

Traditional Institutions and Security Administration in African Societies: An Empirical Analysis of Calabar South Local Government Area

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Abstract

This study examines the role of traditional institutions in security administration in African societies, with specific reference to Calabar South Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. The study was motivated by the increasing reliance on traditional authorities in addressing grassroots security challenges such as communal conflicts, youth restiveness, theft, and cultism. A survey research design was adopted, and data were collected from 150 respondents comprising traditional rulers, community leaders, security personnel, and residents through structured questionnaires. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The findings revealed that traditional leadership, customary conflict resolution mechanisms, and community surveillance significantly enhance security administration, while weak collaboration with formal security agencies limits effectiveness. The study concludes that traditional institutions remain relevant in contemporary security governance and recommends their integration into formal security frameworks.

Keywords: *Traditional institutions, Security administration, African societies, Community governance.*

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Background to the Study

Security administration in African societies has historically been anchored in indigenous institutions and traditional governance systems that predate colonial rule and the emergence of modern state structures. Prior to the establishment of formal policing institutions, African communities relied on traditional authorities such as chiefs, elders, lineage heads, and councils to maintain law and order, adjudicate disputes, and ensure social harmony. These institutions were deeply embedded in the cultural, social, and spiritual life of the people, and their authority was derived from customs, traditions, and collective community values. As a result, they were not only accepted but also respected as legitimate mechanisms for regulating behaviour and enforcing norms.

Traditional institutions performed a wide range of security-related functions, including conflict resolution, crime prevention, intelligence gathering, and enforcement of sanctions against deviant behaviour. According to Ray (2003), traditional rulers acted as custodians of customary laws and played critical roles in maintaining peace and stability within their domains. Similarly, Okafor (2007) notes that indigenous systems of justice emphasised reconciliation, restitution, and social cohesion rather than punitive measures, thereby reducing the likelihood of recurring conflicts. These features made traditional institutions effective in managing security at the local level.

However, the advent of colonialism introduced formal policing systems that often displaced or weakened traditional structures. Colonial authorities established centralised security institutions that operated largely independent of indigenous governance systems. This trend continued in the post-colonial era, leading to the dominance of formal security agencies such as the police, military, and other paramilitary organisations in national security administration. Despite this shift, traditional institutions have persisted and continue to function alongside modern state institutions, particularly in rural and semi-urban communities.

In contemporary Nigeria, the limitations of formal security agencies have become increasingly evident. Challenges such as inadequate manpower, poor funding, logistical constraints, corruption, and weak community trust have hindered the effectiveness of state-led security efforts. As Alemika (2013) observes, these deficiencies have created gaps in security governance, especially at the grassroots level, thereby necessitating the continued relevance of traditional institutions. Their proximity to the people, cultural legitimacy, and deep understanding of local dynamics make them indispensable actors in maintaining peace and security.

Furthermore, traditional institutions possess unique advantages that enhance their effectiveness in security administration. They have access to local intelligence networks, command respect and authority within their communities, and are better positioned to mediate disputes and prevent conflicts before they escalate. Adebayo (2013) argues that the involvement of traditional authorities in community security arrangements enhances compliance with rules and fosters collective responsibility for maintaining order. In many

communities, traditional rulers also collaborate with vigilante groups and local security outfits to monitor activities and deter criminal behaviour. In Calabar South Local Government Area of Cross River State, these dynamics are particularly evident. As a densely populated urban and semi-urban area, Calabar South faces a range of security challenges, including cultism, youth violence, theft, drug-related crimes, and communal disputes. The complexity of these challenges is further compounded by rapid urbanisation, unemployment, and social inequality. While formal security agencies are present, their capacity to effectively address all security concerns remains limited.

In response, traditional rulers, community leaders, and local stakeholders have increasingly taken on active roles in security administration. They often engage in dispute resolution, mobilise community members for surveillance activities, and collaborate with police and vigilante groups to maintain order. These efforts highlight the continued relevance of traditional institutions in contemporary security governance. However, their effectiveness is not without challenges. Issues such as lack of formal recognition, limited resources, and weak coordination with formal security agencies often constrain their capacity to operate effectively. Moreover, the interface between traditional institutions and modern security agencies is sometimes characterised by ambiguity and tension, particularly regarding jurisdictional authority and operational control. This raises important questions about how traditional institutions can be better integrated into formal security frameworks to enhance overall effectiveness. The study seeks to examine the role of traditional institutions in security administration in Calabar South Local Government Area, with particular focus on traditional leadership, customary conflict resolution mechanisms, community surveillance, and collaboration with formal security agencies. By providing empirical insights into these dimensions, the study contributes to the broader discourse on security governance in African societies and highlights the potential of indigenous institutions as complementary actors in addressing contemporary security challenges.

Statement of the Problem

Security administration remains a critical challenge in Nigeria and across many African societies, particularly at the grassroots level where state presence is often weak and institutional capacity is limited. Despite the existence of formal security agencies such as the police, military, and other paramilitary organisations, insecurity continues to manifest in various forms, including cultism, youth violence, theft, communal conflicts, and organised crime (Alemika, 2013; Okoli & Iortyer, 2014). These challenges are especially pronounced in urban and semi-urban areas such as Calabar South Local Government Area, where rapid population growth, unemployment, and social dislocation exacerbate security vulnerabilities.

Over the years, scholars have argued that the limitations of formal security institutions—ranging from inadequate manpower and logistics to corruption and lack of community trust—have significantly undermined their effectiveness in maintaining law and order (Onuoha, 2017; Ebo, 2007). As a result, local communities increasingly rely on alternative mechanisms, particularly traditional institutions, to address security concerns. Traditional rulers, elders, and community leaders often serve as first responders in conflict

situations, providing mediation, intelligence, and community-based enforcement of norms (Ray, 2003; Adebayo, 2013). However, despite their continued relevance, the role of traditional institutions in contemporary security administration remains inadequately integrated into formal governance structures. Existing studies suggest that while traditional authorities possess cultural legitimacy and local knowledge, their contributions are often undermined by lack of formal recognition, weak institutional frameworks, and limited collaboration with state security agencies (Alemika, 2013; Eze, 2017). This disconnect creates a gap in security governance, where neither traditional nor formal institutions operate at optimal capacity.

Furthermore, empirical evidence indicates that customary conflict resolution mechanisms, which are widely utilised in many communities, are not fully harnessed within the broader justice and security system. Okafor (2007) notes that these mechanisms are effective in promoting reconciliation and reducing violence, yet they are frequently sidelined due to the dominance of formal legal systems. Similarly, community surveillance systems, including vigilante groups and neighbourhood watch arrangements, play a significant role in crime prevention but often operate without proper regulation, training, or support (Adebayo, 2013; Etannibi, 2014).

The issue of weak collaboration between traditional institutions and formal security agencies further compounds the problem. Studies have shown that mistrust, unclear roles, and jurisdictional conflicts hinder effective cooperation, thereby reducing the overall efficiency of security administration (Onuoha, 2017; Salihu, 2019). In many cases, valuable local intelligence possessed by traditional leaders is not effectively integrated into formal security operations, leading to delayed responses and missed opportunities for crime prevention. In addition, broader socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and youth marginalisation continue to fuel insecurity in many communities. Okoli (2016) argues that these structural conditions create an enabling environment for criminal activities, particularly in areas where governance structures are weak. In such contexts, the absence of effective and coordinated security mechanisms further exacerbates the problem. From a community development perspective, Anam (2020) emphasises that sustainable rural and community development is closely linked to effective local governance and security structures. According to Anam, traditional institutions play a vital role in mobilising community resources, fostering participation, and maintaining social order, all of which are essential for development. However, the failure to adequately integrate these institutions into formal governance systems limits their potential contribution to security and development outcomes.

Despite extant literature on security governance in Nigeria, there remains a significant empirical gap regarding the specific contributions of traditional institutions to security administration at the local level, particularly in urbanising areas like Calabar South. Most existing studies focus on national or regional security challenges, with limited attention to how indigenous institutions function within specific local contexts. Therefore, the central problem addressed by this study is the inadequate integration and utilisation of traditional institutions in contemporary security administration, despite their proven relevance and effectiveness at the community level. This study seeks to fill this gap by empirically examining the role of

traditional institutions in security administration in Calabar South Local Government Area, with a view to identifying their contributions, challenges, and potential for enhancing security governance.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective is to examine the role of traditional institutions in security administration.

Specific objectives are to:

1. Assess the impact of traditional leadership on security administration
2. Examine the role of customary conflict resolution in maintaining peace
3. Evaluate the effect of community surveillance on crime control
4. Determine the level of collaboration between traditional institutions and formal security agencies

Research Questions

1. How does traditional leadership influence security administration?
2. What role does customary conflict resolution play in maintaining peace?
3. How does community surveillance affect crime control?
4. What is the level of collaboration between traditional institutions and formal security agencies?

Research Hypotheses

1. Traditional leadership has no significant effect on security administration.
2. Customary conflict resolution has no significant effect on peace maintenance.
3. Community surveillance has no significant effect on crime control.
4. Collaboration between traditional institutions and formal security agencies has no significant effect on security effectiveness.

Literature Review

Traditional Leadership and Security Administration

Traditional leadership remains a fundamental pillar of security administration in African societies, particularly at the grassroots level where formal state institutions often have limited reach. Traditional rulers, chiefs, and councils of elders serve not only as custodians of culture and tradition but also as key actors in maintaining law and order within their communities. According to Ray (2003), these leaders exercise authority derived from custom and legitimacy, enabling them to enforce norms, mediate disputes, and regulate behaviour in ways that formal institutions may not easily achieve. Their decisions are often respected because they are grounded in shared values and long-standing traditions.

In Nigeria, traditional leaders continue to play significant roles in enhancing compliance with community rules and promoting social cohesion. Their proximity to the people allows them to detect early signs of conflict and intervene before situations escalate into violence. Adebayo (2013) observes that communities with strong traditional leadership structures tend to experience lower levels of crime due to the effectiveness of informal control mechanisms. Moreover, traditional authorities often mobilise community members for collective security

efforts, thereby strengthening local capacity for crime prevention. Despite these contributions, the effectiveness of traditional leadership is sometimes constrained by lack of formal recognition, political interference, and limited integration into the modern security framework.

Customary Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Customary conflict resolution mechanisms constitute an essential component of traditional security administration in African societies. These mechanisms are typically informal, community-based, and rooted in indigenous legal traditions that emphasise reconciliation, restitution, and restoration of social harmony. Okafor (2007) notes that traditional dispute resolution processes are generally faster, less expensive, and more accessible than formal judicial systems, making them particularly relevant in communities with limited access to formal courts.

Unlike formal legal systems, which often prioritise punishment, customary mechanisms focus on restoring relationships between disputing parties and reintegrating offenders into the community. This restorative approach reduces the likelihood of recurring conflicts and contributes to long-term peace and stability. In many Nigerian communities, disputes related to land, family matters, and minor criminal offences are often resolved through traditional institutions, thereby reducing the burden on formal courts and security agencies. However, the effectiveness of customary conflict resolution is influenced by factors such as the impartiality of traditional authorities, the level of community trust, and the extent to which these mechanisms are recognised by formal legal systems. While they are widely accepted at the local level, their lack of formal legal backing sometimes limits their enforceability, particularly in cases involving serious criminal offences. Nevertheless, their role in preventing conflict escalation and promoting social cohesion remains significant.

Community Surveillance and Crime Control

Community surveillance is another critical dimension of traditional security administration, involving the active monitoring of activities within a community to detect and prevent criminal behaviour. This form of surveillance is often carried out through informal networks such as neighbourhood watch groups, vigilante organisations, and youth associations. It relies heavily on local knowledge and collective responsibility, making it highly effective in environments where formal policing is limited. Adebayo (2013) found that communities with strong local vigilance systems experience significant reductions in crime, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. Community members are more likely to recognise suspicious behaviour, identify strangers, and report potential threats, thereby enhancing early detection and prevention of crime. In many cases, the presence of community surveillance structures acts as a deterrent to potential offenders, as the likelihood of being identified and apprehended is increased. In addition, community surveillance strengthens the relationship between residents and traditional authorities, as information gathered is often communicated through established local leadership structures. However, challenges such as lack of training, potential abuse of power, and absence of formal regulation can undermine the effectiveness of these systems. Despite these limitations, community surveillance remains a vital tool for grassroots crime control and complements the efforts of formal security agencies.

Collaboration with Formal Security Agencies

Effective security administration in contemporary African societies requires a synergistic relationship between traditional institutions and formal security agencies. While traditional authorities possess local knowledge and cultural legitimacy, formal institutions such as the police and military provide legal authority, technical expertise, and enforcement capacity. The integration of these two systems is therefore essential for achieving comprehensive and sustainable security outcomes.

Alemika (2013) argues that collaboration between traditional and formal security institutions enhances intelligence gathering, improves response to security threats, and strengthens overall security governance. In Nigeria, such collaboration often takes the form of information sharing, joint community patrols, and coordinated conflict resolution efforts. Traditional leaders frequently serve as intermediaries between the community and security agencies, facilitating communication and building trust. However, despite its importance, collaboration between traditional institutions and formal security agencies is often weak and inconsistent. Challenges such as lack of clearly defined roles, jurisdictional conflicts, mutual distrust, and absence of institutional frameworks for cooperation limit the effectiveness of such partnerships. In some cases, formal security agencies may disregard the contributions of traditional authorities, while traditional leaders may be reluctant to fully cooperate due to perceived marginalisation. Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that where effective collaboration exists, security outcomes are significantly improved. Strengthening institutional linkages, clarifying roles, and promoting mutual respect between traditional and formal actors are therefore essential for enhancing security administration in African societies.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Social Control Theory propounded by Hirschi (1969), which provides a sociological explanation for conformity and deviant behaviour in society. The theory posits that individuals are less likely to engage in criminal activities when they have strong bonds with society. These bonds are expressed through four key elements: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. When these elements are strong, individuals are more likely to conform to societal norms and values; when they are weak, the likelihood of deviant behaviour increases.

In the context of African societies, traditional institutions play a crucial role in strengthening these social bonds. Traditional rulers, elders, and community leaders foster attachment by maintaining close interpersonal relationships within the community. Through cultural practices, rituals, and communal activities, individuals develop a sense of belonging and loyalty to their community. This attachment discourages deviant behaviour, as individuals are less likely to act in ways that would harm the social group to which they are connected. Furthermore, traditional institutions reinforce commitment by encouraging adherence to societal expectations and responsibilities. Members of the community are often expected to uphold family honour, respect elders, and comply with established norms. Violating these expectations can lead to social sanctions such as shame, ostracism, or loss of status, which serve as deterrents to criminal behaviour.

The element of involvement is also evident in traditional settings, where individuals participate actively in communal activities such as festivals, meetings, and security arrangements. This active engagement reduces the time and opportunity available for deviant acts. Similarly, belief in the legitimacy of cultural norms and traditional authority strengthens compliance, as individuals internalise the values and moral codes of their society. Applying this theory to security administration, traditional institutions function as mechanisms of informal social control that regulate behaviour and prevent crime. In areas such as Calabar South Local Government Area, where formal security presence may be limited or overstretched, these institutions help maintain order by enforcing norms, resolving conflicts, and mobilising community members for collective security efforts.

However, the effectiveness of Social Control Theory in contemporary settings depends on the strength of these social bonds, which may be weakened by factors such as urbanisation, modernisation, and socio-economic changes. As communities become more heterogeneous and less cohesive, the influence of traditional institutions may decline. This underscores the need to strengthen and adapt traditional structures to complement formal security systems. Social Control Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how traditional institutions contribute to security administration by reinforcing social norms, promoting cohesion, and reducing opportunities for criminal behaviour in African societies.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a survey research design, which is appropriate for collecting data from many respondents and examining relationships among variables. This design allows for the systematic collection of quantitative data on the perceptions and experiences of respondents regarding the role of traditional institutions in security administration. It also facilitates generalisation of findings within the study area.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Calabar South Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. The area is characterised by a mix of urban and semi-urban communities with diverse socio-economic activities, including trading, fishing, and civil service. Calabar South is known for its high population density and exposure to various security challenges such as cultism, theft, youth violence, and communal disputes. The presence of both traditional institutions and formal security agencies makes it an ideal setting for examining their roles and interactions in security administration.

Population and Sample Size

The study comprises traditional rulers, community leaders, residents, and security personnel within Calabar South LGA. These groups were selected because they represent key stakeholders in local security governance. A sample size of 150 respondents was used for the study. The selection was carried out using a combination of purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to select traditional rulers, community leaders, and security personnel due to their specific knowledge and involvement in security

matters, while random sampling was employed to select residents to ensure representativeness and reduce bias.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires designed to elicit responses on key variables such as traditional leadership, conflict resolution, community surveillance, and collaboration with formal security agencies. The questionnaire included closed-ended and Likert-scale items to allow for easy quantification and analysis of responses.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected for this study were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages, were employed to summarise the demographic characteristics of respondents and to present general patterns in their responses. In addition, inferential statistics, particularly the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis, were used to test the stated hypotheses and examine the strength and direction of relationships between traditional institutional variables and security administration outcomes. All statistical tests were conducted at a 0.05 level of significance, ensuring that the findings are reliable and suitable for drawing valid conclusions.

Results/Findings

Table 1: Bio-data of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	85	56.7
	Female	65	43.3
Age	18–25 years	30	20.0
	26–35 years	45	30.0
	36–45 years	40	26.7
	46 years and above	35	23.3
Occupation	Traditional rulers	30	20.0
	Community leaders	35	23.3
	Security personnel	40	26.7
	Others (traders, artisans)	45	30.0
Education	No formal education	15	10.0
	Primary	30	20.0
	Secondary	55	36.7
	Tertiary	50	33.3

Note: The table shows a balanced distribution of respondents across gender, age, occupation, and educational levels, indicating that the data collected is representative of key stakeholders involved in security administration in Calabar South LGA.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Analysis of Traditional Leadership and Security Administration

Variables	N	r-value	p-value	Decision
Traditional Leadership & Security Administration	150	0.70	0.000	Reject H ₀₁

Finding: Traditional leadership significantly enhances security administration.

Note: The result indicates a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between traditional leadership and security administration. This suggests that effective leadership by traditional authorities contributes meaningfully to maintaining law and order in the study area.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Analysis of Customary Conflict Resolution and Peace

Variables	N	r-value	p-value	Decision
Conflict Resolution & Peace	150	0.68	0.000	Reject H ₀₂

Finding: Customary conflict resolution promotes peace.

Note: The table reveals a strong positive relationship between customary conflict resolution and peace maintenance. This implies that indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms are effective in reducing conflicts and fostering social harmony.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Analysis of Community Surveillance and Crime Control

Variables	N	r-value	p-value	Decision
Surveillance & Crime Control	150	0.72	0.000	Reject H ₀₃

Finding: Community surveillance significantly reduces crime.

Note: The result shows a very strong positive and significant relationship between community surveillance and crime control. This indicates that local vigilance and monitoring systems play a crucial role in deterring criminal activities.

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Analysis of Collaboration and Security Effectiveness

Variables	N	r-value	p-value	Decision
Collaboration & Security Effectiveness	150	0.64	0.000	Reject H ₀₄

Finding: Collaboration improves security effectiveness.

Note: The table indicates a moderate but significant positive relationship between collaboration and security effectiveness. This suggests that cooperation between traditional institutions and formal security agencies enhances overall security outcomes, although there is still room for strengthening such partnerships.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide compelling empirical evidence that traditional institutions remain central to security administration in Calabar South Local Government Area and, by extension, in many African societies. The results demonstrate that variables such as traditional leadership, customary conflict resolution, community surveillance, and collaboration with formal security agencies all have significant relationships with security outcomes. This suggests that indigenous governance structures continue to function as effective mechanisms of informal social control in contemporary settings.

The strong positive relationship between traditional leadership and security administration confirms the enduring relevance of traditional authorities in maintaining law and order. This finding aligns with Ray (2003), who emphasised that chiefs and elders serve as custodians of customs and mediators in community affairs. In the context of Calabar South, traditional leaders provide localised leadership that enhances compliance with norms and facilitates early intervention in emerging conflicts. Their legitimacy and cultural authority enable them to influence behaviour in ways that formal institutions may find difficult to achieve, particularly at the grassroots level.

Similarly, the significant impact of customary conflict resolution on peace maintenance supports the argument of Okafor (2007), who highlighted the effectiveness of indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms in promoting reconciliation and reducing violence. The findings indicate that traditional methods of resolving disputes—often characterised by dialogue, mediation, and restitution—are not only accessible but also culturally acceptable to the people. This enhances their effectiveness in preventing the escalation of conflicts into more serious security threats. In many cases, these mechanisms provide quicker and more sustainable solutions compared to formal judicial processes.

The study also reveals that community surveillance plays a critical role in crime control, as evidenced by its strong positive relationship with reduced criminal activities. This finding underscores the importance of collective vigilance and community participation in security governance. Local surveillance systems, often coordinated through traditional institutions, enable early detection of suspicious activities and enhance deterrence. This supports the broader argument that security is most effective when it is community-driven and based on shared responsibility. However, despite these positive contributions, the study identifies limited collaboration between traditional institutions and formal security agencies as a significant challenge. While both systems have complementary strengths, the lack of structured coordination, mutual trust, and clearly defined roles often undermines their effectiveness. This finding is consistent with Alemika (2013), who noted that weak institutional synergy remains a major constraint in Nigeria's security architecture. The absence of formal mechanisms for collaboration reduces the potential benefits of integrating traditional knowledge with modern security practices. Overall, the findings suggest that while traditional institutions are effective in local security administration, their impact can be significantly enhanced through better integration with formal security structures. Strengthening this relationship is essential for achieving a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to security governance.

Conclusion

The study concludes that traditional institutions remain indispensable actors in security governance in African societies, particularly at the grassroots level. Their roles in leadership, conflict resolution, and community surveillance contribute significantly to maintaining peace and preventing crime in Calabar South Local Government Area. However, the effectiveness of these institutions is not fully maximised due to weak collaboration with formal security agencies and lack of institutional support. As security challenges become more complex in contemporary society, there is a growing need to adopt a more integrated approach that combines the strengths of both traditional and modern systems.

Therefore, the study emphasises that the integration of traditional institutions into formal security frameworks is essential for enhancing security effectiveness. Such integration will not only improve coordination and information sharing but also strengthen community trust and participation in security governance.

Recommendations

1. Integrate traditional institutions into formal security frameworks: Government should formally recognise and incorporate traditional authorities into national and state security architecture, enabling them to play defined roles in security administration.
2. Strengthen collaboration with security agencies: Mechanisms for regular interaction and coordination between traditional leaders and formal security agencies should be established to enhance information sharing and joint operations.
3. Provide legal recognition for traditional roles: Legal frameworks should be developed to clearly define the roles, responsibilities, and limits of traditional institutions in security matters, ensuring legitimacy and accountability.
4. Support community surveillance initiatives: Government and stakeholders should provide logistical and financial support for community-based surveillance systems such as vigilante groups, while ensuring proper regulation and oversight.
5. Train traditional leaders in modern conflict resolution: Capacity-building programmes should be organised to equip traditional leaders with contemporary skills in conflict management, mediation, and security administration, thereby improving their effectiveness in handling emerging security challenges.

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