

THE DECLINE OF INDIGENOUS CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISMS IN KOKONA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, NASARAWA STATE, 1996–2019

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical decline of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in Kokona Local Government Area (LGA), Nasarawa State, between 1996 and 2019, with particular emphasis on their diminishing role in managing farmers–herders conflicts. Prior to the consolidation of modern local government administration in Nasarawa State in 1996, agrarian communities in Kokona—such as those in Garaku, Amba, Kofar-Gwari, and surrounding rural settlements—relied heavily on councils of elders, lineage heads, and village chiefs to regulate land use, seasonal grazing routes, and access to water points. These institutions employed culturally embedded practices such as negotiated compensation for crop damage, oath-taking, and communal reconciliation ceremonies, which historically prevented disputes from escalating into violence. However, the legacy of British colonial land tenure reforms, which introduced statutory ownership and weakened communal land control, fundamentally disrupted these indigenous systems. In the post-colonial period, state policies—including the Land Use Act of 1978 and subsequent local government reforms—further eroded the authority of traditional institutions by transferring land control and dispute adjudication to state bureaucracies and formal courts. In Kokona, this shift reduced the capacity of village heads and elders to enforce settlements, even in conflicts they once resolved effectively. Between the late 1990s and 2010s, recurrent clashes between farmers and migrating pastoralists—particularly during planting and harvest seasons—illustrated the growing inability of indigenous mechanisms to contain disputes. The introduction of modern governance responses, such as security deployments and proposed anti-open grazing measures, often bypassed local knowledge systems and deepened mistrust among communities. Drawing on historical records, local conflict patterns, and contemporary analyses, this study argues that the decline of customary conflict resolution mechanisms in Kokona contributed significantly to violent confrontations, population displacement, declining agricultural productivity, and food insecurity. The paper concludes by advocating for the reintegration of indigenous institutions into formal governance frameworks as a critical pathway toward sustainable conflict management and communal stability in Nasarawa State

Keywords: The Decline, Indigenous Conflict, Resolution Mechanisms, Kokona.

I. Introduction

The Middle Belt region of Nigeria has, since the late twentieth century, emerged as one of the country's most volatile zones of farmers–herders conflict, driven largely by competition over land, water resources, and ecological space. Nasarawa State occupies a central position in this conflict corridor due to its transitional geography between the arid northern savannah and the more fertile Middle Belt agrarian zones. Within this context, Kokona Local Government Area (LGA) represents a critical microcosm for understanding how historically effective indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms have gradually declined, giving way to recurrent violent confrontations between farming communities and pastoral groups.

Prior to the formal establishment of Nasarawa State in 1996, communities in Kokona—particularly in areas such as Garaku, Amba, Kofar-Gwari, Agwada axis, and

adjoining rural settlements—relied on deeply entrenched customary institutions to regulate land use and manage disputes arising from seasonal cattle movements. Councils of elders, village heads, and lineage leaders played central roles in negotiating grazing access, compensating farmers for crop damage, and restoring communal harmony through rituals, oath-taking, and public reconciliation ceremonies. These mechanisms were embedded in shared moral codes and social sanctions, making compliance both culturally binding and socially enforceable. As recalled by an elderly community leader in Garaku, disputes over damaged farmlands were often settled “before sunset,” with compensation in grain or livestock agreed upon publicly to prevent retaliation.

However, the effectiveness of these indigenous mechanisms was progressively undermined by colonial legacies that reshaped land tenure and authority structures. British colonial administration introduced statutory legal systems and indirect rule arrangements that subordinated customary institutions to colonial courts and district officers. Communal landholding practices were gradually replaced by notions of state-controlled land ownership, weakening the authority of traditional leaders to allocate land and enforce decisions. Although these changes originated in the colonial period, their impact persisted into the post-independence era, particularly with the enactment of the Land Use Act of 1978, which vested land ownership in the state and further marginalized customary adjudication systems.

In Kokona LGA, the post-1996 period witnessed a growing disjunction between indigenous authority and modern governance structures. Local government councils, security agencies, and formal courts increasingly assumed responsibility for conflict management, often sidelining traditional institutions that lacked statutory backing. This shift proved problematic, as formal mechanisms were frequently slow, inaccessible, or distrusted by rural populations. Oral accounts from Amba and Kofar-Gwari communities indicate that elders’ rulings on grazing disputes were increasingly ignored, especially when armed actors or external pastoral groups were involved. Consequently, conflicts that would previously have been resolved through dialogue escalated into violent clashes, particularly during planting and harvest seasons.

This paper situates the decline of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in Kokona LGA within these broader historical and institutional transformations. By examining the interaction between colonial legacies, state policies, and contemporary governance challenges between 1996 and 2019, the study assesses how the erosion of customary institutions has reshaped patterns of conflict, undermined communal coexistence, and contributed to persistent insecurity in the area.

Historical Foundations of Indigenous Conflict Resolution Pre-Colonial and Early Colonial Era

Before the formal imposition of British colonial rule in the early twentieth century, agrarian and pastoral communities in what later became Kokona Local Government Area operated indigenous conflict resolution systems that were integral to social organization and land management. These mechanisms were rooted in communal land tenure, kinship networks, and shared cosmological beliefs that emphasized harmony between human activity and the natural environment. Farming communities in areas such as present-day Garaku, Amba, and Kofar-Gwari recognized land as a collective heritage held in trust by lineage heads and village elders, while pastoral groups negotiated seasonal access through established norms rather than fixed territorial claims.

Disputes arising from crop damage, encroachment on farmlands, or competition over water points were typically addressed through customary adjudication forums, convened by village heads or councils of elders. These forums prioritized restorative justice over punishment, focusing on compensation, reconciliation, and the restoration of communal balance. Compensation often took the form of farm produce, livestock, or labour contributions, agreed upon publicly to prevent reprisals. An elderly farmer from Amba recalled that prior to colonial intervention, “no dispute was taken beyond the elders; once

compensation was paid and prayers offered, peace returned to the land.” Such practices reinforced accountability and mutual respect, ensuring that conflicts did not escalate into violence.

Central to these indigenous systems was the regulation of grazing corridors and water access points, which were negotiated seasonally in accordance with agricultural cycles. Elders and lineage heads marked specific routes for cattle movement after harvest periods, allowing pastoralists to graze without damaging standing crops. Ritual oaths, libations, and ancestral invocations were sometimes employed to bind agreements, with the belief that spiritual sanctions would deter violations. These cosmologically grounded practices gave moral force to decisions and ensured compliance even in the absence of coercive enforcement.

The advent of British colonial administration fundamentally altered these indigenous governance structures. Through the introduction of statutory legal systems and new land tenure policies, communal landholding practices were gradually displaced by notions of individualized and state-controlled ownership. Land that had long been regulated through customary norms became subject to formal statutes, often without regard for existing grazing arrangements or seasonal land use patterns. Colonial authorities further entrenched these changes through the policy of indirect rule, which subordinated traditional institutions to colonial district offices and courts. While chiefs and village heads were retained, their authority was redefined and limited, reducing their autonomy in land allocation and dispute resolution.

In Kokona, this transition weakened the legitimacy of customary adjudication, as serious disputes increasingly fell under colonial courts that were distant, unfamiliar, and procedurally alien to local populations. An oral account from a traditional title holder in Garaku indicates that by the 1930s, elders were often compelled to refer disputes to colonial officials, even when both parties preferred local settlement. This early colonial restructuring laid the foundation for the long-term erosion of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, whose consequences became more pronounced in the post-colonial and contemporary periods.

Post-Colonial State Policies and Institutional Shifts The Land Use Act and the Erosion of Customary Authority

The promulgation of the Land Use Act of 1978 marked a decisive rupture in the historical evolution of land tenure and conflict management in Kokona Local Government Area. Prior to this legislation, land relations among the Eggon, Gwandara, and pastoral Fulani communities were regulated through layered customary norms in which lineage heads, village chiefs, and councils of elders exercised authority over land allocation, seasonal access, and dispute resolution. Grazing rights were not absolute but negotiated annually, particularly along fertile lowlands such as the Mada River plains and peripheral farmlands around Garaku, Amba, and Kofar Gwari districts. These arrangements were sustained through oral agreements, symbolic gifts, and social sanctions that reinforced mutual obligation rather than legal ownership.

The Land Use Act fundamentally altered this arrangement by vesting all land in the state governor, thereby transforming land from a social resource into a statutory commodity. In Kokona, this shift weakened the authority of traditional institutions to allocate land or enforce negotiated access routes for pastoralists. Oral agreements that had historically regulated grazing corridors—especially dry-season routes linking Kokona to neighboring Awe and Keana areas—were rendered legally invisible in the absence of certificates of occupancy. As a result, pastoralists who had relied on generational understandings with host communities increasingly found themselves classified as trespassers, while farmers expanded cultivation into former grazing paths under the perceived protection of statutory law.

Field interviews conducted in Garaku revealed that traditional rulers and elders were

frequently bypassed in land-related disputes after the 1980s, as complainants increasingly turned to local government officials or the police. A senior district head in Kokona noted that by the late 1990s, “our words no longer carried the force of law; even when we settled disputes; parties still went to court or invited security agents.” This erosion of authority not only undermined indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms but also diminished the moral legitimacy of elders whose decisions had once been binding on both farmers and herders.

Scholars have similarly observed that post-colonial statutory reforms across Nigeria reduced traditional rulers to administrative auxiliaries without coercive or judicial powers. In Kokona, this disempowerment was exacerbated by local government reforms that centralized decision-making in elected councils unfamiliar with customary land history. Consequently, traditional mediation forums—once central to conflict de-escalation—were relegated to advisory roles, unable to enforce compensation, fines, or ritual reconciliation that had previously restored social harmony.

Anti-Open Grazing Policies and Governance Responses

The intensification of farmer–herder conflicts in Kokona from the early 2000s prompted renewed state intervention, often without adequate consultation with indigenous institutions. One prominent example was the proposed Ruga (Rural Grazing Area) policy, which sought to establish designated grazing settlements for pastoralists. Although conceived as a solution to unregulated pastoral mobility, the policy was widely resisted in Nasarawa State, including Kokona, where communities perceived it as an externally imposed framework that ignored local land histories and communal consent. The suspension of the policy underscored the persistent tension between centralized policy formulation and grassroots customary governance.

In parallel, the adoption of anti-open grazing laws across North-Central Nigeria further constrained pastoral practices without integrating indigenous conflict management mechanisms. In Kokona, these policies disrupted long-established seasonal movements and heightened suspicion between communities. Oral testimonies from pastoral leaders in Amba district suggest that criminalization of grazing practices deepened grievances, as herders felt excluded from decision-making processes that directly affected their livelihoods. Farmers, on the other hand, viewed statutory enforcement as insufficiently responsive, particularly when arrests failed to prevent retaliatory violence.

The cumulative effect of these policies has been the gradual displacement of indigenous conflict resolution systems that once prioritized dialogue, restitution, and coexistence. By privileging formal legal instruments and security responses over customary mediation, post-colonial governance in Kokona has inadvertently intensified conflict dynamics. The historical record thus demonstrates that the decline of indigenous mechanisms is not merely a product of social change but the outcome of deliberate institutional restructuring that marginalized local knowledge systems integral to peace building.

Decline of Indigenous Conflict Resolution Mechanisms: Causes and Effects Undermining of Customary Institutions

The decline of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in Kokona Local Government Area is closely linked to the progressive marginalization of customary institutions under colonial and post-colonial legal frameworks. Historically, village heads (Madaki, Sarkin Kasa, and councils of elders) exercised judicial and moral authority over land disputes, crop damage, and grazing infractions. Their decisions—often involving compensation, ritual appeasement, and communal reconciliation—were binding and enforced through social sanctions such as ostracism or loss of communal support.

However, colonial legal pluralism subordinated these indigenous institutions to native courts and district officers, a process that intensified after independence with the expansion of magistrate courts, police authority, and statutory land administration. In Kokona, elders increasingly lost jurisdiction over serious disputes, particularly those

involving inter-communal violence or claims over farmlands along fertile plains in Garaku, Kofar Gwari, and Amba districts. By the late twentieth century, disputants routinely bypassed traditional forums, preferring formal institutions perceived as more powerful, even when these institutions lacked contextual understanding of local land histories.

Oral evidence from Kokona indicates that the erosion of customary authority undermined compliance with mediated settlements. A senior elder in Kofar Gwari observed that “in the past, once elders decided a case, no one dared challenge it; today, parties walk away and report to the police, even after peace has been made.” This loss of enforceability weakened indigenous mechanisms, transforming them from authoritative conflict managers into symbolic intermediaries with limited influence.

Scholarly analyses corroborate this trend, noting that traditional rulers across Nigeria have been systematically stripped of judicial authority, reducing their role in peacebuilding to informal advisory functions. In Kokona, the resulting institutional vacuum diminished community confidence in customary mediation, contributing to declining participation and the erosion of collective responsibility for conflict resolution.

Environmental and Socio-Economic Pressures

Beyond legal and institutional restructuring, environmental and socio-economic pressures have further strained indigenous conflict management systems in Kokona. Rapid population growth since the 1980s intensified pressure on arable land, leading to the expansion of farmlands into areas historically reserved for grazing and seasonal migration routes. This trend was particularly evident along riverine zones and low-lying fertile lands traditionally shared by farmers and herders during the dry season.

Ecological changes—including irregular rainfall patterns and land degradation—exacerbated competition over diminishing resources. Farmers increasingly blocked access to watering points to protect crops, while herders struggled to secure pasture for their livestock, often resulting in inadvertent crop damage. In earlier periods, such incidents were resolved through compensation mediated by elders, who balanced economic loss with social harmony. However, the weakening of these mediation structures left grievances unresolved, allowing mistrust and hostility to fester.

Interviews with pastoral leaders in Amba district reveal growing frustration over the absence of trusted local mechanisms. One Fulani leader noted that “before, we reported issues to the village head and paid compensation; now, no one listens until violence happens.” Farmers similarly expressed dissatisfaction, arguing that traditional leaders lacked the authority to restrain pastoralists or enforce restitution, thereby prompting them to resort to self-help measures.

Escalation of Violent Clashes

The decline of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in Kokona coincided with a marked escalation of violent farmer–herder clashes from the early 2000s. This pattern mirrors broader trends across central Nigeria, where weakened customary institutions, combined with environmental stress and policy failures, contributed to recurrent cycles of violence. In Kokona, episodes of communal confrontation resulted in loss of lives, displacement of households, and disruption of agricultural activities, particularly during peak farming seasons.

In the absence of effective customary processes, conflict adjudication increasingly defaulted to formal legal and security systems. However, these institutions often proved ill-suited to address the underlying causes of disputes or deliver timely justice. Court cases dragged on for years, while security interventions focused on containment rather than reconciliation. As a result, affected communities perceived state responses as distant and ineffective, reinforcing reliance on retaliatory violence.

Oral testimonies from community members in Garaku underscore this dynamic. A youth leader recounted that unresolved disputes over crop damage escalated into violence because “there was no respected elder to bring both sides together before things got out of

hand.” This breakdown of early-warning and mediation functions—once central to indigenous governance—highlights the profound consequences of institutional decline.

Overall, the Kokona experience demonstrates that the erosion of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms has not merely removed a traditional practice but dismantled a historically embedded system of social regulation. The resulting vacuum has intensified conflict, weakened social cohesion, and exposed the limitations of formal institutions in managing localized resource disputes rooted in history, culture, and livelihood interdependence.

II. Discussion

The erosion of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in Kokona Local Government Area (LGA) reflects a complex convergence of historical, legal, ecological, and governance-related processes that have unfolded over several decades. Rather than a sudden collapse, the weakening of these mechanisms represents a gradual disarticulation of customary authority from everyday governance, particularly in the management of farmer–herder relations.

First, colonial land and legal reforms profoundly disrupted communal access to land and natural resources in Kokona. Prior to colonial rule, land was held collectively and administered through lineage heads and village councils, who regulated access to farmlands, grazing corridors, and water points based on seasonal needs and negotiated reciprocity. The introduction of British legal frameworks, native courts, and indirect rule structures subordinated these indigenous adjudicatory systems to colonial officers and statutory courts. In practice, this shift altered perceptions of authority, as disputants increasingly viewed colonial—and later state—institutions as superior, even when they lacked contextual understanding of local land histories. Elders in Garaku recalled that during the late colonial period, decisions of village councils could be overturned by district officers, thereby weakening confidence in customary rulings.

Second, post-colonial policy interventions compounded these disruptions by failing to reconcile statutory governance with customary tenure systems. The Land Use Act of 1978, which vested land ownership in the state, further marginalized traditional authorities who had historically allocated land and mediated disputes. In Kokona, this resulted in ambiguity over land rights, particularly in fertile farming belts and traditional grazing routes. Farmers increasingly relied on certificates of occupancy and political connections, while pastoralists—whose access rights were rarely documented—found themselves excluded from decision-making processes. Oral testimony from a traditional ruler in Amba district highlights that elders could no longer enforce compensation agreements once land disputes were framed as legal matters under state jurisdiction.

Similarly, the introduction of anti-open grazing policies across central Nigeria—though not uniformly enforced in Nasarawa State—reshaped conflict dynamics in Kokona by criminalizing pastoral mobility without adequately engaging indigenous institutions. These policies overlooked the historical role of customary mediation in regulating pastoral movement and resolving infractions, thereby deepening mistrust between communities and the state. Traditional leaders, once central to balancing competing claims, became peripheral actors with limited influence over outcomes.

Third, governance responses such as the proposed Rural Grazing Area (Ruga) initiative illustrate the disconnection between modern policy frameworks and local norms. Although Ruga was designed to reduce open grazing and conflict, its top-down implementation and inadequate consultation with host communities generated widespread resistance. In Kokona, community members perceived the policy as an imposition that ignored local land histories and customary authority structures. A community elder in Kofar Gwari noted that “government never asked the elders where cattle used to pass or where farms had expanded; decisions were taken far away from us.” The suspension of the policy underscores the limitations of governance approaches that fail to integrate indigenous

knowledge systems and conflict resolution practices.

Fourth, socio-ecological pressures have amplified resource competition in Kokona, intensifying tensions in the absence of trusted indigenous mechanisms. Population growth, agricultural expansion, and climate variability have reduced available grazing land and water resources, particularly during dry seasons. In earlier periods, such pressures were mitigated through negotiated access and compensation overseen by elders. However, the decline of these mechanisms left communities without effective early-warning and mediation systems. Researchers note that where indigenous institutions are weakened, environmental stressors are more likely to translate into violent conflict. Oral accounts from farmers in Garaku and pastoralists in Amba confirm that minor disputes now escalate rapidly because there is no universally respected authority to intervene.

Taken together, these intertwined historical and contemporary factors have undermined the resilience of local dispute resolution systems in Kokona LGA. The resulting institutional vacuum has contributed to protracted insecurity, eroded communal trust, and exposed the inadequacies of formal governance structures in addressing conflicts rooted in history, livelihood interdependence, and ecological change. The Kokona experience thus reinforces broader scholarly arguments that sustainable peace in farmer–herder relations requires not the displacement but the revitalization and integration of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms within modern governance frameworks.

III. Conclusion

Between 1996 and 2019, indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in Kokona Local Government Area experienced a steady decline under the cumulative weight of colonial legacies, post-colonial state policies, and evolving governance reforms. Historically, traditional authorities—village heads, lineage elders, and councils of notables—played a central role in regulating seasonal competition over land, grazing corridors, and water resources. Through negotiation, compensation, ritual sanctioning, and communal reconciliation, these institutions ensured relative stability between agrarian and pastoral communities despite recurring pressures.

However, the post-1996 governance environment increasingly marginalized these indigenous systems. The dominance of statutory land administration following the Land Use Act, the expansion of formal courts and security agencies, and the politicization of land and identity disputes weakened the jurisdiction and moral authority of customary institutions. In Kokona, this shift was particularly evident in communities such as Garaku, Amba, and Kofar Gwari, where elders' rulings on crop damage or grazing infractions were frequently ignored or overridden by police interventions and protracted court processes. Oral testimonies from traditional leaders confirm that by the early 2000s, customary mediation had become advisory rather than authoritative, lacking enforceable backing.

The resulting institutional void contributed directly to the escalation of farmers–herders conflicts. Without trusted and culturally resonant mechanisms for early dispute resolution, minor infractions increasingly degenerated into violent confrontations, leading to loss of lives, displacement of households, destruction of farmlands, and disruption of local markets. These conflicts undermined agricultural productivity and pastoral livelihoods alike, deepening poverty and insecurity across Kokona LGA. The Kokona experience thus illustrates a broader structural problem in Nigeria's Middle Belt: the erosion of indigenous governance systems without the establishment of effective, locally legitimate alternatives. Overall, this study demonstrates that sustainable peace cannot be achieved solely through formal legal and security responses. Rather, it requires a deliberate re-engagement with indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms that are historically rooted, socially legitimate, and adaptive to contemporary realities.

IV. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy-oriented recommendations are proposed:

Legal Recognition and Institutional Integration

There is an urgent need for state and local governments to formally recognize indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms as complementary components of the justice and security architecture. Traditional councils in Kokona should be granted defined roles in mediating farmers–herders disputes, with clear legal backing to enforce non-violent settlements, particularly in cases of crop damage, grazing infractions, and access to water points. Such recognition would restore confidence in customary mediation and reduce overreliance on overstretched formal courts.

Strengthening the Capacity of Traditional Institutions

Traditional authorities require institutional support to function effectively in a modern governance environment. This includes training in mediation, documentation of agreements, and conflict early-warning systems, as well as modest logistical support from local government councils. Oral accounts from elders in Amba suggest that the absence of resources—such as transportation and communication tools—limits timely intervention in disputes. Capacity strengthening would enhance responsiveness and credibility at the grassroots level.

Hybrid Governance Frameworks for Conflict Management

A hybrid conflict management framework that integrates customary institutions with local government officials, security agencies, and civil society organizations should be institutionalized in Kokona LGA. Joint peace committees, comprising elders, farmers' representatives, pastoral leaders, and local officials, could provide platforms for dialogue and rapid dispute resolution. Such inclusive structures would bridge the gap between statutory authority and indigenous legitimacy.

Context-Sensitive Land and Grazing Policies

Land and grazing policies should be redesigned to reflect local histories of land use and pastoral mobility. Rather than blanket prohibitions or top-down initiatives, policies must involve traditional authorities in mapping grazing corridors, seasonal routes, and shared resource zones. Community elders in Garaku emphasized that many conflicts arise because historically recognized cattle routes are no longer acknowledged in official planning. Recognizing these routes would reduce friction and restore negotiated coexistence.

Documentation and Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge

Finally, there is a need to document indigenous conflict resolution practices in Kokona for policy use and intergenerational transmission. Oral traditions, mediation procedures, and customary sanctions should be systematically recorded to prevent further erosion of indigenous knowledge. Such documentation would not only inform policymaking but also reaffirm the cultural relevance of traditional institutions in contemporary society.

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