

Resolving Conflict in African Traditional Society: An Imperative of Indigenous African System

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Abstract

The paper examines the mechanism for conflict resolution in traditional African societies before the advent of colonialism in the continent in which Yoruba society was x-rayed as a reference point. It is however noted, that in resolving conflict in traditional African societies, the platform always provide opportunity for the parties involved to interact, building consensus and provision of order in a given society. The traditional conflict resolution techniques such as mediation, negotiation, adjudication and reconciliation were also examined and the indigenous personalities in conflict resolution in African societies which includes kings and chiefs, ancestors, elders and family heads and family system. It is believed that the advent of colonialism attempted to wipe out the Africans' methods of monitoring, preventing, managing and resolving conflicts. Africans also had their peculiar ways and manners of effecting peace-making, peace building, and confidence building. Based on these major roles played by indigenous knowledge in traditional African societies in conflict resolution beside the development process. It is concluded that, it is necessary however that the original African values must be revisited.

Key Words: Conflict, Conflict resolution, African societies, Age-grade, Ancestors.

Introduction

Indigenous communities around the world are constantly struggling to maintain their rights, their traditions and their knowledge, in a system still dominated by a western worldview. They face the challenge of living in two worlds, the indigenous and the non-indigenous one, in constant tension with each other, with the latter having more power in shaping the former. For centuries, indigenous populations have suffered from invasion and oppression, and oftentimes they have seen their knowledge eclipsed by western knowledge, imposed on them through western institutions. Yet, indigenous populations have managed to survive for centuries adapting in many different ways to adverse climate conditions and managing to create sustainable livelihood systems. Their diverse forms of knowledge, deeply rooted in their relationships with the environment as well as in cultural cohesion, have allowed many of these communities to maintain a sustainable use and management of natural resources, to protect

their environment and to enhance their resilience; their ability to observe, adapt and mitigate has helped many indigenous communities face new and complex circumstances that have often severely impacted their way of living and their territories. Indigenous knowledge refers to the local knowledge that is unique to a given culture and acquired by local people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiments, and intimate understanding of the environment in a given culture (Chikaire, Osuagwe, Oguebuchulam and Ejiogu, 2012).

Traditional conflict resolution mechanism is a social capital, defined as the capability of social norms and customs to hold members of a group together by effectively setting and facilitating the terms of their relationship, sustainability facilitates collective action for achieving mutually beneficial ends (Fred-Mensah, 2005). Over the years, there have developed inter group conflict over land; increasing reliance on formal contracts to regulate relationships and create understanding; and shifts in methods of conflict resolution in that mediation seems to have given way to more confrontational statutory approaches based on formal court procedures (Fred-Mensah, 2005). Despite these, traditional methods still prevail, especially at the grassroots level in Africa setting.

Conflict resolution comprises a complex network of forces surrounding the parties in the conflict. It is a healing process in which all stakeholders contribute positive energy. The task is to re-establish the energy flow within individuals, families and communities so as to re-build social harmony. In this context, reconciliation often requires symbolic gestures and associated rituals including exchange of gifts, and slaughter of animals (chickens, goats, sheep, cows) (Ndumbe, 2001).

Conflicts may be managed so that they do not escalate and lead to crisis. Conflict management is different from peace building which seeks to prevent conflicts from developing in the first place by engaging all stakeholders in processes that facilitate peaceful coexistence. Conflict resolution deals with settlement of conflicts that may already exist. The spiritual dimension of conflict resolution refers to creating and restoring impaired relationship with God, the spirits, ancestors, family and neighbours as the case might be (Mbiti, 1991). This is critical in restoring other relationships at the physical level. In this context, rituals play an important role in the reconciliation process. They help to link people to the past, present and future.

Conflicts must be understood in their social context, involving “values and beliefs, fears and suspicions, interests and needs, attitudes and actions, relationships and networks...” (Brock–Utne, 2001). Thus, the root causes of conflicts must be explored to emphasize shared understandings of the past and present. Brock–Utne (2001) notes that, the immediate objective of such conflict resolution is to mend the broken or damaged relationship, rectify wrongs, and restore justice. Another aim is to ensure the full integration of parties into their societies again, and to adopt the mood of co-operation. The objective of conflict resolution, therefore, is to move away from accusations and counter accusations, to settle hurt feelings and to reach a compromise that may help improve future relationship. The effectiveness of the process and sustainability of the outcomes, generally, are attributed to such factors as simplicity, participatory nature, adaptable flexibility, complete relevance, and comprehensiveness (Brock–Utne, 2001). According to Asafo-Agyei (2003), traditional societies resolved conflicts through internal and external social controls. The internal social controls use processes of deterrence such as personal shame and fear of supernatural powers. External controls rely on sanctions associated with actions taken by others in relation to behaviours that may be approved or disapproved.

Indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms focus on the principles of empathy, sharing and cooperation in dealing with common problems which underline the essence of humanity (Murithi, 2006). Cultural approaches to resolving and managing disputes play a vital role in promoting peace and social order in communities. Cultural values and attitudes provide the basis for interaction and the norms by which individuals and communities live. These also promote sharing and equitable distribution of resources, thus promoting a climate for peace. African cultural principles relate to the very essence of existence and being human and how all humans are inextricably related. Therefore, peace-making is underscored by the principles of reciprocity, inclusivity and a sense of shared destiny between people. It provides a value system for giving and receiving forgiveness. This is because society places greater emphasis on communal life. Therefore, creating and sustaining positive mutual relations, are shared tasks involving everyone. It is believed that people are linked to each other including disputants as perpetrators or victims (Murithi, 2006).

Conflict is as natural as the concept of peace contrary to the global or universal conception. Africans have particular ways of conceptualizing conflict. Traditional definitions of conflict regard it as “a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals” (Onigun, Otite and Albert, 2001). However, conflict may generally exist wherever or whenever incompatible activities occur and may result in “win-lose character. The resolution, transformation and management of conflict may also produce a win-win situation.

Concept of Conflict

Conflict takes various forms and dimensions in African societies; it is significant to note that conflict is difficult to define from the perspective of the Africans. It seems to be part of excitement for networking relationship, whether negative or positive. Consequently, conflicts are in the magnitude of rage, rift, misunderstanding, family and market brawls, skirmishes and wars, public insurrections and assaults. It also includes chieftaincy and boundary disputes. These storms of conflicts are wide spread in Africa (Olaoba, 2005). Conflict as an element of social interaction has been defined in various dimensions. Some writers argued that, a conflict situation emerges when two or more parties could not agree on an issue. The parties to such conflict may not necessary be the government or nation states. In an incompatible stage among nation- states, every part involved seeks to achieve certain objectives, such as additional or more secure territory, security, access to markets, prestige, alliances and the overthrow of an unfriendly government (Omotosho, 2004).

The study of conflict in Africa has not always been mindful of the need to consider the interaction of local and international factors in the evolution of conflicts between African Nations. Conflict can be described as a condition in which are identifiable group of human beings weather tribal, ethnic, linguistic, religious, socio-political, economic, cultural or otherwise is in conscious opposition to one or more other identifiable human group because these groups are pursuing what to be incompatible goals (Ibid)

More importantly, conflict arises from the interaction of individuals who have partly, incompatible ends, in which the ability of one actor to gain his ends, depends to an important degrees on the choice or decisions that other parties will take. Conflict could be violent on uncontrollable dominant or recessive, resolvable or insolvable under various sets or circumstances (Omotosho, 2004). Mohammed (n.d) argues that Conflicts are inevitable wherever severe resources are unequally distributed among competitors and inequity is reflected in cultural and political relationship between groups. With regards to various issues

in dealing with conflict, it is important to bear in mind not just overt, physical violence, but also the sometimes subtly disguised forms of structural and cultural violence (Adam, 2000). Conflict management in general and conflict resolution in particular, are almost entirely determined by our understanding of the composition of a conflict and not only by symptoms (Kotze, 2000).

Albert (2001) opined that, there is nothing wrong with conflict, it is a critical mechanism by which goals and aspirations of individuals and groups are articulated; it is a channel for a definition of creative solutions to human problems and means creative solutions to human problems and a means to the development of a collective identity. Wadinga (2013) described African conflicts as phenomenon which are frequently brushed and dismissed as been chaotic, or worthy of some vague pity or humanitarian concern, but rarely of any in-depth political analysis. He added that the divide and rule policies of colonial administrators assured the docility of different ethnic groups and this shielded them from the menace of insurrection. For instance, among the Yoruba peoples, indigenous law derives essentially from customs and traditions. Literacy was not associated only with the written word, but also very essentially, with verbal art and remembrance. Although, the legal traditions of the Yoruba were largely unwritten, their preservation and survival were done through performance to make them lively and easily understood. Because the traditional society presented an atmosphere conducive for enduring performance, in short, the Yoruba people derived their sources of adjudication from wisdom and traditional knowledge of the forebears which were always dramatized. Olaoba (2001) confirmed that, the elders sit under a tree, and talk until they agree, the elders (old age or seniority) as the force behind order or decorum in traditional society. This indicates that elders, within the culture of the Yorubas, are the power house of wisdom and knowledge. Cases of fighting among adolescents or young people were in the past accorded an impromptu settlement by the passers-by who normally ensured restoration of peace and harmony. There existed various community associations and guilds saddled with the responsibility of maintenance of peace and order in marketing operations include, stealing, debt and fraud. In certain circumstances, gods and ancestors (the living dead) are called upon, their spirit invoked and every one especially the disputants are reminded of the aftermath of their wrath if they refuse to say the truth. In the markets, and the palace (court) spirit is present. The spirit could be malevolent / benevolent (Olaoba, 2002)

In Africa, there are levels or phases of conflict resolution as well as dispute resolutions at the inter-personal or family level, the extended family level and village or town level (chief in council). These tiers represent the political units making up the community. The smallest unit called *Idile* (Nuclear family) is headed by a *Bale*. The next unit is the *Ebi*, (extended family headed by *Mogaji* who is the most influential or usually the eldest person in the *Ebi*. Extended family includes all people who have blood ties. The last tier of the units is the quarter which comprises of several family compounds is headed by a *Baale*, (the chief-of-ward/quarter, while the head of household which includes the man's immediate family of wife or wives and children (Albert, 1995)

Cases resolved by *Bale* include conflicts among co-wives, brothers and sisters, truants, and street fights involving his children and his foster children or dependants. Conflict solved immediately includes minor conflicts by scolding the trouble makers and appeasing whoever was offended. The "bale" is required to visit the offended person, even to thank him/her for accepting a peaceful resolution of the conflict. It is the duty of *Bale* to call together his household and warn them to desist from making any more trouble. The court imposed no fine.

However, appeals could be made from court to the second court which is the court of the ward-chief (*Ile-ejo ijoye Adugbo*). This court tried civil cases. It could not try criminal case but it had the authority to conduct preliminary investigation into criminal cases before transferring them to the court of the king (*Ile-ejo Oba*) (Oguntomisin, 2004). *Baale* (chiefs) also controls the relationship between members of his family and outsiders. Such cases can threaten the survival of the entire lineage or ward. Once the matter is resolved, emphasis is put on how good neighbourliness can be achieved and preserved. Land dispute, lack of good care for women and children by the husband, infidelity by the women, dispute over inheritance are the commonest in this category.

However, dispute resolution by the Chief-in-council (*Igbimo Ilu*) in Yoruba land was the highest traditional institution for conflict resolution. In the pre-colonial era, the council had the power to pass a death sentence on any offender brought before it. The court of the king was the highest court. It was also the last court to which appeal could be made but, among *Egba* and *Ijebu*, however, the *Ogboni* court seemed to be the last court of appeal (Oguntomisin, 2004). A woman is traditionally expected to be on her knees and to offer the traditional greetings unless the chief ask her permission to stand up. A man has to start by prostrating which is a way of offering traditional greeting. Whatever judgment is given is accepted.

In the traditional judiciary system in Yoruba land, fines of damages are not usually awarded by the mediators in civil cases. The utmost aim is to restore peace by setting disputes amicably. In other words, restoration of harmony is what is paramount in the traditional judicial system. Sometimes, however, mediators award simple fines as a deterrent to the occurrence of particular anti-social behaviour. This may be demanded in form of kola nuts or local gins both of which have ritual significance. Some of the kola nuts are broken and passed round for everyone to eat as a way of celebrating the resolution of the conflict. The drink is also passed round for all to taste. If no gin or palm wine is available, ordinary drinking water can be used. In some traditional settings, the palm wine or gin is used to pour libation to the gods and ancestors of the people involved in the dispute. These actions help to reinforce the term of the reconciliation.

Indigenous Personalities in Conflict Resolution

Kings and Chiefs

The political culture evolved in African societies recognized the king as the overall boss and father of the kingdom. He was at the apex of a royal hierarchy of chiefs and statesmen. He was the sacred representative of the supernatural on earth and the personification of his kingdom. Indeed, he was the link between the sacred world and the physical universe. The liaison personality between the gods and the people over whom he governed. The king often played pivotal role in the governance of his kingdom. Thus, to enable the king play significant role in African society, he was distinguished and invested with specifically distinct royal title symbolic of the history of his kingdom. Some of the titles are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Title of the Kingship in Africa

S/N	Table of Kingship	Kingdoms in Africa
1	Ga Mantse	Ga (in Ghana)

2	Ohene	Ashante (Ghana)
3	The Oni	Cradle of Yoruba
4	The Alaafin	Oyo Kingdom
5	The Zibondo	Basogo Kingdom (Uganda)
6	The Kabaka	Kingdom of Buganda (Uganda)
7	The Moro Naba	Kingdom of Mossi
8	The Bur	Serer Kingdom (Senegal)
9	The Mani Kongo	Kingdom of Kongo
10	Ngwenyama	Swazi Kigdom
11	Shaka	Zulu Kingdom
12	The Ba	Salonn Kingdom (Senegal)

Source: Ayittey (1991). Indigenous African Institutions. New York: Transnational Publishers, Inc

The royal titles are limitless but they are significantly symbolic of the suzerainty of the divine personality. The nature of kingship in African traditional societies was that of a human being in the garb of godliness, which endowed on the personality, the power to issue out authority that cannot be queried. Herein lies the power of Africa kings towards social control and establishment of law and order in the society. In most cases, therefore, the word of an African king as understood, was law never to be flouted by anyone in his kingdom.

Chiefs as Partners in Progress with African Kings

African kingdoms were ruled by kings (monarchs) in the constitutional framework of monarchical government. They were rulers. One needs to understand that Chiefs were subordinate to the kings and therefore had chieftom as their area of jurisdiction. Chiefs were of lesser status and power than the kings in African societies. While kings were rulers, chiefs were leaders. The meeting point of their constitutional rights and duties was their commitment to governance and inauguration of peace and harmony in African societies.

The chiefs in partnership with African kings carried out executive, legislative and judicial duties in their respective domains. They were duty bound to resolve conflicts regularly and facilitated peace and harmony which enhanced development in the society. The chiefs acted as safety verve in the conduct of conflict resolution meetings for the kings, who perhaps by loss of memory, would have missed certain procedure associated with the art of resolving conflict. African chiefs have the wherewithal of conflict resolution in the society. This they have learnt by heart and experience from their forebears who bequeathed the art to them. Some of these chiefs were more practical and experience than the kings who they installed. This was why it was not so easy a task for the kings to underrate the intelligence and wisdom of their chiefs. The chiefs were often respected for the wealth of knowledge in reconciliation and enduring sense of history of the culture of the kingdoms. African chiefs were the watchdogs for the morality and proprietary of manners for the youth and the elderly in African societies.

Ancestors

The ancestors/ancestress have been conceived as the living dead sharing dual existences, the living world and the spiritual community. The experience gained while on earth usually informed the level of reflections of earth activities in the spiritual community. Such an experience was never given off since the connective veins and blood continually flowed in their offsprings, who though, lacked the requisite experience, must be guided to gain the experience

of life. Such an experience is that of motivation and coordination in the art of conflict resolution. Indeed, it is never in doubt that the ancestors would bring to bear on their ancestral and serene community, the art of facilitating peace and harmony, which undoubtedly, one will find out resonated in the modular exhibition of peaceful development. Thus, the art of conflict resolution would not have been limited to earthly living and sojourn but that it continued in the ancestral community.

Elders and Family Heads

African elders had the capacity to initiate developments, gave foresight into the future of the society and facilitated peace and harmony, the preserves of law and orderliness, which signalled social engineering. This presupposes the fact that the living elders have been imbued and endowed with the art of conflict resolution – the defence of truth and projection of progress in African societies. These elders were attributed with sterling qualities which stood them out of the society. These included:

- i. forbearance
- ii. tolerance
- iii. patience
- iv. foresight
- v. innovative spirit
- vi. self-control
- vii. forthrightness and
- viii. commitment to development process

It is believed that the knowledge and wisdom of the elders were bequeathed to them by their ancestors who earlier had the foremost of knowledge and understanding of the earthly conflict resolution model. It is also significant to infer from the ancestral impartation of knowledge on the living elders that African societies had existing conflict resolution model before western influence came. The living elders, therefore, were the instruments of transition of knowledge and experience of conflict resolution in African societies.

Family System

Fundamentally the family is a social unit and the bedrock of relationships and development. The family had been the unit of political culture in Africa and as such the foundation of conflict resolution. The art of conflict resolution, as discussed, promoted peace and harmony for the African populace. This presupposes the fact that the family must first feel the pulse of peace and harmony before it extends to the larger society. Thus, peace and harmony at the family level had been the foundation of a sound and positive political culture. At the family level the engineers (facilitators) of peace and harmony were the family heads, who, in their own rights were also considered as elders. As a matter of fact, family heads in African societies were the most aged and matured otherwise they would have lacked the experience and wisdom with which to resolve conflicts. They must be the oldest person in the family. The family heads in Africa had the capacity and experience of resolving conflicts within the family set up. As the oldest in the family and as ancestors in the making, they demonstrated the art of resolving conflict as bequeathed to them by the family ancestors. They therefore had the capacity of resolving conflicts such as marital brawl between co-wives in the family, between wives and husbands, between children and mothers as well as quarrels arising from property inheritance.

Age-Grade Association

Conflict resolution was tailored towards the restoration of peace and enhancement of harmony in African indigenous societies. Obviously, one must know that it was not an easy task. It was

desirous of knowledge, wisdom and experience. It was also aligned on social responsibilities of the age-grade association. The age-grade associations, therefore, played significant roles in the process of conflict resolution. Members of age-grade association in Africa had the capacity for ensuring mutuality and harmony. Thus they are:

- a) forceful in action,
- b) dynamic by mindset,
- c) enthusiastic in manners,
- d) versatile in social engineering,
- e) intimidating in the struggle,
- f) spectacularly youthful; and
- g) blunt in the pursuit of truth.

These sterling qualities enabled the age-grade association wherever noticeable in African indigenous societies, to be power to reckon with in the reconciliatory process of restoring peace and harmony back to the society. The existence of the age-grade association was one good innovation which has proven quite successful in the sustainability of law and order in African indigenous societies.

Secret Societies

The acts of conflict resolution require some elements of power and authorities. The enforcement of order enables peace facilitators to persuade parties to the conflict so much that peace becomes the order of the day and development can then take place in the society. Members of secret societies in Africa, through the ages, have had the mandate to lubricate the engine of societal development.

Secret societies performed such role as to resolve conflict in traditional African societies. As earlier indicated, members of secret societies enforced social ethic and public probity in the society. They had facilitated justice was also part of the concern of secret societies. They had never shirked their responsibility to ensure a thrivable and proven social engineering which had checkmated dastardly and criminal acts in the society where the secret societies operated. In some cases, they had served as the supreme tribunal for conflict resolution. Conflict resolution demands maturity on the part of peace facilitators, openness of mind, great sense of history and enthusiasm anchored on capacity to wield enough power. Members of various secret societies in Africa before the colonial rule had enough of the foregoing attributes. The Poro society in Sierra Leone and the Ogboni cult among the Yoruba of south west Nigeria had long established the models of conflict resolution geared towards peaceful co-existence of people in their environment. Secret societies in Africa had devised the extra-judicial means of seeking to resolve an almost difficult conflict. It usually involved ritual performance, oath taking and the administration of ordeals. For example, one will get to understand that the *edan* was a symbol of ritual detection of crime in ogboni cult among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria.

Conflict Resolution Methods in Africa

The methods of performing conflict resolution in the traditional African societies are; mediation, adjudication, reconciliation, arbitration and negotiation. It also includes employing extra-judicial devices and usage of legal maxims to persuade or convince the disputants about the implication or otherwise of their behaviour. These methods have been effective in traditional African Society.

Mediation: Mediation is an old method of conflict management surrounded by secrecy. It involves non-coercive intervention of the mediators(s), called third party either to reduce or go beyond or bring conflict to peaceful settlement. Olaoba (2005) described mediation as a method

of conflict resolution that had been so critical to traditional society. The mediators usually endeavoured that peace and harmony reigned supreme in the society at whatever level of mediation. Mediators are sought from within the communities or societies of the parties concerned. Elders are respected as trustworthy mediators all over Africa, because of their accumulated experiences and wisdom. Their roles depend on traditions, circumstances and personalities, accordingly. These roles includes, pressurizing, making recommendations giving assessments, conveying suggestions on behalf of the parties, emphasizing relevant norms and rules, envisaging the situation if agreement is not reached, or repeating of the agreement already attained (Bright-Brock, 2001).

Adjudication: In traditional African society, adjudication involves bringing all disputants in the conflict to a meeting usually in the chambers or compounds of family heads, quarter heads and palace court as the case maybe. Dialogue was linked with the adjudicatory processes in traditional (Olaoba, 2005).

Reconciliation: This was the most significant aspect of conflict resolution. It is the end product of adjudication. After the disputants have been persuaded to end the dispute, peace was restored. This restoration of peace and harmony was always anchored on the principle of give a little and get a little. This idea buttresses the idea of the disputing parties to give concessions. A feast was usually organized to confirm the readiness of the conflicting parties towards reaching points of compromise.

In African traditional society, conflict resolution method is characterized by the use of arbitration. The reconciliation function is practiced by an authority figure that mediates between conflicting parties but is empowered to make binding judgments. The purpose is not to render a judgment in law but to reconcile the conflicting parties and its norms. The relationship between the authority and the community is cushioned by community representatives who advise authority (William, 2000).

Negotiation: The secret of negotiation is to harmonize the interests of the parties concerned. Thus, even when the conflict involves a member against his or her society, there is an emphasis on recuperation and reinsertion of errant member back into its place in society. The recovery of a dissident member can just as well be seen as the restoration of the harmony and integrity of the community, as the assertion of value consensus and social cohesion, so that the management of the conflict favours the concerns of both parties (Olaoba, 2000). In traditional Yoruba society, peace is negotiated. Apology for wrongs done to individuals and the entire community was a feature of negotiation. Such apology was channelled through Yoruba elders, compound heads and chiefs of high calibre in the society. It is done on the representative level or quasi-representation. The *Babaogun* (patron) played the role of a representative in the sense of conflict resolution (Olaoba, 2005).

Conclusion

It is interesting to note that each people, ethnic groups or race have their own ways of doing things especially in the matter of conflict resolution. Europe, for example, the police are an agency of crime detection, several African societies relied on oath-taking and divination in pre-colonial times. While the western world placed emphasis on a judicial system presided over by lawyers and judges; traditional Africa uses council of elders, king's court, peoples (open place) assemblies, etc. for dispute settlement and justice dispensation (Nwolise, 2005). Traditional conflict resolution process encourages the conflict parties to use words of forgiveness or rituals and facilitate reintegration into the communities. Therefore, in traditional African societies, indigenous knowledge play major role to conflict resolution besides to development process.

Finally, it is the advent of colonialism wipe out the Africans' methods of monitoring, preventing, managing and resolving conflicts. Africans also had their peculiar ways and manners of effecting peace- making, peace building, and confidence building. If these are what had happened in African societies in the pre colonial era and later disrupted by the colonialists invaders and intruders, it is necessary however that original African values must be revisited.

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