

POLITENESS STRATEGIES AS VIABLE DISPUTE SETTLEMENT APPROACH BETWEEN FULANI HERDSMEN AND VILLAGE SETTLERS IN OKE-OGUN AREA OF OYO STATE

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Abstract

The Oke-Ogun region of Oyo State, a significant agricultural hub, faces rising violence due to tensions between indigenous farmers and Fulani herders, which threatens the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While existing peace studies focus on fact-finding, this study investigates the role of language, particularly politeness strategies, in addressing these conflicts, by exploring how sociolinguistic resources are utilized. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory was applied to interrogate how communication promotes understanding and reduces hostility between the groups. Fieldwork activities included interviews and observations in local government areas, engaging traditional rulers, community members, and Fulani herders. Analysis revealed that the identified conflicts stem from linguistic and non-linguistic factors, such as ideological differences, mythical beliefs, and environmental issues like desertification. Yoruba farmers dehumanize Fulani herders with animal metaphors, while Fulani view the Yoruba as passive. Myths, such as Fulani beliefs in plants for cattle fertility, fuel conflicts when herders graze on crops. Desertification exacerbates Fulani migration, increasing competition for resources. Politeness strategies, such as tact and agreement maxims, aid conflict resolution through blame-shifting, metaphorical language, collectivization, and indirectness. The conclusion is that these strategies, while promoting understanding, also support SDGs in food security and peaceful coexistence. However, deep-seated tensions and external influences may limit their effectiveness. Peaceful management of herders-farmers conflicts in Oke-Ogun, Oyo State, requires a respectful approach with dialogue, active listening, and mutual respect through politeness principles. State and non-state agencies can play key roles by facilitating dialogue, promoting cultural understanding, offering conflict resolution training, and conducting research to

identify root causes of such conflicts and support community-driven solutions for Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, Oke-Ogun region of Oyo State, Animal metaphors, Desertification, Politeness strategies

Introduction

The Oke-Ogun area of Oyo State, often referred to as the food basket of both Oyo State and Nigeria, has gained significant attention in recent years for agricultural and historical studies, particularly in relation to global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, the region has received limited focus from peace and conflict studies, especially from a socio-linguistic perspective. This study has, therefore, addressed this gap by examining Oke-Ogun as a hotspot for increasing violence and insecurity, largely due to the ongoing conflict between indigenous farmers and itinerant Fulani herdsman. The goal of the study is to explore contextually relevant linguistic elements, specifically politeness strategies, as potential tools for resolving disputes, and promoting peace in the Oke-Ogun region of Oyo State. The Fulani, known for their strong connection to cattle and religion, are famous for their transhuman lifestyle; migrating with their herds due to seasonal ecological changes. This migration often brings them into contact and conflict with farming communities, a situation that has intensified in recent years.

The origins of the Fulani people are subject to various historical accounts. According to Dr. Ballkie (1856:174-175), in an interview with the Sarikin Hausa of Hamarawa, the Fulani are believed to have originated from a place near Timbuktu called Male, which is referred to as the district of Melli. Another version of their origin, provided by Koelle, traces the Fulani to Futa Toro, located north of the Gambia. This account is somewhat aligned with the Sarikin's version, as Futa Toro is believed to be within the geographical area of Melli, according to Arab geographers.

Further accounts suggest different origins for the Fulani. Some claim they originated from the Malays or Polynesians (Taylor, 1921), while others describe them as descendants of Gypsies displaced from their Indo-Germanic homelands by the Magyars through Egypt. Other sources, such as Delafosse, link the Fulani to the children of Israel who were said to have escaped Egypt under the reign of Pharaohs, with some claiming they are descendants of Joseph who left Egypt via the Nile and settled in North Africa.

Jeffreys (1944) and Dr. Meek (1925:94-96) acknowledged the complexity of tracing the Fulani's origins. Dr. Meek, noting the difficulty in pinpointing their exact origin, suggested that the Fulani's traditional first chief was Ilo Falagui, a descendant of Ham, whose legacy is associated with the Hamitic origin of the people. In addition, Palmer (1931), a former governor of Northern Nigeria, argued that the Fulani were an offshoot of a union between Arabs and Berbers who had visited the Maghrib in 650-750 A.D. from regions like Genar, Tegang, and Adrar in Mauritania during the Roman and Byzantine era. According to this account, after helping to destroy the Sarakolle or Wakore state of Ghana, the Fulani were pushed further into Senegal and Niger by the Tuareg around 1050 A.D. These various accounts make it difficult to establish the precise lineage of the Fulani people. Their migration to northern Nigeria occurred gradually, with small groups moving from the direction of Melli (near Timbuktu) to establish a base in Sokoto.

Other groups are believed to have settled in Bornu, Adamawa, and the Hausa states. By the time of the Jihad (Holy War), Fulani chiefs had already infiltrated the administrative systems of the Hausa kingdoms by the 14th Century. One of the key figures in that process was Shehu Usman Dan Fodio, who was born in 1744 A.D. in the Toronkawa group of the Gobir kingdom. Usman Dan Fodio led the Fulani jihad, ultimately establishing Fulani dominance over the culturally rich Hausa lands (Nwabara, 1963).

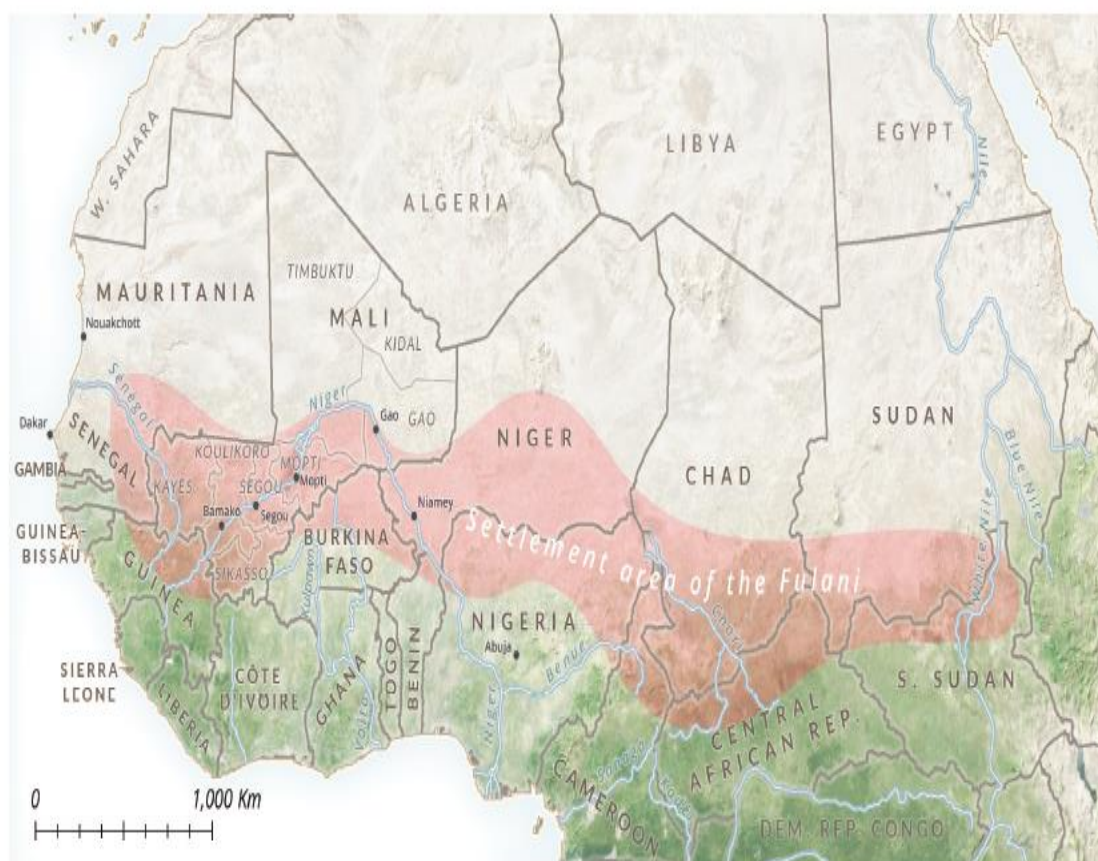


Figure 1.1: Map of Africa

Source: CTL SENTINEL (2017:35)

The Fulani are not only found in Nigeria but also in other West African countries such as Cameroon, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and Sudan. Despite their nomadic lifestyle, the Fulani population has grown significantly over time, from about 6 million in the 1960s to an estimated 20-25 million today (Dupire, 1963; Riesman, 1992; Pulse, 2022). The Fulani speak Fulfude in Nigeria, while in Senegal and surrounding areas, the language is known as Pular or Fula. This linguistic variation is a result of the Fulani's nomadic way of life.

Culturally and socially, the Fulani are identified by their occupation, religion, marriage practices, food, and traditional clothing (Bonfiglioli, 1988; Hopen, 1958; Stenning, 1959; Hampshire, 2003). The Fulani society is structured into a caste system based on status and occupation. The Fulbe, as they are known, are skilled herders who understand the ecological changes that affect their livestock. Hopen (1958) notes that the Fulbe divide the year into five seasons that align with the weather, each affecting their herding activities. During the growing and harvest seasons, they keep their cattle away from farms in distant settlements, a practice associated with the "rumirde" season. Other castes among the Fulani include blacksmiths, bards, and merchants.

Herding is a central aspect of the Fulani way of life, driven in part by ecological changes such as desertification. The Sahel region, which is mostly green, is favorable for cattle rearing, and this has shaped the Fulani's migratory lifestyle. As a result, the Fulani often live as settlers within host communities. This means that the historical context of these conflicts, particularly in Nigeria's Oke-Ogun region, is deeply rooted in social, economic, and environmental factors.

The farmer-herder conflict, particularly in the Oke-Ogun area, has historical, environmental, and political origins. The competition for resources like land and water has worsened over time. During the colonial period, British policies disrupted traditional land use and pastoral movements, setting the stage for future conflicts. Modern issues like climate change, population growth, and shrinking resources have exacerbated the tensions. Farmers often encroach on land used by herders, increasing competition for grazing land and water. Government efforts to resolve the conflict, such as grazing reserves or ranching, have faced implementation challenges, and extremist groups like Boko Haram have exploited the situation (Adisa and Yusuf, 2022).

Addressing the conflict requires a multifaceted approach, including better land management, support for sustainable agricultural practices, and fostering dialogue between communities. An important aspect of resolving this conflict, going by Holmes (2013), is the role of communication, particularly politeness strategies, which can promote constructive dialogue and understanding.

The farmer-herder conflict in Oke-Ogun has resulted in displacement, violence, and food insecurity. Despite various government attempts, the conflict persists. This research proposes that using language, specifically politeness strategies, can be a powerful tool in resolving these disputes. By promoting respectful communication, misunderstandings can be reduced, fostering cooperation and contributing to the broader goal of achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in food security in Oyo State and Nigeria's broader food security projections.

Many studies have explored the farmer-herder conflict from environmental, political, and economic perspectives, but few have focused on linguistic solutions (Ifatimehin and Tenuche, 2009; Imo, 2017, Agbegbedia, 2014; Muhammed et al., 2015, Olatunji, 2017; Ogo-Oluwa, 2017, Johnson and Taofik, 2017; Adisa and Adekunle, 2010).

Several other studies have also analyzed the conflict through the lens of ideological discourse, identity representation, and pragmatics. For instance, Adeleke (2004) studied how Yoruba myths serve as traditional tools for conflict resolution, offering a cultural approach to resolving disputes. In contrast, this study focuses on how politeness strategies, as pragmatic tools, can be applied to settle conflicts between Fulani herdsmen and farmers in Oke-Ogun.

Other research, such as that by Ayodabo and Babajo (2010), examined the pragmatic functions of proverbs in Nigerian languages and their potential for settling conflicts. In a similar vein, Ajayi and Buhari (2014) compared traditional African conflict resolution methods with modern litigation processes. While their focus was on the comparison between traditional and modern conflict management methods, this study specifically examines the role of politeness in the resolution of conflicts in Oke-Ogun.

While studies such as Augustine (2018) explored language's role in conflict resolution, focusing on specific cities like Jos, Idris and Lawan (2018) rather emphasize the role of language in resolving ethnic and religious conflicts, aligning with the present study's focus on the usefulness of politeness strategies in resolving and managing the perennial farmer-herder conflict in Oke-Ogun, the Oyo State agricultural hub.

This research explored the role of language, particularly politeness strategies, in resolving conflicts between Fulani herders and Yoruba farmers in Oke-Ogun. It specifically : (a) identified the causes of the conflict, (b) categorized these causes, and (c) analyzed effective politeness strategies for resolving

the conflict. The main question guiding the research is: How effective can politeness principles be in resolving farmer-herder conflicts in Oke-Ogun?

Methodology

Along with Brown and Levinson's theory, Halliday's Eco-linguistic model was used to analyze data gathered through observations, interviews, and community meetings in Oke-Ogun. The research employed qualitative methods, including discourse analysis of conversations, with translations from indigenous languages to English.

The study was conducted in six towns within six local government areas of Oke-Ogun: Ìsẹ̀yìn, Baba Ode, Okeho, Tede, Iganna, and Kishi. Meetings were held with traditional rulers, community members, Fulani herders, and security agencies. Indigenous languages (Yoruba, Hausa, Fulfulde) were used, with interpreters where necessary. Politeness principles guided these interactions, which were transcribed and analyzed for the research.

The primary focus was on specific towns and areas within the Oke Ogun region. The towns selected from different axes include:

- i. **Ìsẹ̀yìn axis:** Ìsẹ̀yìn, Alobò, Alagbade, Alayin, Ikere, and Alagogo;
- ii. **Ìtẹ̀síwájú axis:** Out, Okaka, Ipapo, Baba Ode, and Igbojaye;
- iii. **Kájòlà axis:** Okeho, Ilua, Iwere Oke, Isemi Ile, and Ayetoro Okeho;
- iv. **Àtìsbò axis:** Tede, Irawo, Sabe Alaga, and Ofiki;
- v. **Ìwàjòwà axis:** Iganna, Ilaji, Ijio, Gbedu, and Itasa; and
- vi. **Ìrèpò axis:** Ìrèpò and Kishi



Figure 2: A figure showing conflict resolution setting involving Fulani Herder, village farmers, research assistants (participatory observation method was deployed)

Through these efforts, the study focused on provide insights into how politeness strategies can play a crucial role in resolving conflicts between Fulani herders and Yoruba farmers in the Oke-Ogun region. One gain of this kind of qualitative method is the facilitation of naturalistic approach that requires a theoretical groundwork which emphasizes managing face-threatening acts in communication; hence, the choice of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. The theory distinguishes between positive face (the desire for social approval) and negative face (the desire for autonomy) and outlines various politeness strategies that can help navigate social interactions and conflicts. Besides, the need to expose linguistic model accounted for the deployment of SFL According to Goffman (1967), "face" is the self-image individuals project in interactions, which can be damaged, maintained, or enhanced through communication. Brown and Levinson describe two types of face: positive face, which is the desire for social approval and recognition, and negative face, which is the desire for personal autonomy and independence. The theory also outlines various politeness strategies, including "Bald on Record," "Positive Politeness," "Negative Politeness," and "Off Record" strategies, each of which plays a role in managing social interactions and potential conflicts.

This study has focused on the causes of conflict between the Fulani herdsmen and community members in the Òkè-Ògùn region of Òyó State and the politeness strategies utilizable in addressing these conflicts. The research structure has categorized these causes, and examined both ideological and cultural factors contributing to the tensions.

Categorization of Possible Causes of Conflict

The study has identified ideological, mythical, and environmental factors as major contributors to the conflict. These causes are discussed below:

1. Ideological Variances/Polarities:

- (i) Ideology shapes perceptions of power, dominance, and inequality. The conflict arises from opposing worldviews and values between the Yoruba villagers and Fulani herdsman.
- (ii) **Animal vs. Plant Metaphors:** The Yoruba farmers dehumanize the Fulani by calling them "Eranko" (animal), associating them with destructive and antisocial behaviors. The Fulani, in turn, see the Yoruba as passive and vulnerable, likening them to plants, which they "consume."

2. Mythical Beliefs:

- (i) Fulani herders believe grazing on certain plants enhances the fertility of their cattle, leading them to bring cattle into villages and feed on crops. This belief fuels conflict over land use.

3. Desertification:

- (i) Environmental degradation in northern Nigeria has led many Fulani herders to migrate down south in search of grazing lands, resulting in clashes over resources in Yoruba land.



Figure 3: a picture showing herds resident in another man's farmland

Results

The causes of conflict are divided into linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Non-linguistic causes include mythical beliefs, desertification, and migration, while linguistic causes involve blame-shifting, collectivization, metaphor use, and indirectness.

Politeness Strategies in Resolving Conflict

The study has identified two key politeness strategies: Tact Maxim and Agreement Maxim, illustrated through blame-shifting, metaphor use, collectivization, and indirectness.

1. Blame-Shifting and Tact Maxim:

- i. Fulani herders often shift blame for damage to farmlands onto children or "foreign" herders, avoiding responsibility, deploying deresponsibilization strategy aimed at minimizing the cost of admitting fault. In contrast, the Yoruba, using proverbs, promote peaceful resolution and respect. The following excerpts for example:

‘Bí a bá n jà, bí i ká kú kó’ (Though we may quarrel, we don't wish harm to the opponent).

‘Eni bá rora pa èrè, a rí ifun inu rè’ (One who kills an ant carefully may discover its intestines).

2. Metaphor as Compensation and Tact Maxim:

- i. Metaphors such as animal and plant imagery communicate the conflict's dynamics, with each group using language to justify its actions. The kolanut, typically a gift, is used in the context of the conflict as compensation, representing money. This is exemplified in excerpt 5 below:

Balode: Kin lo o fi se itan'ran fun Oloko t'o o f'eran jeko re? (what do you what to do now to appease the owner of the farm which your herds have destroyed?)

Fulani: a ma fun won lo wo obi (we are going to give them Kola)

Balode: Bi elo (like how much?)

Fulani: bi egberun marun: (like five thousand)

3. Collectivization as a Tact Maxim (Joint Land Ownership):

- i. Fulani herders claim joint ownership of land, asserting a cultural belief that the entire land of Nigeria belongs to them, reinforced by the election of a Fulani president.

Excerpt 6 highlights this notion:

Balode: ile wa niyi, Aa a si le je ki awon Ajoji wa ba ilu wa je (This is our land and we cannot allow anybody to come and spoil this land, our inheritance for us.)

Fulani: A jo nile yi nii (We both own this land together).

Balode: se e n gbo! Ajoji na n f'owo la'le (Can you see? The foreigners too claim ownership of land in Nigeria).

Discussion

Indirectness as a Tact and Agreement Maxim:

Fulani herders use indirectness to avoid direct confrontation, implying that others (e.g., children or foreign herders) are responsible for the destruction. This minimizes conflict, and maintains mutual respect. Indirectness is another key politeness strategy used in resolving conflicts between the Fulani herders and the village farmers in the Oke-Ogun area of Oyo State, Nigeria. During interviews, Fulani herders often engage in the use of 'deresponsibilisation strategy' to feign their responsibility for damage to farmlands without directly admitting it. When asked, a Fulani man suggested that "the children" were responsible for the destruction, implying that the act was not directly carried out by them. Further investigation revealed that the Fulani herders might choose times when Muslim and Christian farmers are not on their farms, so they can claim the destruction was caused by "foreign" Fulani people. In some cases, the Fulani herders may also engage in revenge-driven destruction, targeting farms as an act of retaliation for unresolved past conflicts.

Indirectness, in this case, serves as a politeness strategy that aligns with the tact and agreement maxims. The tact maxim minimizes costs for the hearer, while maximizing benefits to them, and in this context, it allows the Fulani herders to avoid direct confrontation or responsibility. The agreement maxim stresses the importance of minimizing disagreement and maximizing mutual understanding. The aim here is to stress that, despite the occasional conflicts, both the Fulani herders and the Yoruba farmers have coexisted for many years, and such disputes are unproductive and harmful to social development. By emphasizing peace and understanding, the goal is to create an atmosphere conducive to growth and mutual respect, where conflicts are resolved without escalating tensions or causing further harm.

Summary of Findings

The study emphasizes the importance of politeness principles in resolving farmer-herder conflicts. By focusing on language, discourse, and mutual understanding, dialogue can be facilitated, helping to bridge gaps and promote cooperation. The approach also highlights shared interests and values

between the two groups, encouraging peaceful coexistence. However, challenges remain, including power imbalances, resistance to dialogue, and emotional responses, which could hinder conflict resolution.

Conclusion

The study revealed that ideological variances, mythical beliefs, and desertification are key causes of the conflict. The Fulani and Yoruba groups hold opposing worldviews, and their metaphors reflected these divisions. Linguistic strategies like blame-shifting, metaphor use, collectivization, and indirectness played significant roles in conflict resolution. Although these strategies have potential for promoting peace, external challenges and deep-seated tensions may complicate the process.

Relevance to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Arising from the Ajayi Crowther University Oyo (Nigeria)'s research grant endowed to solve societal problems, the study's findings underscore the importance of resolving conflicts in the Òkè-Ògùn region to ensure the sustainable development of the area, particularly in agriculture, which is vital to the region's economy. By promoting peaceful coexistence between farmers and herders, this research supports the achievement of SDGs related to food security, social harmony, and economic stability in Òyó State and Nigeria in general.

Recommended Implementation Strategies

To address the conflict between Fulani herders and Yoruba farmers in the Oke-Ogun region of Oyo State, a thoughtful, respectful approach is necessary. Ajayi Crowther University can play a key role by applying politeness principles that promote active listening, respect, and understanding. The University can contribute in the following ways:

1. Host Dialogue Sessions by organizing regular forums and workshops to provide a platform for Fulani herders and Yoruba farmers to express their concerns in a respectful manner.
2. Promote Mutual Respect by encouraging active listening and acknowledgment of differing viewpoints to build trust and reduce misunderstandings.
3. Conduct conflict Resolution Training by implementing programs on negotiation and conflict resolution, emphasizing politeness and understanding during contentious discussions.
4. Float Cultural Education by offering courses to educate both groups about each other's traditions, cultures, and economic practices, fostering empathy and reducing prejudices.
5. Formulate research and Solution Proposals to conduct research on the causes of conflict, share findings sensitively, and propose equitable solutions.
6. Collaborate with Local Leaders and NGOs by working with local leaders, government agencies, and NGOs to create community-driven initiatives with respect for both groups' traditions.
7. Encourage Joint Projects that promote cooperation through community-based resource management programs, agricultural fairs, and shared activities.
8. Offer mediation Services by establishing neutral third-party mediation services to help resolve disputes while maintaining the dignity and interests of both parties.
9. Provide psychological Support in form of counseling for those affected by the conflict in a supportive, non-judgmental way.

Addressing Fulani Resistance to Dialogue

It is a very valid concern that the Fulani are known not to be open to dialogue; and this reluctance can indeed create challenges. Stakeholders such as Ajayi Crowther University should, therefore, consider how the following strategies can be useful in getting this reconciled with the indigenous farmers' rights and survival:

- (i) Engaging with influential Fulani leaders who may be more open to dialogue, and work through them to promote understanding and cooperation;
- (ii) Establishing trust with Fulani communities through consistent, respectful engagement, and tangible benefits like improved access to resources or services.
- (iii) Using neutral facilitators, like respected community elders or external mediators, to facilitate dialogue and negotiation;
- (iv) Recognising and addressing power imbalances between Fulani herders and farmers, ensuring that marginalized groups have a voice and equal opportunities;
- (v) Providing alternative solutions that meet the needs of Fulani herders, like designated grazing areas or livestock support programs;
- (vi) Focusing on gradual, incremental progress rather than expecting immediate resolution, allowing for trust and understanding to develop over time;
- (vii) Partnering with organizations working with Fulani communities, like NGOs or community-based organizations, to leverage their expertise and relationships;
- (viii) Encouraging government support and policies that promote peaceful coexistence, like laws protecting farmers' rights and providing support for herders;
- (ix) Conducting education and awareness campaigns targeting Fulani communities, highlighting the benefits of cooperation and peaceful coexistence; and
- (x) Ensuring that the rights and survival of farmers and other affected groups are protected, while also working towards finding mutually beneficial solutions.

By using the politeness principle in these strategies, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, can contribute to creating a more harmonious relationship between Fulani herders and Yoruba farmers, and addressing their conflicts with respect and understanding. It must, however, be remembered that reconciliation and finding mutually beneficial solutions take time, effort, and perseverance.

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