CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PEACE BUILDING IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY: A CASE STUDY OF AGULERI-UMULERI COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This study examined the patterns or mechanism for conflict resolution and peace building in traditional African societies with particular reference to Aguleri-Umuleri Town in Anambra State. Conflict resolution in traditional African societies provides opportunity to interact with the parties concerned, it promotes consensus-building, social bridge reconstructions and enactment of order in the society. The paper submits further that the western world placed more emphasis on the judicial system presided over by council of elders, kings' courts, peoples, assemblies, etc; for dispute settlement and justice dispensation. It concludes that traditional conflict resolution techniques such as mediation, adjudication, reconciliation, and negotiation as well as cross examination which were employed by Africans in the past, offer great prospects for peaceful co-existence and harmonious relationships in post-conflict periods than the modern method of litigation settlements in law courts. The made use of primary and secondary sources of data collection.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Peace, Nation building, African Traditional Religion, Society.

Introduction

Due to generative and diverse nature of conflicts that has evolved as a common phenomenon in our contemporary society, it is pertinent that understudy of various means of stemming the trend of escalations be made with apparent discourse from the cultural values and religious system of the people in the traditional African society, conflict may generally exist whenever or wherever.

Incompatible events occurred, transformation and management of conflict may however produce win-win situation too. In contemporary African society, nobody cares about the truth. If Africans have to put the falling apart together, her original values must be revisited. 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 scare status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals (Onigun,Otite& Albert, 2001). In absence of love, chaos and anarchy sets in, if peace was not sought instability and disorders ensues, this therefore stagnate progress and economic development of the people. There is need for relative peace and orderliness in people's socio-cultural relationship that can secure ample truth and confidence that would in turn corroborate social and economic stability in the society

A Conceptual Analysis 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 of 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. African conflict is not susceptible to prediction, although it can be explained. Overt manifestations of conflict are seldom unremitting, even in relations between rival cultures (Robert, 1981). Conflict is a particular relationship between states or rival factions within a state which implies subjective hostilities or tension manifested in subversive economic

or military hostilities (Quincy, 1971). Conflict can be described as a condition in which an 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.

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. 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 they 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. In fact, 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 (Albert, 2001).

The repercussion of conflicts between person to person, group to group, community to community, state to state or nation to nation rarely cease with the termination of overt hostilities. However, conflict can solve contentions issues between nations or it can further exacerbate them. In any case, the consequences of conflicts are usually felt for some time after a war ends. Wadinga 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. Wadinga 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 (Wadama, 2013).

In the pre-colonial days, there were many principles guiding conflict resolution in the traditional African societies. Those who want their conflicts resolved must have confidence in the tribunal that would resolve the dispute, these include elders, chiefs, priests, priestesses, masquerade cult etc. The disputants must have

confidence in them. They (disputants) must be ready to submit themselves to the constituted authorities. These conflicts could be interpersonal conflicts and inter-communal conflicts. How would the other opponents know that there will be no partiality? Both disputants must be truthful. The mediator, arbitrator, judge must also be truthful, the presence of the ancestral forces is a factor; some may collapse or forced to say the truth because of the ancestral forces. The mediator, judge and arbitrator must be well prepared because truth is not static. Truth is also a covenant logo disputant or parties in conflict must not miss. For one of the conflicting party to have come to the tribunal, it means that party is ready or agreed to settle or resolve dispute. Although this not always the case.

The Aguleri- Umuleri 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 one found in other traditional African societies.

However, Olurunsola, wrote that prior to European advent, the Igbos consisted of over two hundred independent territorial groups divided into villages. The internal organization of these groups rested upon patrilineal clans and lineages. These groups were autonomous with regards to governmental processes, but social bonds were strong among them. (Olorunsola, 1972)

Umuleri-Aguleri land resolution through traditional methods.

Since 1933, the pathetic dimension of the conflict is that the Aguleri and Umuleri people have one ancestral origin in *Eri*, and had been living peacefully side by side in Otuocha for decades before the focus of division and anarchy emerged. The land conflict, before the disastrous war had passed through the court's strategy, political, bureaucratic, and military strategy without solution and peace in sight, before the traditional strategy was applied. However, the traditional formula which led to the peaceful resolution of the Aguleri-Umuleri-Umuoba Annam war involved oath-taking, declaration of —No more war, peace treaty and the performance of a cleansing ritual called *Ikomue*. The first traditional oath which took place on 25th January, 2000 involved only Aguleri and Umuleri, while other communities latter join in order to avoid further wars and destabilization in the Omambala area. All those communities came with their

respective representatives, as well as local deities (oracles) to be sworn to in the presence of gods and all people present. The oath which is binding on every indigene of the participating communities was taken to the effect that the contracting parties accept peace and there would be no more war and bloodshed amongst and between the five communities. Violators of this oath face the wrath of the deities present, and the ancestors, who in the presence of god constitute the source of moral sanctions and peace guarantors. This first Oath taking process relaxed tension in the war torn area and paved way for their processes that brought the final peace. The traditional method of resolving the conflict was adopted in peace, treaty making by traditional rulers and leaders of thought led by Igwe Nzekwesi, for sanity and rigidity.

It was however observed that the traditional leaders and rulers were also being touched, encouraged and propelled into action by the message of peace, and the direct challenge to them in President Olusegun Obasanjo's speech when he visited Aguleri-Umuoba-Anam conflict area. In his words;

I will be addressing our traditional and religious leaders here. What are we saying in the communities in which we are? What are we saying, and what are we doing to really dampen these types of senseless killing, this type of senseless destructions of lives and property? You only need to go down there (Otuocha) and you will be shocked. I was shocked. In a small community like this and will anybody tell me that these three communities are not related? Are they not brothers and sisters? The governor told me that he came here and asked same questions and you said you are not …. A small community like this, you have turned it into ghost town. A community, that known God as it should be known, this type of thing will not be happening… what has happened to our traditional way of life where elders intervene and help to resolve differences? Are there no more elders in the community? If there are, have they abandoned their responsibility? Then what are they doing? (Olusegun Obasanjo cited in Nwolise, 2005)

After the first oath process of 25th January, 2000, a second oath took place on 6th April of the same year. In this second oath, the leaders of Aguleri, Umuleri, and Umuoba Anam were invited to the center of the field. Each community was been asked to come with a big goat, a small he-goat, some kola nuts, etc; along with symbol of their community deity and its chief priest (Ezemmoo). After reading the contents of the oath, each community appointed one representative to Oath on its behalf and in the presence of its deity, and other communities' deities.

Even, the Christians in these communities were called out to swear according to Christian doctrine, led by the respective priest of the Catholics and the Anglicans with their Bibles. Each denomination appointed a representative who took oath on behalf of others. Without sacrifice, it would have been difficult for members of these communities to eat together.

Traditional Approaches to Conflict Prevention, Management & Resolution in Africa

The following were some of the ways through which conflicts were prevented, managed and resolved in Africa before the coming of the colonialists:

1. *Socialization*

The indigenous African see human existence as unified, interlinked, and integrated in a web. In most communities in Africa, there existed the concept "collective personhood" or "member of the human family" This concept is contained in the proverb that states, "I am because we are". From childhood, people were taught to live in harmony with others and avoid a situation of trying to win at all cost in the case of conflict and dispute settlement.

Indigenous Africans impart in their offspring that quarrel and fight with others are to be seen as quarrel between blood relations.

2. *Inculcation of Myths*

The use of proverbs, idioms, folktales and songs to describe the nature of the world and how to live in it was another way of preventing, managing and resolving conflicts in Africa. The need to live harmoniously with others and avoid violent conflict because of the dangers inherent in it was one of the reasons for inculcating these myths through the use of proverbs, idioms etc. on the children at tender age.

3. *Use of Traditional Institutions in Conflict Monitoring*

The institutions of family, council of elders, clan, female born of a village etc. were used in the task of conflict monitoring and prevention. Each family head is employed and mobilized to prevent conflict through peace education, conflict monitoring, mediation and reconciliation.

4. *Ritual Treaties and Blood Covenant*

Rituals treaties and blood covenant were used to remove fear, and engender trust, blind families and villages and to avoid war. Such treaties and covenants involve powerful deities, which makes it not easy to violate as violation would bring dire consequences (Nwolise 2005).

5. *Institution and Celebration of Festivals*

There were instituted celebrations of festivals during which the virtues of peace, harmonious living, honesty etc. were extolled in songs. Rituals and scarifies were performed to the village deities and ancestors for peace, protection, good works, fertility etc.

6. *Use of Sanctions*

Sanctions were imposed on families and individuals who were seen to have contradicted the customs and traditions of the people in order to deter others from engaging in behaviours that would engender conflict. Sanctions were meted on such misbehaviour as stealing, willful murder, incest, abuse of elders, willful damage of property, lying, bearing false witness, poisoning, rape etc. Such sanctions included those that were imposed by the deities such as accidents, sickness, death, famine, poverty, misery, barrenness and loss of children etc. to the ones imposed by the society in such as exile, ostracism, fines, compensation, restitution, rendering apology etc.

7. *Use of Marriages*

Marriage is one of the means to the prevention, management and resolution of conflict before slave trade, colonialism and religion changed the societal life of the indigenous Africans. Marriages reduced inter-group wars as children who possessed mixed blood were used to prevent, manage and resolve conflict. Most of those marriages were not just intra-tribal but inter-tribal and most times involve the royalty.

8. *Oath Taking*

One of the approaches used in Traditional Africa to prevent, manage and resolve conflict was oath taking. This was a practice to establish truth and guilt and discourage dishonest attitude and evil actions in society (Oguntomisin 2004). Most times this was done at the shrine of a very powerful deity over something that could be an avenue for contacting such deity. People are always warned

before taking oath on the consequence of doing so on falsehood in order to avoid shame, or even death.

Conclusion

Despite all the alluring offers of conflict management techniques in African, the reality today is that 'we are' not 'who we were' close to a century ago. Today, African families and societies are so complex that some of the institutions and approaches are either comatose or, out rightly dead. Even the much respected and sought-after elders are so dearth that it would be almost impossible to find an elder with essential qualities and requisite mien to handle conflicts within the families. The obvious way forward is an abridged conflict resolution technique that will be an amalgam of the past and the present, and which will make it perfectly capable of handling future conflicts with profits. Each people, race, or identity group have their own ways of doing things especially as they concern conflict resolution. While in Europe, for example, the police are an agency of crime detection, several African societies relied on oath-taking and divination in pre-colonial times. These methods still thrive today in some places on a very limited scale alongside torture and skull breaking in the name of interrogation and confession extraction. Also, 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). However, in Africa, conflict takes various forms and dimensions. It is worthy to note that conflict does not have a single definition from African perspective. It could be a kind of social unrest or relationships, whether positive or negative. Finally, it is the advent of the slave drivers and colonial masters to Africa, that adulterated, and in some areas, 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. These peculiar and very effective methods have today been wiped out by the forces of colonialism, including psycho-war forces. This resulted to instability and retarded development. Dialogue between disputants is today replaced by fighting, and the mediating role of elders, and other more peaceful institutions as age-grades, highly revered societies are replaced in several clashes with police actions (tear gas), military —peace keeping, operations, and endless court proceedings. This reminded us of the old saying that people live out their culture and tradition for self confidence, self reliance, positive change and

stability, and that people without their culture are as good as dead and forgotten.

A society which neglects the instructive value of its past for its present and future, cannot be self confident and self-reliant; and will therefore lack internally generated dynamism and stability.

Moreover, the essence of dispute settlement and conflict resolution in traditional African States include to remove the root-causes of the conflict; reconcile the conflicting parties genuinely; to preserve and ensure harmony, and make everybody involved in the resolved conflict happy and be at peace with each other again, and this required getting at truth; to set the right milieu for societal production and development; to promote good governance, law and order, to provide security of lives and property and to achieve collective well-being and happiness. These are different from what one obtains today where nobody cares about the truth. If Africans have to put the falling apart together, her original values must be revisited.

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