas these were major issues behind communal conflicts.

Elsewhere in Benue State, this finding also collaborates with earlier findings by Audu et al (2023), who studied conflict over land resources and declining agricultural productivity in Benue State using structural questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and reported increasing pressure on limited land resources from population growth through expanded scopes of buildup, agrarian and livestock grazing activities.

Beyond the shores of Africa, Wang et al (2025), studied land use conflicts in the Harbin-Changchun urban agglomeration in China using the Production Ecological living theory as bases for analysis of the origin and effects of conflicts of land use, This study reported significant relationship between population growth and land use conflict in the region within the context of routine economic development, environmental degradation and climate change which triggers off the proliferation of socioeconomic structures on limited land area, thereby offsetting the delicate equilibrium between its demand and supply leading to conflict.

The study again found that there is a significant relationship between traditional leadership institutions and communal conflict resolution within Tivland. This finding implies that traditional leadership institutions have made positive impact on conflict resolution within Tivland. This findings harmonies with earlier finding by Emmanuel (2025), who studied communal conflict in Northern Nigeria within the context of the role traditional rulers in peace building using Emirs, District Heads and Village Chiefs as bases for interpersonal interaction through Key Informant Interview and Focus Group Discussion (KII & FGD). The study which anchored on the scarcity theory reported strong positive correlation between traditional leadership institutions and conflict resolutions in the region involving Bornu, Yobe, Adamawa, and Gombe states.

This finding also harmonies with earlier finding by Ezani *et al* (2025), in their study on unethical practices and the role of traditional ruler-ship structures in resolving conflict in Tivland. The study used mixed method research design with descriptive statistic of frequency distribution and percentages as bases

for analysis of data which reported that traditional rulers have made tremendous impact on conflict resolution in Tiv land.

It is interesting to note one unique feature of the Ezeanu and co-study. The study clearly stands out by pointing out that, despite the significant roles of traditional leadership and rulership structures within Tiv land in conflict resolution, the institution has, over the past couple of years, been progressively characterized by a desire for personal aggrandizement among some unscrupulous elements within the traditional ruling class. The study notes courageously that this development has led to some unpleasant infiltrations from impunity and political elite class, which often reduces the efficiency with which traditional rulership institutions can function and hence the need for greater objectivity in appointing traditional rulers.

Conclusion

This study has x-rayed the role of traditional leadership institution on Tivland against the backdrop of resolving communal conflicts within the Tiv domain. The study found out that among the remote and proximate causes of communal conflict is population growth over fixed land areas, which gradually mounts pressure on existing land through the intensification of socioeconomic activities in all their diversity, a development that has already produced gross disruption in the delicate equilibrium between demand and supply realities on land. The paper also found that traditional rulers have made positive impact in the area of resolving communal conflicts and as such their role is indispensable in the combined endeavors to achieve peaceful coexistence as a necessary requirement for economic growth and development in Tivland.

Recommendations

To ensure the continued relevance and effectiveness of traditional rulers in reducing conflicts, the following recommendations are advanced.

- i. Population education should be made adequately available to the rural localities to enable them plan childbirth relative to land resource availability.
- ii. Traditional rulers should be closely monitored within the context of their livelihood to ensure they live above poverty-line. This is to strengthen them against financial inducement and defray.
- iii. Traditional rulers should be provided with adequate security as equal partners in leadership just like government top officials.

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