

Traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in Nigeria: Evaluating the Efficacy of The Fulanis “Sharo” System in Modern Communal Disputes

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Abstract

This study evaluated the efficacy of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in Nigeria, focusing on the Fulanis Sharo ceremony, and their relevance in addressing contemporary communal disputes. Despite increasing reliance on formal legal systems, this indigenous mechanism remains vital, particularly in rural communities where access to courts is limited and cultural values play a central role in dispute settlement. The study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design, utilizing Key Informant Interviews (KIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) across selected Fulani communities. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Findings revealed that Fulani systems are grounded in structured processes: The Fulanis Sharo involves public flogging as a symbolic means of restoring truth and order. This mechanism was found to be effective in resolving disputes related to land, marriage, inheritance, and social conduct, and was widely perceived as legitimate and fair by community members. However, the system faces challenges such as urbanization, legal exclusion, and changing societal values. The study recommended the integration of traditional mechanisms into formal legal and policy frameworks, capacity building for traditional leaders, and participatory policymaking that respects indigenous knowledge systems. The findings underscore the enduring relevance of culturally grounded approaches in promoting grassroots peace and sustainable conflict resolution in Nigeria.

Review Article

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Introduction

Communal conflicts in Nigeria arising from land disputes, resource competition, inter-ethnic rivalries, chieftaincy succession crises, and boundary demarcations have become a persistent threat to societal stability, peaceful coexistence, and sustainable national development. These conflicts are often violent, recurrent, and deeply rooted in historical grievances, social inequality, and environmental degradation. The increasing pressure on land and natural resources due to population growth, climate change, and migration further exacerbates tensions among communities, particularly in agrarian and pastoral regions. Although the Nigerian state has established formal legal and security institutions to manage and resolve such disputes, these mechanisms are often perceived as inaccessible, costly, slow, and culturally alien, especially by rural dwellers.

As a result, many communities continue to rely on traditional methods of conflict resolution that are embedded in their cultural norms, values, and social

institutions. These indigenous systems are often preferred because they emphasize reconciliation, restoration of relationships, collective responsibility, and communal harmony, rather than adversarial litigation or punitive justice. In rural and semi-urban areas, where access to formal courts and administrative structures is limited or non-existent, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are seen as more legitimate, timely, and effective in addressing grievances and fostering lasting peace. According to Okoli and Omang (2024), the resilience and continued relevance of indigenous dispute settlement processes highlight the critical role they play in maintaining order and cohesion within culturally diverse and institutionally fragile settings like Nigeria.

Thus, understanding and integrating these traditional mechanisms into contemporary peacebuilding frameworks could offer culturally appropriate, grassroots-driven alternatives for managing communal disputes, especially

in contexts where the reach of the state remains weak or contested.

Fulanis Sharo System

The Fulanis of northern Nigeria employ the Sharo ceremony—a culturally significant public flogging ritual—not merely as a rite of passage, but as a mechanism for upholding justice, resolving interpersonal disputes, and reinforcing communal values. Traditionally conducted during major Islamic festivals or in times of social tension, Sharo involves the public whipping of a young man—often as a test of endurance, honesty, or worthiness in matters related to marriage, inheritance, or moral transgression. Its primary objective is to publicly affirm the integrity, courage, and social standing of the individual, thereby either absolving or exposing the person involved in the conflict (Sowale, 2024).

The practice of Sharo is deeply embedded in the Fulani ethical code of pulaaku, which emphasizes virtues such as modesty, self-control, respect for elders, and maintenance of honor. In Fulani communities, where verbal accusation may not be enough to establish guilt or innocence, Sharo serves as a symbolic and physical trial by ordeal. The belief is that a guilty person would not withstand the flogging with dignity, while an innocent person would endure it without flinching, thus publicly proving their innocence and restoring their social standing. As such, the ceremony functions both as a dispute resolution tool and as a means of moral education and deterrence (Usman & Bello, 2022).

Although modern influences such as urbanization, formal education, and national legal reforms have led to a decline in the frequency and visibility of Sharo, especially in urban centers, the practice continues to retain social and cultural significance among nomadic and rural Fulani groups. It remains particularly relevant in areas where access to state justice systems is limited or distrusted. Despite the relatively limited academic literature focusing specifically on Sharo, recent ethnographic and anthropological research affirms that the ceremony still plays a regulatory role, helping to mediate disputes without resorting to protracted legal battles or physical retaliation (Baba, 2023).

Furthermore, Sharo has adapted in some contexts to include symbolic flogging or moderated performances to reduce physical harm while maintaining the ritual's authority and communal purpose. As Sowale (2024) notes, such adaptations reflect the evolving nature of traditional conflict resolution systems as they navigate the complexities of modernity while remaining grounded in cultural heritage. In essence, Sharo continues to serve as a culturally endorsed, non-lethal alternative for justice and

reconciliation in Fulani society, reinforcing social order through collective observance and community validation.

Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities

The persistent escalation of farmer–herder clashes across Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt and northern regions has highlighted the growing inadequacies of the country's formal justice system in effectively addressing communal conflicts. These clashes, often rooted in competition over land, water, and grazing rights, have claimed thousands of lives and displaced countless families, severely undermining social cohesion and economic stability. Despite constitutional provisions and legal frameworks aimed at conflict management, Nigeria's formal judicial system is frequently criticized for its inefficiency, high cost, procedural complexity, and inaccessibility to rural populations. Moreover, many of these disputes are poorly handled due to the system's inability to engage with the socio-cultural dynamics that underpin local conflicts (Babatunde & Ibnouf, 2024; Okoli & Omang, 2024).

One prominent example of policy failure is the controversial *RUGA* (Rural Grazing Area) initiative, introduced in 2019 to create designated settlements for Fulani herders in order to minimize their movement and reduce conflict with farming communities. The program was suspended following widespread public outcry, mistrust, and strong resistance from host communities who viewed it as a land-grabbing scheme that ignored indigenous land rights and failed to engage traditional institutions. According to recent analyses, the lack of adequate consultation with local stakeholders and disregard for traditional conflict resolution frameworks contributed significantly to the failure of the Ruga policy (Wikipedia, 2025). This underscores the critical need for policy approaches that are both culturally informed and locally driven.

In response to these limitations, contemporary scholars and peacebuilding practitioners are increasingly advocating for hybrid models that combine the strengths of both indigenous and formal systems. Such models would integrate traditional mechanisms—like elders' councils, oath-taking rituals, symbolic reconciliation practices such as *igba ndu* (covenant-making), and culturally grounded ceremonies like the Fulanis *Sharo*—into modern dispute resolution processes. By doing so, these models can enhance legitimacy, ensure greater community buy-in, and foster durable peace outcomes (Ugwu & Brigid, 2023; Okoli & Omang, 2024).

Furthermore, hybrid approaches offer the flexibility to adapt to the unique socio-political contexts of Nigeria's ethnically diverse regions, promoting inclusiveness and justice without alienating customary practices. The goal is

not to romanticize tradition or reject modernization, but rather to build a complementary system that leverages the legitimacy and social capital of indigenous institutions while benefiting from the procedural safeguards and formal recognition of the state justice system. If successfully implemented, such integrative models could transform Nigeria's conflict resolution landscape by making justice more accessible, culturally resonant, and socially sustainable.

Statement of the Problem

Communal conflicts in Nigeria persist due to land disputes, resource competition, and social tensions, especially in rural areas where formal legal systems are seen as slow, costly, and culturally disconnected. As a result, communities continue to rely on indigenous conflict resolution methods like the Fulanis *Sharo* ceremony, which emphasize reconciliation and social harmony. However, the relevance and effectiveness of these traditional systems in addressing modern disputes remain uncertain. Additionally, government policies like the suspended RUGA initiative have failed due to lack of cultural integration. This study, therefore, seeks to evaluate the efficacy, legitimacy, and adaptability of *Sharo* system in resolving present-day communal conflicts and explores how they can be integrated into Nigeria's broader conflict management framework.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to critically examine the efficacy of traditional conflict resolution mechanism specifically the Fulanis *Sharo* ceremony in addressing contemporary communal disputes in Nigeria. The study sought to:

1. Examine the structural components and processes of the Fulanis *Sharo* system in resolving communal conflicts.
2. Assess the effectiveness of the *Sharo* mechanism in addressing contemporary disputes such as land, marriage, and resource-related conflicts.
3. Evaluate the perceptions of community members toward the legitimacy and fairness of this traditional conflict resolution system.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. What are the structural components and processes of the Fulanis *Sharo* system used in resolving communal conflicts?
2. How effective is the *Sharo* traditional mechanism in addressing contemporary communal disputes such as those related to land, marriage, and resource use?

3. What are the perceptions of community members regarding the legitimacy and fairness of the Fulani *Sharo* conflict resolution system?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to explore and evaluate the efficacy of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms specifically the Fulanis *Sharo* system in addressing contemporary communal disputes in Nigeria. The qualitative approach was chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of the cultural, social, and procedural dimensions of these indigenous systems within their real-life contexts. The study was carried out in selected communities across Yobe and Adamawa States, Northeast, Nigeria where the *Sharo* system is still actively practiced and respected in local dispute resolution.

The population of the study comprised traditional leaders (Fulanis elders), community members, victims and offenders involved in communal disputes, youth leaders, and local government officials with experience or insight into the application of these traditional conflict resolution practices. A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify and select 40 participants who possessed rich and relevant knowledge of the *Sharo* system. The sample included 10 community elders, 10 Fulanis elders and leaders, 10 community members (five from each region), 5 local government or peace committee officials, and 5 individuals who had directly resolved disputes through the *Sharo* mechanism.

Data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), using semi-structured interview guides designed to probe into the structures, procedures, perceived legitimacy, and outcomes of the traditional systems. Interviews were conducted in local languages and translated into English where necessary to preserve authenticity and accuracy. To ensure content validity, the interview guides were reviewed by experts in indigenous conflict resolution, cultural anthropology, and qualitative research methods. Reliability was enhanced through triangulation, using multiple sources and methods comparing responses from various stakeholder groups across different locations.

The data collected were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and variations in perspectives. NVivo software was employed to assist in the organization, coding, and interpretation of qualitative data. Ethical approval was obtained from a recognized university ethics committee, and all participants were informed of the study's purpose. Voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process to ensure adherence to ethical research standards.

Results

1. What are the structural components and processes of the Fulanis Sharo system used in resolving communal conflicts?

The study revealed that the Fulanis Sharo system was grounded in well-established traditional institutions with clearly defined roles and procedures. In Fulani communities, the Sharo system is coordinated by clan elders and community leaders, often during public festivals or community gatherings. The central ritual—public flogging—serves as both a test of truth and a demonstration of endurance. Before the ceremony, community dialogue occurs to determine the nature of the conflict and identify the disputants. The process is spiritually supervised and is considered complete when the disputants embrace or offer verbal reconciliation in front of witnesses. The system relies on oral tradition, spiritual sanctions, and communal enforcement for legitimacy and compliance.

KII Responses:

Fulanis Elder, Yobe State:

“The Sharo is a serious event. When a dispute is not settled quietly, we gather during a festival or market day. Elders agree on the terms, and the disputants are brought forward. Flogging is a public way to show who is right and who is wrong.”

FGD Responses:

Fulanis Youth FGD (male group):

“Even though times are changing, Sharo still works. When a young man accepts Sharo, it means he wants peace. The flogging is not just punishment, it is also a sign of courage and truth.”

2. How effective is the Sharo traditional mechanism in addressing contemporary communal disputes such as those related to land, marriage, and resource use?

Findings indicate that the mechanism remains effective, particularly in rural areas where formal legal systems are inaccessible, costly, or mistrusted. In Fulanis settlements, the Sharo ceremony is still invoked in marriage disputes, inheritance disagreements, and breaches of social norms. Though more symbolic today, the ritual remains a potent mechanism for reaffirming truth and restoring social balance. While the reach of the system is challenged by urbanization and modern legal developments, their culturally embedded nature allows them to remain functional and relevant in local conflict resolution.

KII Responses:

Fulanis Clan Leader, Adamawa State (2025):

“When two families argue about marriage issues or cattle damage, Sharo helps us avoid war. Once the community sees justice done openly, everyone accepts the outcome.”

FGD Responses:

Fulanis Community FGD (women and elders) 2025:

“Sharo has helped settle things quietly without police or outsiders. It may look harsh, but it prevents bigger problems. After Sharo, the case is closed, and peace returns.”

3. What are the perceptions of community members regarding the legitimacy and fairness of the Fulanis Sharo conflict resolution systems?

Community perceptions of the Sharo system are largely positive, with many participants viewing these mechanisms as more legitimate, accessible, and fair compared to formal legal institutions. Among the Fulani, participants expressed strong cultural pride in the Sharo tradition, viewing it as a just and honorable method of resolving disputes that reinforces moral behavior and upholds communal harmony. Even among younger respondents, there was a recognition of the symbolic power and restorative impact of traditional systems. However, concerns were raised about the need to adapt these systems to changing social realities, including gender inclusion and human rights standards. Despite these challenges, the system is still widely regarded as credible and deeply respected institutions for maintaining peace and order.

KII Responses:

NGO Peace Advocate, Yobe (2025):

“In Fulanis communities, Sharo is not just about flogging—it is a respected process. Outsiders may not understand, but the people involved see it as fair and just.”

FGD Responses:

Fulanis Mixed Group FGD (2025):

“Sharo is not for everyone, but it keeps our youth disciplined. It is fair because both sides agree before it happens. No one is forced. It shows who is truly honest.”

Discussion of Findings

Structural Components and Processes of the Fulanis Sharo System

The study found that the Fulanis Sharo system operates through well-defined traditional institutions that rely on cultural authority, oral tradition, and spiritual legitimacy. The Sharo system is orchestrated by Fulani elders, where

public flogging symbolizes strength, honesty, and readiness for peace. This finding aligns with Sowale (2024) who asserts that Sharo remains one of the most enduring traditional dispute resolution rituals among the Fulani, rooted in the values of *pulaaku*—discipline, modesty, and community respect. Usman and Bello (2022) further highlight that the Sharo system, though symbolic, provides social order and reinforces moral conduct in Fulani pastoralist society.

Effectiveness in Addressing Contemporary Disputes

Participants widely affirmed the effectiveness of the system in resolving disputes related to land, marriage, and resource use. The Sharo ceremony, though symbolic, was effective in quelling tensions and reinforcing truth, especially among younger Fulanis.

This supports the work of Babatunde and Ibnouf (2024) who also argued that indigenous systems are often more successful in addressing grassroots disputes because they are rooted in community identity and trust. Okoli and Omang (2024) similarly found that the Sharo system offers practical solutions that bypass the delays, expenses, and complexities of the formal legal system. In line with this, Aboh et al. (2024) emphasize that traditional conflict resolution methods are not only effective but also promote social cohesion, as they focus on restorative rather than punitive outcomes.

Perceptions of Legitimacy and Fairness

Community members generally view the Sharo systems as legitimate, fair, and trustworthy. The decisions of the Sharo is considered a noble way of resolving disputes without long-term enmity. This aligns with Sowale (2024) who argues that despite the modernization of Fulanis communities, the Sharo ceremony remains socially relevant due to its embeddedness in Fulanis identity and its capacity to symbolically restore harmony. These findings further echo Adebayo and Dauda (2021), who concluded that perceptions of fairness in traditional systems often surpass those of the formal legal process, particularly in rural and culturally conservative communities.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that traditional conflict resolution mechanisms—specifically the Fulanis Sharo ceremony—remain relevant, effective, and widely respected methods for addressing communal disputes in contemporary Nigeria. Rooted in cultural values, spiritual authority, and communal participation, these indigenous systems offer accessible, timely, and restorative alternatives to the often slow, costly, and alienating processes of the formal legal system. Findings from interviews and group discussions revealed that this mechanism not only resolve conflicts related to land,

marriage, and social conduct but also promote social harmony and reinforce community norms. Despite modern challenges such as urbanization, weakened traditional authority, and policy exclusion, the system continues to hold legitimacy among the respective communities.

Recommendations

1. The Nigerian government and conflict resolution agencies should formally recognize and integrate indigenous systems such as the Fulanis Sharo into community-level peacebuilding structures. This can be done through the creation of hybrid conflict resolution committees that combine traditional leaders with representatives of the formal justice system, thereby enhancing legitimacy, accessibility, and local ownership of peace processes.
2. Training and sensitization programs should be organized for traditional leaders to enhance their mediation skills and ensure alignment with constitutional rights, especially regarding gender equity, children's rights, and non-violent methods. Such capacity-building efforts will help these institutions adapt to evolving social norms while preserving their core cultural values.
3. Policymakers should consult traditional institutions and community stakeholders during the design and implementation of conflict-related policies and interventions. For example, land use or grazing policies like RUGA should be culturally sensitive and grounded in the lived realities of local communities to prevent rejection and conflict escalation.

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