

Wisdom and Sagacity in African Traditional Conflict Management

Processes and Systems

*A Keynote Speech held during the Readers Conference at Eldoret Campus of
the Catholic University of Eastern Africa – September 2014*

Introduction

For centuries until recently, the black man's mind and the African culture have been conceived by the Europeans as extremely alien to reason, logic and various habits of scientific inquiry. This mentality is felt all through as one reads books by Western philosophers about Africans. Kwame (1995) writes "... As far as the east is from the west so far is Africa removed from philosophy. The West is the home of civilization and philosophy. Africa is the home of wild trees, wild animals, wild people and wild creatures" (p. 69). Since Africans were at some point in history considered as incapable of critical individual intellectual activity, anything like African philosophy was construed as constituting a contradiction, a self-contradiction. Africans lack intellectual faculties and as such they are not able to engage in any philosophical activity.

For the Europeans anything African could not be rational hence philosophical, neither could anything philosophical be African. Levy Bruhl is one of those who held such a conception of Africans as he says that African mind is pre-logical and not conceptual, and because of this the African mind, can with a lot of ease accommodate a contradiction. For him the African mind can entertain several propositions which the European mind would straight away reject as absurd (cf. Ochieng' Odhiambo, 1995, p 7). The German

philosopher Emmanuel Kant too is quoted saying that the African person is quite black from hand to foot a clear proof that what he says is stupid. He further observed that the difference between the white race and black race appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color. These are just but a few examples to show the way how the people from the West thought about Africans as backward, irrational and a people without a history.

It took a lot of courage and hard work for some African thinkers and scholars of the 19th century and beyond like John Mbiti, Placide Tempels, Odera Oruka etc to get up and fight against this intellectual and ideological slavery by endeavoring to prove that Africans like other human beings are rational and as such are capable of philosophical activity.

This presentation is an attempt to join in the fight of many African thinkers and scholars to prove that rationality and critical thinking and hence a philosophical mind is a universal human endowment and traditional Africans were not an exception. There existed in traditional African culture wise men and women, folk sages who helped the community to understand and to interpret the realities of life in different circumstances.

Towards the Concept of Conflict in Africa

Conflict is as natural and universal as the concept of peace and it may generally exist wherever or whenever incompatible activities occur and may result in “win - lose character although conflict resolution, transformation and management may also produce a win – win situation. Conflict had been prevalent in traditional African society and had

often had its origin in many aspects of their cultural life. It is obvious that conflict is a natural phenomenon in human society although the approach to its perceptiveness, nature and management varied from society to society. Indeed Africans had their own way of conceptualizing and managing conflict whenever it arose. Conflict in the African understanding was understood 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 & Albert, 2001, p. 14).

Conflicts in African society were diverse in nature and they derived from diverse sources such as the family, economy, social and religion as well as breakdown of deplumation relations and personal annoyance over behavioral pattern. Thus even though the family had been considered as the basic unity of African political culture, conflict could derive from the family level. According to Wade (1956, p. 308) and Max Gluckman (1956, pp.101-105) conflict originated from the family. This could be quarrel over inheritance, interpersonal relations and marital matter. As such in the African traditional culture, conflicts were in the magnitude of rage, rift, misunderstanding, family and market brawls, skirmishes and wars, public insurrections and assaults, chieftaincies, land disputes etc. (cf. Olaoba, 2005, pp. 22-37). Among the Kamba for instance, the most common disputes were conflict between husbands and wife, conflict between brothers, conflict between towns men, conflict between kindred relations, conflict between families as well as conflict between clans. There was a procedure to solve these differences. The rule was however that if the bone of contention cannot be resolved by the parties involved either of them may invite a common relation or friend to arbitrate. If this does not work, other social institutions put in place to handle these issues would be involved.

Conflict Resolution in African Traditional Society

Traditional conflict resolution mechanism is a structured political, judicial and arbitration mechanism. Fred-Mensah, (2005) defines it as the “capability of social norms and custom 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, p. 1). The aim of conflict resolution was therefore to bring healing to the concerned parties, to re-establish the energy flow within individuals, families and communities so as to rebuild social harmony. This is why in most reconciliation processes in Africa, symbolic gestures such as exchange of gifts, and slaughtering of animals like chickens, goats, sheep, cows etc. were required (cf. Ndumbe, 2004, p. 23).

The African cultural heritage was very rich in indigenous institutions which governed the entire life of the people thus enhancing mutual understanding and unity of purpose. Africans had long evolved institutions anchored on conflict resolution and governance of the society. These included the family, palace, market, numerous associations and supernatural influences as well. The family unit in Africa represented a vibrant political institution which was the bedrock of governance. The palace which was the highest point of political institution represented the splendor of cultural heritage in traditional Africa. The kings together the chiefs used the palace to resolve conflicts.

Africans had a very unique way of dealing with law breakers and causers of conflict in the community as well as a very definite manner of reconciling parties and punishing the offender. In African societies, the law enforcement agents, traditional police and courts

were responsible for ensuring compliance with the laws of the land. They used council of elders, king's courts, peoples (open place) assemblies, etc for dispute settlement and justice dispensation (cf. Nwolise, 2005, p. 155).

Truth in conflict management in Africa was crucial; saying the truth was very significant: in cases of a dispute, it was expected that both disputants must be truthful; the mediator, the judge and the arbitrator must tell the truth. Indeed truth was a covenant logo the parties in conflict had to abide by. In some societies, gods and ancestors were 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 (cf. Olaoba, 2002, p. 9.)

The role of the elders in dispute settlement is worth mentioning here. Disputants often take their cases to elders and neighborhood mediators who can be depended upon to resolve conflicts with dispatch in local language, using familiar standard behavior. Among the Akamba for instance there were no written laws and everything was derived from customs and traditions which were essentially passed on orally. In handling cases, the "atumia", the council of elders would sit under a tree, and talk until they agree. The elders were the force behind order or decorum in traditional society. Elders were considered as the power house of wisdom and knowledge (cf. Olaoba, 2001, pp. 1-2). The elders played a catalytic role in promoting peace and harmony in the community. They were wise ethical professionals in the community and they played as well the role of teaching, guidance and counseling on morals of the community. Since they lived ethical lives, their leadership was acceptable to the community. They were close to the living as well as the living dead and ancestors who wisely guided the people in the community. Due to their significant status in the community, people turn to them to

enquire what is amiss with community and what ought to be done to restore back peace and harmony.

Apart from the elders, religious leaders played a very fundamental role also in ensuring that disputes were resolved and peace and harmony reign in the community. They too counseled the community in matters relating to God, spirits and the ancestors. By so doing they ensured that peace existed between the visible and invisible world. Sometimes offering of sacrifices and pouring of libations as well as solemn oaths were performed under the guidance of the religious leaders as means to reconcile people among themselves, with God and the ancestors.

In some communities, covenants were common feature in reconciliation system of the people. They were agreements drawn up to cement a deal of settlement between two parties who were in dispute but have reconciled. Covenants ensured peace, good relation, friendship and respect and love between the parties. An example of covenant is the Luo-Maasai covenant which was as a result of prolonged conflict between the two communities. The participants comprised men, women and children. Branches of poison trees and weapons of warfare were placed along the border so as to form a fence between the antagonists. A dead black dog was placed across the fence, cut into two and blood spilled on the fence and to the ground on both sides of the fence. Meanwhile, the lactating mothers of conflicting groups exchanged their babies across the fence so that each could suckle the babies of the other group. Prayers led by respective elders and religious leaders followed this. They beseeched God to bless the covenant of peace (cf. Shenk, 1983, p. 45). The chopped off branches of poison trees, whose sap was used to poison arrows and the slain black dog symbolized that evil had been severed, thus vicariously bringing

peace. The exchange of the babies across the fence by the mothers and suckling of one another's babies implied that the warring parties had become kith and kin.

In the traditional judiciary system among many communities like the Akamba, fines and damages were not usually awarded by the mediators in civil cases since the utmost aim is to restore peace by settling disputes amicably. Restoration of harmony was what was paramount in the traditional judicial system. Sometimes, however, some simple fines like local beer "kaluvu" among the Akamba, or "palm wine" or "kolanut" among the Igbo of Nigeria all which have a ritual significance as a deterrent to the occurrence of particular anti-social behavior. Most of these gifts were shared by all as a way of celebrating the resolution of the conflict. Among the Akamba some of this drink was used to pour libation to the gods and ancestors of the people involved in dispute so as to appease them. These actions helped to reinforce the term of the reconciliation.

Methods of Solving Disputes and Conflicts in African Traditional Culture

Traditional conflict resolution processes were essential elements in Africa deeply rooted in the customs and traditions of the people and geared towards reconciliation, maintenance and improvement of social relationships. Their utility and importance lied in the fact that they strove "to restore a balance, to settle conflict and eliminate disputes" (Choundree, 1999, p. 1.) In the African traditional society, there were well defined methods of settling disputes. Each unit was governed by elaborate structures that exerted definite pressure on its members to engage in a conformist rather than non-conformist conduct. These structures served as conduits of peace and harmony in that the

community. Such structures made sure that the living observed the moral values so as to be in good relations with God, ancestors and other people. It was clear to everyone that any misconduct affects not only the living but the gods of the land and the ancestors as well.

Among the Akamba for example, killing or pouring of kin's mans blood in conflict, would cause anger to the ancestors who would in turn punish not only the individual but the whole community. Such an action demanded a sacrifice to appease the angry ancestors otherwise a calamity would befall the wrongdoer and community.

The following are some of the methods used in African traditional setup to settle disputes whenever they arose.

Mediation

Mediation was a method of conflict resolution that had been so critical to traditional society. This method employed in most traditional societies involved non-coercive intervention of the mediator(s), called third party either to reduce or ... go beyond or bring conflict to peaceful settlement. Mediators were sought from within the communities or societies of the parties concerned. Elders were respected as trustworthy mediators all over Africa, because of their accumulated experiences and wisdom. These elders had many roles to play in reconciliation including: pressurizing, making recommendations giving assessments, conveying suggestions on behalf of the parties, emphasizing relevant norms and rules, envisaging the situation if agreement was not reached, or repeating of the agreement already attained (cf. Bright-Brock, 2001, p. 11). Above all, the mediators

usually endeavored that peace and harmony reigned supreme in the society at whatever level of mediation.

Arbitration

This is when an authority figure comes to mediate between conflicting parties by making binding judgments. In arbitration, a dispute is submitted to one or more impartial persons, usually experts in the construction field, who decide the outcome. The arbitrator's decision is private and binding unless the parties have agreed to an advisory opinion. The purpose is not to render a judgment in law but to reconcile the conflicting parties and its norms.

In the Kamba traditional settings they have court, if the parties have tried negotiation and mediation and it did not work they move to the court, which might be the town hall, in the court judges, which are the elders will be at one side of the court and the diviner at the other hand, the parties to the conflict will now come out and state their case(s) and their supporters will cheer them. The elders and chiefs will now judge them using their norms and belief or the hearing of the gods. Arbitration is a higher step of mediation because mediation process can be done at home, but arbitration is done at the town hall and village square in a wider form.

Negotiation

Another method of resolving disputes in general and land disputes in particular among the Akamba was through negotiations. Negotiation method of conflict resolution existed in traditional African societies and it was all about positive perception of agreement

resulting from cooperation, compromise and consensus among the individuals with a set goal of achieving the best mutual relationship. The process of negotiation is necessary to have peace and harmony in the community. Negotiation method entailed systematic analysis of cooperation, compromise and consensus to the extent that agreement was reached at the end of controversy. Indeed in traditional Kamba community, peace was negotiated. Apology for wrongs done to individuals and the entire community was a feature of negotiation. Such apology was channeled through the council of elders “atumia” compound heads and chiefs of high caliber in the society. Certain features had been associated with negotiation in traditional Kamba society: ability to listen to the other side of opinion, objective appraisal of conflicting issues, articulation of the issues in conflict, understanding the language warranting the conflicting situation and environment, readiness to tread on a level plain ground etc. Negotiation requires sufficient wisdom to slow the pace, observe steadily and strategize the focal length of development in the society. The main emphasis in dispute settlement was placed 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 favors the concerns of both parties (cf. William, 2000, pp. 220-221).

Apart from the above mentioned methods, the Kamba relied on oath-taking and divination as a means of settling disputes of land.

Adjudication

The method of adjudication on the other hand involved 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 African setup. (cf. Olaoba, 2005). The aim of adjudication is to reconcile the parties by arriving at an acceptable solution in accordance with the values of the community.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation was the most significant method in settlement of disputes and it was considered as the end product of adjudication after the parties in dispute had been persuaded to end the conflict and restore peace. This last stage in dispute settlement was marked with a feast that was usually organized to confirm the readiness of the conflicting parties towards reaching points of compromise.

The Role of African Religion in Conflict Resolution

Traditional religion played tremendous role in conflict resolution across cultural boundaries in Africa. Indeed according to J. Mbiti, an African is notoriously religious; he is deeply religious – whenever an African is there is his religion. This being religious is a being in a community. That is why he goes further to say that “A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group for to do so is to be separated from his root, his foundation, his context of security, his kinship and the entire life of society and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 2).

In African society, religion is the guardian of tradition, the dispenser of morality, the standard of reference and the teacher of wisdom. It is the religion that held society in fixed pattern. Religion was the key to society's historical and cultural embeddedness – one could hardly understand the structures of African society unless he or she understood its religion.

As such then, religion played a very central role in solving conflicts between individual and community. Religion that was a very important institution in African culture as it pervades people's lives and regulates every of their activity not only explain the influence of the supernatural but also showcased religious sanctuaries such as shrines and groves the venue that turned out to be the spots of many extra-judicial activities. Traditional religion promoted truth, equity and justice which were the primers of conflict resolution in traditional African societies.

Needless to say there were in each community well defined religious ways and methods of enhancing life since life was considered as a gift from God and the ancestors to the community and as such it had to be protected and safeguarded. Since conflict is life threatening, religion provided methodologies of averting conflict by enhancing peaceful co-existence and settling disputes (cf. Shenk, 1983, p. 38).

Synthesis

In the African traditional religion, there existed folk sages, men and women whom God, the ancestors and the living endowed with the gift of wisdom to help the community deal with issues of concern that pertain their life and existence. Wisdom was thus a very important institution in African traditional society. A wise person is one who is able to

understand and analyze issues; possession of extensive experience in the matters pertaining to the life of the community. Again, a wise person should be able to respect God, the ancestors, elders and indeed each and every person and the entire cosmos. Commitment and dedication to the principle of life and affairs of the community was is an important quality of a wise person. Further the moral integrity of a person is important for one to be considered a sage.

Since disputes are an integral part of human nature, the society devised means and methods to deal with conflicts and the aim was to be able to settle disputes and reconcile people amicably without taking sides. In this, role of the elders was significant since they were considered the force behind order or decorum in the society. They played a very crucial role in enhancing peace and harmony in the society. Apart from the elders, religious leaders played a very fundamental role in ensuring that disputes are resolved and peace and harmony maintained.

Conclusion

Odera Oruka commenting on his project *African Philosophy: A Brief Personal History and Current Debate* talks of his major concern in proving wrong the conventional European claims that Africans are totally irrational and have primitive, pre-logical and non-conceptual minds which can accommodate contradictory ideas with ease. He says “my real purpose in this project was to help to substantiate or invalidate the claim that traditional peoples were innocent of logical and critical thinking. Was traditional African society a place where no person had the room or mind to think independently and at times even critically of the communal consensus?” (Ochieng’ Odhiambo, p. 84).

This paper is an attempt to contribute to this project Odera Oruka is talking about. Through field research the researcher has managed to interrogate people on the significance of wisdom in the African traditional culture and how this institution was used to resolve disputes and establish peace and harmony among the members of the society. Looking at the field research findings and the literature review, it is correct to conclude that when conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanisms are based on principles cherished and internalized by a community, and are contextualized to capture their collective knowledge and experiences, they yield positive results.

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