A Review of Traditional Methods of Conflict Resolution from a Nigerian-African-Perspective

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Article Info	Abstract
	Westernisation and globalization have almost eroded this culture and left in their trail an alien culture of conflict resolution which, in most cases, is at variance with our African ethics and cultural values. The replacement of our grand African methods of conflict resolution with the European methods of conflict resolution has particularly done harm rather than good to our group cohesion as one Nigeria, and generally to our group cohesion as Africans. There is doubtless the fact that an alien culture of conflict resolution on an African soil necessarily undermines our history as one black people, our philosophy as a communal entity and our belief that peace and unity of the collective supersedes the selfish interests of a select few who seek to benefit from conflict. Our history of ethnic clashes, insurgencies and the rise of crime in our African societies attest to the fact that in matters of conflict resolution, Nigerians and indeed Africans have employed the wrong methods, bereft of our African spirit of unity and peace in preference to unrests, upheavals and wars. It is against this backdrop that this paper explored our traditional methods of conflict resolution and made recommendations. In doing this, the paper looked at what conflict is, causes of conflict in Africa, principles of conflict resolution, methods of conflict resolution by the major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, the use of proverbs rhetoric and folklores in conflict resolution and common methods of conflict resolution in Africa. The paper concluded the discourse with a summary and made some recommendations on the way forward.

Introduction

The goal of any society is the maintenance of social order. Using the language of Ferdinand Tonnies, in a Gemeinschaft-type arrangement, which characterizes our African communities in their pristine form, free from Western influence, social order was easy to maintain as the operating principle among the natives was the natural will (*kurwille*). In this form of arrangement, communal spirit and brotherhood were the bonding thread that held a community together, and social order was seen as a necessity rather than an option. Tonnies (1955), quoted by Viviene Cree in her book, *Sociology for Social Workers and Probation Officers*, noted that all intimate, private and exclusive living together is life in Gemeinschaft. In such an intimate, private living together, social order was indeed the rule rather than the exception. Cree (2010) observed that, in the Gemienschaft, there was a high value placed on territory, kinship, and solidarity. In such a simple social arrangement, therefore, social order was a cardinal objective easily achievable. However, in a Gesellschaft-type arrangement, characterized by an African society with an alien-cultural ways of addressing African conflict issues, there is bound to be social disorder, as an alien-cultural way of dispute settlement must necessarily clash with our

own African-cultural methods of dispute settlement. The reason is obvious, that, in a Gesellschaft-type society, where the operating principle is the rational will (*wesewille*), parties involved tend to rationalize issues rather than heed the truth and appropriate emotions required for conflict resolution.

Therefore, if social order is the goal of any civil society, conflict, which rears its ugly head the most in our modern African societies, is a threat to that social order and, therefore, must be addressed by the sociologist. Although some functionalists believe that conflict plays a functional role in group association and dissociation, all the same proper handling of conflict is necessary for the preservation of peace and unity and the protection of lives and property. The common adage which says that, "We disagree to agree," tends to support the functionalist stance. Coser (1956, p.31) wrote:

No group can be entirely harmonious, for then it would lack process and structure. Group formation is a result of both association and dissociation, so that both conflict and cooperation serve a social function. Some certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation.

Yes, but then conflicts which are allowed to blow up into wars, leading to loss of lives and property, must be avoided. The Latin adage which says, "Si vis pacem, bellum para," ("If you want peace prepare for war,") also tends to support the functional role of conflict in the society, but we must avoid violent clashes even though we are prepared for them. Ajayi & Buhari (2014, p.141) have this to say about Albert's view on conflict:

Albert's position on conflict was 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 a means of creative solutions to human problems and a means to the development of a collective identity.

Georg Simmel, the functionalist/conflict theorist, although supports the presence of conflict as a catalyst for growth and development in the society, says, in the words of Charles (2010), that excessive conflict could destroy the society, as a house divided against itself cannot stand.

What is Conflict?

In its simplest form, conflict is when two parties disagree over a thing of value, or when the goals and interests one party are at loggerheads with those of the other party. However, OtiteandAlbert(2001) asserts that the goal of conflict is to neutralize harm, or exterminate the opponents in a struggle for values and claims to limited status, power, and resources. Although this definition is correct in its own right, not all conflicts lead to injury and elimination of rivals.

Conflict in the African context takes three forms, namely, person-to-person conflict, intra-communal conflict and inter-communal conflict. It could be in form of disagreements and street fights on the one hand, and intra- or inter-tribal clashes and wars on the other hand. Conflict by its very nature has the potential to unify or alter social relationships. In Nigeria, according to the Daily Trust of 20/8/2002, the recurrence of conflict in the Nigerian Society has given birth to several militias such as the O'dua People Congress (OPC), the Bakassi Boys, the Egbesu Boys, the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC) and the Igbo People Congress (IPC). Others include the Arewa People's Congress (APC), the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Ohanaeze N'digbo. And, more recently, some other groups have sprouted under the names of Boko Haram and the Niger Delta Avengers. The paper maintained that these groups have been formed in order to fuel the embers of conflict, and to execute the ethno-religious agendas of their founders.

Causes of Conflict in Africa

Among Africans, what have driven them to conflict include among other things: land disputes, differences in ethno-religious ideologies, disagreement over rights of inheritance and murder. Land disputes have become a recurrent decimal on the African landscape, especially in Nigeria. Mass killings have been recorded over the years with respect to land disputes. The Tiv/Jukun, Ife/Modakeke, Itsekiri/Ijaw, Aguleri/Umuleri, Yelwa/Tarok clashes are indeed few of the many consequences of land disputes that have been recorded in Nigeria. Differences in ethno-religious ideologies have also accounted for the breakout of conflict in Africa. Disagreements on the level of ethnic and religious divides have erupted in conflict among many African nations. The Christian-Muslim dichotomies across many multi-religious African nations, such as the Hutu and Tutsi crisis of Rwanda and Burundi, have taken their toll on Africa as regards the engineering and execution of conflicts. Rights over inheritance of land and property have also resulted in conflict, where there is disagreement as to who should own what after the death of parents and forebears. Murder is another cause of conflict among Africans, especially in pre-colonial Africa. The murder of a native of one ethnic group by another had always ended up in war, if demand(s) by the aggrieved kinsmen were not met by the killer clan. An example is seen in Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" where the wife of Ogbuefi Udo of Umuofia was killed by the people of Mbaino. War was averted because Mbaino people met with the demands of Umuofia people (Achebe, 1994).

Principles of Conflict Resolution in Africa

In traditional Africa, and indeed Nigeria, conflict resolution is based on certain enviable principles that are rooted in the people's beliefs in the gods of justice who would react in punishment if uprightness was not upheld. Two main principles of conflict resolution in Africa are truth and impartiality. Truth on the part of the offender and the offended was required for the resolution of conflict. In the process of adjudication, the facts must be laid on the table for the judges to resolve the conflict amicably. Lies rather compounded the situation and could lead to clashes or wars. Lies were avoided, not so much in this regard as in the fact that the gods would strike liars, if lies were told. Another is impartiality. The judges themselves had to be impartial, based on the facts presented on the table. As social actors, they must not be influenced negatively by what Talcott Parsons refers to as the pattern variables. For example, the chief justice must not let the course of justice be influenced by his personal relationship with any or both of the disputing parties. That is, he must settle for universalism in preference to particularism.

Conflict Resolution in Nigeria

When hackles are raised as a result of conflict, there is need for resolution of such conflict. Conflict in itself is not bad, for where men cohabit there is bound to be conflict, even between parties of the same consanguinity. Conflict becomes a social evil when the method of resolution allows it to degenerate to chaos and war, leading to the loss of lives and property. This section takes a look at the methods of conflict resolution employed by the Yorubas, Igbos and Hausas.

The Yoruba methods of conflict resolution

The ethno-religious conception of man in the Yoruba cosmology accounts for the strong regard the Yorubas have for the resolution of conflict. Man, according to the Yorubas, is a composite of the material element (*ara*), the spiritual element (*ori*) and the life-giving element (*emi*); so that in man there exists a harmonious coexistence of the material element as we see it, the spiritual element beyond the temporal and the life-giving element. According to Hallen and Sodipo (1987), a "person" in Yoruba thought is made up of three important elements: *ara*

(body), *emi* (life giving element) and *ori* (the vital force responsible for destiny).This harmony between the material, the spiritual and life-giving elements drives man towards harmonious and peaceful coexistence with his fellow men; so that if this harmony is broken there is an urgent necessity to restore it.

The smallest unit of the Yoruba community is the *idile* (nuclear family), which is headed by the *Bale* or head of the nuclear family. According to Ajayi and Buhari (2014, pp.143–144), the *Bale* is responsible for solving skirmishes which occur in the family involving wives, brothers and sisters, truants, and street fights involving his children and his foster children or dependants. Conflicts solved immediately include minor conflicts by scolding the troublemakers 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.

Next in rank is the *ebi* (extended family) where the head is the *Mogaji*, the eldest member of the extended family. When disputes occur in the family, involving members of his extended family, he is called to resolve the disputes, and his verdicts are sacrosanct, as extended family members hold him in awe as the peacemaker of their family.

The last tier comprises of several compounds of a close geographical contiguity, headed by the *Baale* (chief). It is worthy of mention here to state that cases handled by the *Bale* and the *Mogaji* are mostly civil cases. Criminal cases which are beyond them are therefore brought before the court of the *Baale*. Whatever his judgment on any issue, it is taken as a forthright dispensation of justice, and parties go home appeased.

The Igbo methods of conflict resolution

The Igbos have similar methods of conflict resolution to those of the Yorubas, except that they have an exceptional system of justice administration, having their deities as superior beings who are judicial arbiters over cases of conflict.

The Igbo traditional institutions for conflict resolution include: the family, Amala (council of elders), Okpara system (eldest male), Umuanna (clan), Umuada (female born in a town but married out), age grades, assembly of the people, Ohanaeze (assembly of the people and the king), hunters' association, and agbara (local deities or oracles). These are not different from the ones found in other traditional African societies (Ajayi & Buhari (2014, p.145.)

At every level of the justice administration among the Igbos, the verdicts of the heads of social groups involved are in most cases adhered to, and resolution is achieved without the use of violence. Cases of witchcraft and other malicious social evils invisible to man were referred to the oracles that were expected to speedily dispense justice.

Beyond humans, as already hinted, another system of justice administration held in awe among the Igbos was that presided over by their deities who were seen as super-humans, speedily flawless in the dispensation of justice. According to Ezenwoko and Osagie (2014, p.153–154),

The Igbo relied on some aspects of their culture such as oracles and deities in the resolution of conflicts. In pre-colonial period, most people and communities took their problems to the oracles in search of the divine impartial wisdom of the gods (Alagoa, 2001). The oracles are extra human forces usually represented by carved wood, stone or iron, rivers, trees and hills. Igbo oracles are believed to possess supernatural powers and so, played important roles in dispensing justice among the people. The Igbo invoked the judgment of the Oracle by special appeal to them through their priests – *Ndi Eze Mmuo*, who usually administered oaths (*Iduisi*)

to the accused person(s) brought before them. Each community had its deities and idol, some of which were believed to be more powerful than the others.

The Hausa/Fulani methods of conflict resolution

Although the Hausa/Fulanis have similar methods of justice administration in matters of conflict resolution to those already discussed, their mode of justice administration is majorly tied to the Sharia system of jurisprudence, since a greater majority are Muslims.

Taking the Fulbe people of Adamawa State of Nigeria as a case study, according to Pate and Daudu (2009), conflict resolution takes several forms such as *Pulaaku* ('Fulbe-*ness*'); *Ndottien/Ardibe* (elders/leaders); *Walderu* (age-grade system); *Soro* (beating game); *Hunayeere* (oath-taking); *Eggol* (avoidance/migration), among others. Cardinal among the Fulbe people is the spirit of patience, perseverance and accommodation in matters conflict, which demonstrates the 'Fulbe-*ness*' of the one exercising restraint instead of flying into a rage in a conflict situation. In this manner, the Fulani must gloss over the enormity of the offence as a trigger of conflict. Another method of conflict resolution is the *Ndottien/Ardibe* where recourse is made to elders and leaders in the matters of conflict settlement. Confidence is reposed in them to deliver impartial judgment. The *Walderu* or age-grade system is another machinery of justice administration among members of the same age grade of the Fulbe people who have relapsed into conflict. As deemed appropriate, sanctions are meted out on the guilty party as a form of deterrence. The *Soro* or beating game is another means of conflict resolution among the Fulbe youth, intoxicated by youthful exuberance and given to lawlessness. The *Soro* is a violent fighting game, which has parties coming out refined social entities. The *Soro* serves as a disciplinary and purgative game where the rules are built towards settling old scores violently, but in a friendly manner (Pate & Daudu, 2009.) The *Hunayeere* or oath-taking involves swearing in the name of Allah and leaving justice in His hands. This is predicated on the notion that if someone swears insincerely, awful things will happen to him. By taking the oath, the dispute is regarded as settled and is hence closed. As a result, Allah is asked to make a decision in the issue. Both parties are expected to adhere to the terms of the oath-taking honestly (Pate & Daudu, 2009.) The *Eggol* is another method of conflict resolution where one party demonstrates extreme maturity by avoiding the other; sometimes it may lead to migration of the one who has decided to avoid conflict.

As earlier hinted, the Hausa/Fulani method of conflict resolution is, to a large extent, tied to their Islamic faith. Mufti (2014) observed that *Sulha* is a phrase that the Qur'an frequently uses to end different kinds of disputes. It entails attempting to find consensus, resolution and peace. *Sulha* generally then is the religious principle that runs through all kinds of conflict resolution. However, some Muslim jurists, over the years have developed some methods of conflict resolution. One such method employed by the Hausa/Fulani in conflict resolution is the appointment of the *Qadi* (Justice of Peace)as an arbiter of squabble, to oversee the processes of mediation, arbitration, and reconciliation, to achieve settlement and peace(Mufti, 2014.) Another means of conflict resolution among the Hausa/Fulani is that conflicting parties have the option of having their disagreement resolved by a *wasta* or an impartial mediator who would make sure that everyone was happy with the result of the arbitration. *Tahkeem*, or the use of intermediaries to represent the parties, could be used in other situations, in order to negotiate on behalf of the parties and ensure that they receive a fair settlement. These intermediaries should be able to articulate the parties' positions as clearly as possible (Mufti, 2014).

The Use of Proverbs, Rhetoric and Folklores in Conflict Resolution

Proverbs, rhetoric and folklores play a central role in conflict resolution across the three ethnic nationalities discussed above, especially among the Igbos. According to Achebe in his classic, *Things Fall Apart*, ". . .proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe, 2016, p. 11.) When ordinary day-to-day language fails to convey piercing meaning in a conflict resolution setting, proverbs are employed to do the work. Rosado (2014, p. 28) has this to say:

As elders address conflict in the society, their main method of conflict resolution is the use of proverbs serve as moral guidance, record keepers of history and as education parables. Essentially, proverbs are the sustainers of cultural values, history and knowledge in traditional Nigerian society, While dealing with conflict, elders use appropriate proverbs that fit the situation, for proverbs are of high esteem because they are words of wisdom and guide relationships, the vehicle of language, and the holder of history which helps the community remember who they are and where they come from. Proverbs can be used as a kind of probing comment on behaviour that shakes people into sense or advise them on the consequences of their actions.

Rhetoric is a probing question which requires no answer, but which sets the questioned thinking deeper beyond the peripheral. The Ibo rhetoric, extracted from Rosado's work, asked in the course of conflict resolution is one example: *Ayin na juodudu ko ta onye?* (You are chasing the beast to bite who?) This clearly demonstrates that when conflicts arise, we do not say it does not concern us. We deal with it, for if we chase the beast (conflict) away, it may go and consume a kinsman, so we kill the beast; we do not chase it away. The same goes for folktales. They encapsulate Africa's history and, when recounted, they refresh our memories about our moral values, unity, commitment to peace and our common root of brotherhood.

Common Methods of Conflict Resolution in Africa

Adjudication: Adjudication is one method employed by Africans in the resolution of conflict. Olaoba (2005) says it involves convening the disputants in the conflict in meetings, usually in the chambers or compounds of family heads, quarter heads or palace courts, as the case maybe.

Reconciliation: It is the most important aspect of conflict resolution. Adjudication is geared towards reconciliation. After the disputants have been advised that peace and unity are superior to dispute, the broken relationship is restored. A feast is usually organized as a sign that the conflicting parties have completely forgiven each other.

Mediation: Over all Africa, elders are held in high esteem, because they are seen as repositories of wisdom. They are most times chosen as go-betweens to mediate between the parties in conflict, and their verdicts are well respected. Brock-Utne (2001) says their roles range from tradition to tradition, circumstance to circumstance and personality to personality. These roles include 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.

Negotiation: Disputants or parties to a conflict are considered as destabilizing the social order of an African society, bonded in love. The erring party is made to see this and offer apologies for the wrong committed in the process of negotiation.

A Brief Appraisal

It is important to state here that no dispute resolution mechanism, be it African or foreign, can be one hundred percent flawless. The strength or advantages of the traditional method far outweighs its disadvantages; that is why it is only proper that we use a method that is African-

friendly and acceptable to quite a great number of Africans. For one thing, due to our common brotherhood, a traditional African who takes his brother to the English court may never be forgiven, long after the court settlement (Okom, 2015.) This is because the accused (or the one who is taken to court) feels that his brother has betrayed him, by not seeking the traditional method that is familiar to both, and also because he has dragged him before "foreigners" whose focal point it is to drain the pocket of the accused through lawyer-hiring. Finally, the language of the English court is so complex that a simple case that should have been settled in one day may be settled in months and sometimes years, thereby wasting quality time the African should spend in farming or working for survival. Be that as it may, the traditional method of dispute settlement is not without its challenges. First of all, the corrupt human nature underlies every human relation, such that corrupt administration of justice still lurks in the African dispute resolution process. Tribal, emotional and financial sentiments still play an overpowering role in the dispute settlement process. It is in this regard that Owolabi (nd., p.6) observed that,

Corruption in the Indirect Rule system soon got to the attention of the colonialists, as most of the warrant chiefs prospered materially through the proceeds of bribery and corruption. Also, the local councils established by them were fertile grounds for corruption.

Again, the African societies are becoming more and more differentiated, with migration and the growth of urban centres, to the extent that there is social disorganization and a mix of cultures which call for a lingua franca that, in many cases, is English. Under this circumstantial constraint, African must be forced to give up their traditional method of dispute resolution and embrace the criminal justice system of the state. This unfortunate situation is predicated upon Africa's quest for progress with other nation, which they cannot now jettison. It must then be said that, although the state and its criminal justice system have taken over, it is still advisable to see ourselves as Africans and try to settle our conflicts in the African way, without necessarily making recourse to the criminal justice system, which encompasses the Police, the Courts and the Prisons.

Conclusion

This paper was able to look at the definition of conflict, causes of conflict in Africa, principles of conflict resolution, methods of conflict resolution by the major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, the use of proverbs rhetoric and folklores in conflict resolution, common methods of conflict resolution in Africa, their strength and limitations. Now the paper will conclude with some recommendations.

Recommendations

The high level of conflicts, immanent in contemporary Africa, points to the fact that the methods of conflict resolution that Africans have acquired from the Europeans have failed, hence there is need for Africans to revert to our traditional methods of conflict resolution, founded on our African ethics and value orientation. The paper makes the following recommendations. (1) Our primary and secondary school curricula should be revised to include what can be referred to as African Ethics and Values, where our long-abandoned morals and religious values are taught. (2) Our institutions of socialization, such as families, schools, churches, social media, workplaces, and so on, should shelve the individuality of the West and teach as well as practise the "we" principle characteristic of our African communalism. (3) The use of proverbs, rhetoric and folktales should be encouraged in all spheres of our social lives, in order to bring alive our moral values and norms, and our common history as one Black and indivisible people. (4) When communal disputes arise, reputable elders and chiefs, conscious of our oneness as Africans, should be called to mediate. Running to the police and courts has only helped to compound the situation, as the corruption found therein only helps to worsen

the situation. Governments of the day should make sectoral budgetary allocations to relevant Ministries and Agencies responsible for the promotion of our rich cultural heritage, like the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture and National Orientation Agency, so that everywhere the African spirit would be promoted and lighted in the hearts of all.

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