

Chapter 2

Theories of Conflict Resolution and Their Application within African Context

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Introduction

An African adage does remind that as collaboratively designed and functional the human teeth and tongue are; these two sets of the human anatomy do enter into conflict. Additionally, within an anarchic world without an operational world government (Havercroft & Prichard, 2017), only nation-states that are stronger or strongest succeed in imposing their will and rule. Consequently, within the temporal world, there is no protection against conflict. Conflict therefore is an inevitable aspect of living. However, while conflicts may arise, they are not expected to be kept alive indefinitely or else the very beautifully created world would go into extinction through human action sooner than it is meant to. Hence, the frantic efforts on the part of the human community to develop theories and practices that may contain the process of conflict evolution and manage the effects of conflict on human affairs.

Aside African models of conflict resolution, there exist a myriad of conflict resolution mechanisms across the world. However, the ultimate aim of this chapter is to highlight one conflict resolution case study that is relevant to African context.

Sources of conflicts

A conflict usually occurs between two or more entities. It is usually a disagreement that begs to be to be attended to, as ignoring a conflict has the potential of generating further and more toxic conflicts. Whereas the origins of conflicts are usually primarily sourced within social environment, the pristine source of conflict originated from a misunderstanding that primordially occurred between the Creator and the most evolved of the created phenomena (e.g. the human being).

Having been birthed from the bosom of the Most High and having been endowed with the freewill that permits him or her to stand or to fall, the human being was first confronted with the challenge of accurately interpreting the nature of the relationship that ought to bind him or her to his original source. While it is acknowledged that a definite relationship has been established between the human being and his original source through the medium of that which has been variously described as the kingdom of God within by religionists, the Master within, or the silent or still voice within by mystics (sages that are versed in the techniques establishing a direct link between humankind and God), it is not

always that the human being has been able to properly decipher the appropriate thoughts that s/he should think or the fitting action that s/he should take for the purpose of pleasing the Omniscience or for the purpose of enjoying inner peace in this world. To the extent that this scenario holds true, the prime source of conflict must therefore be traced to the misunderstanding that first occurred between the Creator and the created.

However, for all practical purposes, the literature on conflict and conflict resolution limits itself to sources of conflict that are society and/or environmentally bound. This chapter shall not be an exception to this rule.

The most easily discernible source of conflict is the disagreement that may occur between two individuals. Numerous factors may account for such a disagreement including but not limited to personal aggression (Schellengberg, 1996). When a person, for whatever reason, chooses to vent anger towards another person with or without a claim for reparation, conflict has been generated and the faster arrangement is put in place to contain the effects of such a disagreement, the earlier peace may return.

The running of an organisation may also provide multiple sources of conflict (Herrity, 2024). It may be the Chief Executive Officer or high ranking officers of management that may be found to be either too demanding or inconsiderate or bossy by the rank and file of the organisation. It may equally be one or two heads of units that cause irritation through their styles of administration. It may also be the result of rivalry among two or more units making up the organisation that may generate conflicts. Indeed, conflicts may be generated by the sheer incongruous behavioural patterns of a few employees who would not keep to the general rules of the organisation. Whichever was the case at any time in point, some sorts of conflicts may have been generated that need to be attended to, on time if the health of the organisation were to be restored timeously.

Another source of conflict may be found within the structure of society or within the processes that a society may have sanctioned and which may have been found out to be incongruous to natural justice (Fisher, 2000). For example, where a society was structured along race or ethnic lines, wherein specific races or ethnic groups were variously favoured to the detriment of others, tensions may arise leading to a myriad of conflicts (Fisher et al., 2000). Additionally, processes such as taxation or conduct of other government businesses in a non-transparent fashion may bring about conflicts that would need to be nipped in the bud if harmony were to return quickly.

Beyond ancient times wherein interpersonal and inter-community relations have been based mostly on human understanding and compassion, human society has since developed into a complex web of economic nodes spanning myriad activities that go from simple exchange of goods, to simple business transactions on the one hand, and from the sale of one's skills through employment to mega

commercial deals on the other hand. In modern times, the success or failure of these business and commercial transactions have come to define human *happiness* as survival itself has come to be determined by the products of these economic transactions. For example, the ability to feed, settle one's social service bills, transport oneself, and cater for one's dependants in a multiplicity of ways squarely depends on the fruits of the kinds of economic transactions elucidated earlier. Consequently, any breach whatsoever that has the potential of endangering the success and fruitfulness of these economic transactions quickly becomes a source of conflict which, if not attended to urgently, could escalate into avoidable human misery.

Humankind being fundamentally a peace desiring entity, his core having been originally fashioned with more spiritual fabrics than material elements, has always worked in the interest of resolving any tensions that the afore mentioned sources of conflict have generated over time. As such, theories of conflict resolution whose purpose it is, to outline processes of reducing the damaging effects of conflicts or of terminating conflicts altogether have been birthed and continue to be birthed by respected minds.

Theories of conflict resolution

A theory, by its nature, is a statement, observation or circumstance that has proven its own reliability in explaining a phenomenon over time as a result of having returned the same dependable outcome over time. Based on its dependability, that which has been referred to as *theory*, has come to be accepted implicitly as a fact with a longevity that extends into eternity. Thus, the statement: *The sun rises from the East and sets in the West* is viewed as a theory.

However, statements such as: *The Earth is flat* and *the shortest distance between two points is a straight line* and *Marriage takes place between a male and a female person* have all once been held as theories. Yet, they either have been or are currently being proven not to be that enduring into eternity. For example, beginning from 240 BCE when ancient Greeks calculated the circumference of the Earth and proved that, rather than being flat, the Earth is spherical (Dicks, 1970), the old theory of the flatness of the Earth got discarded. Naturally, if instead of being flat, the Earth is spherical, then there exist no straight lines on Earth but curves (Reddit, 2012). In the same vein, although lesbians and gays have existed since time immemorial, the global community began to accept and live with this reality only at about the 20th century. Consequently, it shall not be surprising if at a point in the future history of men and women, the sun decides to rise from a cardinal point other than the East and set in a cardinal point other than the West.

The foregoing exposé therefore, compels a slight adjustment to the definition of *theory* wherein a theory is viewed as a statement, observation or circumstance that returns a reliability in explaining a phenomenon that lasts as long as such an

explanation remains consistent with human reasoning. It is within the context of this understanding that a number of conflict resolution theories have been evolved that continue to serve the interest of humankind.

In a general sense, tension and conflict having been conceived as arising from the inability to fulfil basic human needs, notable conflict resolution theories have been developed for specific physiological, psychological and socio-political conditions. Examples of these are the theories of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Abraham Maslow, Wright Mills, Antonio Gramsci, Jean-François Lyotard, Anthony Giddens and Cornel West (Li, 2018).

For example, Karl Marx posits that modern human societies tend to be broken down into two classes, namely, the bourgeoisie (holders of the capital) and the proletariat (workers). In addition to owning the means of production, the bourgeoisie tend to invest more on maintaining the means of production than on the welfare of workers. Hence, the perpetual tension between the capitalist and the worker. One way of resolving this tension or conflict according to Marx is through the installation of a new social order that has been named *socialism* or *Marxism*. Unlike Marx, Weber concerned himself with preventing chaos within modern society by promoting efficient social order through the advancement of the theory of bureaucracy. In the view of Webber, a well-run bureaucracy ensures a fair and accountable distribution of material, financial and welfare resources to the different social strata needing same within society. While different social strata (classes) need different resources, these social classes are not necessarily antagonistic towards one another. In any case, the bureaucratic process ultimately delivers efficient service and thereby guarantees a sustainable social governance. On his part, Abraham Maslow hierarchized human needs from the lowest to the highest on a pyramidal figure that portrays these needs as belonging to two main planes of human consciousness, namely, the physiological and psychological planes of consciousness. According to Maslow, while the satisfaction of the lower needs tends to stimulate the desire to satisfy higher needs, the resolution of any of the conflicts is contingent upon the identification and application of the appropriate (physiological or psychological remedies) to the typology of conflict concerned (physiological or psychological conflicts). Wright Mills revisits the bureaucritisation process within modern society but through a lens different from that employed by Webber. If Webber did not believe that bureaucracy had a role in balkanising modern society into antagonistic social classes, Mills holds that bureaucracy tends to divide society into a class of elites and lower social classes. While these two classes may not be as antagonistic as it is the case in the story of Karl Marx, Mills believes that the elite class tends to accumulate more political and economic powers than lower social classes, a situation that may lead to social conflict. One way of avoiding an overflow of the possible conflict that may result from this kind of situation, is a timely fairly equitable review of the distribution of societal political and economic privileges between the elite class and the lower classes.

Gramsci's conflict resolution theory, while approaching Karl Marx's, differs from it in one major way. Although Gramsci holds that a powerful group of politicians does manipulate the beliefs and values of his native country of Italy, instead of establishing a socialist Italian society as Karl Marx would have advocated, Gramsci rather advocates the minimising of the corruption of the cultural national space so that all persons, politicians or not, within society may partake in an equal understanding of the beliefs and values of the nation. On his part, Lyotard, a French philosopher that birthed *post-modernism* (Li, 2018). is of the view that the modern person has been thirsting for freedom, democracy and egalitarianism beginning from the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century and especially since after the Second World War. The absence of any of these three concepts and practices (freedom, democracy and egalitarianism) in any part of the world, according to Lyotard has been a source of conflict which only the supply of freedom and democracy can quell. Giddens is a sociologist that focused most of his work on the difference existing between traditional and modern societies. While he acknowledges that the differences between traditional and modern societies (technologies, new typologies of human relationships, etc.) could be initially disorienting, he draws attention to the fact that these differences do constitute initial sources of conflicts and indeed the conflicts themselves both within human beings and within societies. One way of overcoming the tensions and conflicts occasioned by these differences is to become increasingly open minded in adopting new technologies and new ways of connecting with the world around us. Finally, West is an American philosopher who believes that the human being evolves principally within cultural bubbles. Each group of persons therefore possesses a cultural environment within which it evolves. Where more than one such groups co-habit within a society, conflicts may arise out of misunderstanding of the varying cultural contents. Resolving such conflicts would normally take willingness to learn from each other with a view to evolving a new culture or at least with a view to creating an important intersecting zone of tolerance towards extant cultures.

Beyond the forenamed authors, Kurt Lewin is one of the foremost theorists in the area of conflict resolution. His *field-theory* suggests that while sources of conflict and actual conflicts themselves are steered up within *the field* (e.g. the human living space or the social realities of the individual), the human being's response to these conflicts tends to actualise the building of some sort of bridge that connects both *conflict* (field-sociological) and *reaction to the conflict* (psychological) (Levinger, 1957). It is the view of Lewin that the building blocks with which to resolve the conflict are obtainable from the space occupied by the bridge connecting the sociological and the psychological. The construct known as *conflict resolution* has equally been located within the confines of *critical theory* (Hansen, 2008). In this sense, it has been stated that no reliable conflict resolution may be attained unless a spectrum of factors are taken into consideration, critical theory being a theory that suggests that social reality is explainable only by the

multifaceted components making it up. In the view of Moiso (2013), these components that may be captured both quantitatively and philosophically, must all be implicated in the study of social dynamics including the process of resolving conflicts.

Yet, there exist theories of conflict resolution that are founded on ancient cultures. African culture with its traditional African conflict resolution theory is an example. In view of the centuries-long contact with other cultures, ancient African culture may have been said to have been somewhat diluted and altered. Additionally, going by the fact that the balkanisation of the continent had exposed extant African nation-states to less or greater assimilation of a few non-African cultures, it is reasonable to conjecture that current African nation-states are no more culturally homogenous and that ancient African culture may in fact have disappeared in some of these states that are known to have undergone a deep assimilation into other non-African cultures. Yet, extant literature maintains that ancient Africa lives on and that *traditional or indigenous Africa never (sic) vanishes* (Ayittey, 2006 p.56) and that in spite of the centuries-old experiments in slavery and colonialism, African values continue to rule over many of the affairs of the peoples and governments of Africa (Biao, 2024; Ngara, 2017; Avoseh, 2008; Omolewa, 2007; Opoku, 1985).

Consequently, African conflict resolution mechanisms that are tipped in African values and African philosophy of life are currently employed both within and without the African continent to resolve conflicts. In view of the important contribution this conflict resolution is bringing to both the stability and development of the African polity, a number of investigative studies continue to probe into the knowledge area of African conflict resolution with a view to carrying on refining it for the purpose of making it even more serviceable to the African environment. The many studies that have so far been carried out in this area have revealed on the one hand, that the African conflict resolution rests on such African philosophies of life as *Ubuntu*, *Ujamaa* and *African communalism* and on the other hand, that it is made up of such mechanisms as negotiation, mediation, adjudication and reconciliation (Ghebretsekle & Ramala, 2018).

Ubuntu is a concept that emphasises the centrality of humanity in all of life actions. Apart from positioning the human being at the apex of all that is created, it emphasises collective human thought and action as the only sure path to wholesome and sustainable societal development. *Ujamaa* on its part, conveys at its core, the idea of collective survival. Like *Ubuntu*, it acknowledges both the existence and importance of a humanity made up of numerous beings. This humanity, *Ujamaa* admonishes and invites to work collaboratively for the purpose of collective survival. This collaborative work may target economic activities designed to provide for the nutritional needs of the whole community (cooperative economics), the promotion of whole community public space hygiene (cooperative health) or the advancement of a sustainable environment

(collective environmental security). African communalism implies the sharing of both the labour and the commonwealth of the community. Whereas the fraternal and sisterly labour of the community was originally built up in a community spirit, the wealth that was derived from it (commonwealth) often gets shared among community members fairly along members' needs.

With regard to traditional dispute resolution methods, it is relevant to mention that "negotiation, mediation, adjudication and reconciliation have, since pre-colonial history, been developed to different levels and practiced in various African communities". This implies that it would be wrong to consider negotiation, mediation, adjudication and reconciliation to have solely a western origin (Ghebretekle & Ramala, 2018 p.329).

The mechanism of mediation derives its strength from the ability to prioritise communication among the disputants. The first goal of the mediator(s) is usually the ability to bring about ever greater clarity within the issue that may have caused the conflict in the first place. It is believed that through such a process of abundant communication the disputants would not only begin to understand better the various aspects of the conflict, they would also begin to see more clearly their individual or collective roles in birthing the conflict. This way, they would be more ready to resolve the issue than they may have been at the beginning of the conflict resolution endeavour. Reconciliation is a process held in very high esteem in Africa, as specialists exist that can reconcile humans with God (vertical or religious reconciliation) while others exist that facilitate human-to-human reconciliation (horizontal reconciliation). Whichever is the case, the reconciler is usually a highly respectable priest or member of the community whose words and actions carry some previously known integrity. The words of the reconciler are usually soothing and the conclusion s/he reaches is usually not a judgement in a legal sense but one which usually turns out to create a win-win situation for the protagonists in a dispute. The process of adjudication is one that encourages two or more disputants to willingly hand in their dispute to a third party for the purpose of taking a decision by which they may have earlier on committed to abide. The process of arbitration is one to which two or more disputants would submit themselves to, with a view to accepting whichever binding decision that the arbitrator ultimately takes. Negotiation is one process that prioritises the willingness to be truthful, dialogue, active listening, the spirit of compromise and concessions. Disputants who submit to these ideals in the process of negotiation usually get their conflicts resolved much more easily than those that hesitate to embrace this process.

While there exist a few individual theories of conflict resolution, and whereas the mechanisms for operationalising some of these theories may be detailed (e.g. mediation, reconciliation, etc.), in the practical application of these theories, rarely is one single theory or mechanism employed in either managing or

resolving an identified conflict. Usually, a combination of these theories and/or mechanisms are employed. Such is the case within the South African political conflict resolution wherein a combination of afore discussed theories and mechanisms have been employed and are still being currently deployed.

Conflict resolution: The case of post-apartheid South Africa

As this chapter draws to a close, and to buttress the foregoing discussion of the dynamics of conflict resolution with a concrete example, one enigmatic country, South Africa, is here thrown up as a beneficiary of a quintessential process of conflict resolution that eventually birthed a giant nation-state under the southern African sun. While most people were rudely awoken to the existence of pre-independent South Africa only with the discovery of the promulgation of the apartheid law in the 1940s and the horrors of the 1970s wherein protesting children were mowed down by the apartheid police, it is well to note that prior to these times, traditional South Africa had existed wherein *the application of negotiation and mediation in traditional dispute resolution* had always preceded the referral of a case to traditional leaders for adjudication (Ghebretekle & Ramala, 2018 p.329).

For example, more than ten thousand (10,000) years before colonial conquerors ventured into the southern coast of Africa in the 17th century, the San hunters and gatherers, the Khoekhoe pastoralists and the Bantu-speaking agriculturalists had left their mark of existence within the geo-political space referred to, today as South Africa (Worden, 2012). Even when in 1652, the Dutch East India Company established a fort at Table Bay, far from making this space a colonial enclave, the company settled in that space only as a way of carrying out some agricultural production for the sustenance of the company as long as it camped at this place as a transit place in the journey between the East and Europe (Worden, 2012). However, agricultural business boomed expanding into the production of wine and after a few skirmishes with the Khoekhoe and Bantu-speaking people, the Dutch began to gain upper hand and dominance of the region which dominance ended up birthing the dream of establishing a colony in this southern most region of Africa. However, although the Dutch had been occupying this southern African region close to 150 years (1652-1795) they had hardly perfected their colonial ambition when they were overrun by British colonisers who nevertheless kept the Dutch on the second row and other indigenous populations on the third row of political authority. Such was the social and racial structure of South Africa until the British handed back the administration of the country to the Dutch in 1806 (Worden, 2012).

Between 1806 and 11th February 1990, at 16h14mns South African time, when Nelson Mandela walked out of prison a free man, many political transformations and horrors, including the formation of liberation movements, the introduction of the apartheid policy, assassinations of opposition politicians by government and numerous civil unrests had taken place. South Africa was still being ruled by the

apartheid regime in 1990. Yet, the release of Mandela from prison was to be a first step in reconciling the nation which was expected to progress afterwards towards the establishment of democratic governance and an administration of national unity whose mandate was to heal the nation of past violations and ills. What then were the main steps taken towards attending to past violations and resolving the national conflict that led to the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and his cohorts?

The steps involved in the South African National Conflict resolution

Three main phases may be identified within the South African national conflict resolution process, namely, the pre-public phase, the public phase and the post-public phase.

Humankind being inherently good, no matter how cruel a person or group of persons may overtly portray themselves, they do, most times, long for peace and rest of mind within the deepest precinct of their being. Additionally, since in politics, there never exist permanent enemies but permanent interests, long before the public phase of the South African conflict resolution process, there has been instituted a secret, behind-the-scene manoeuvring aimed at uncovering both one South African Black political leader and one South African Black political formation or movement that was most tolerant of a multi-racial South Africa. That Black political leader was found in Nelson Mandela and that political movement was identified as the movement that eventually became popularly known as the African National Congress (ANC).

At the core of the South African national conflict was a political issue regarding not only the installation of a humane, human-rights-imbued and democratic governance but also the struggle for the control of government at the central or national level. After the departure of the British from overt governance of South Africa in 1806, the Dutch or Boers (farmers, farming having become the main occupation of these initial Dutch settlers) or the Afrikaners (the Dutch African citizens who have decided to create a permanent home-country for themselves on African soil) have been ruling over the South African space up until 1994 (a period of 188 years). While numerous great struggles and battles have been fought by the majority Black population organised into political movements to wrestle power out of the hands of the minority Afrikaners, success did not come the way of this Black population before 1994. However, beginning from the 1980s, cracks had begun to appear in the fortress of defence the Afrikaners built around themselves as that segment of the international community that has been complicit in the exploitation of both the people and natural resources of South Africa for centuries, began to pressurise the Afrikaners for the purpose of instituting governance reforms that can be seen as inclusive of all interest groups sharing the South African space. Hence the discovery of Mandela and the ANC with whom the Afrikaners apartheid regime, with the support of the international community, began to negotiate for a peaceful transfer from a minority South

African governance to a multi-party and multi-racial governance. This goal was attained in 1994 when Nelson Mandela was roundly voted in as the first president of a democratic South Africa heading a multi-racial government that vowed to be even more inclusive in addressing all the issues impacting all South African interest groups.

After this just described pre-public phase of the conflict resolution, began the public phase of the South African national conflict resolution process. This second phase lasted from 1995 to 2003. While all South Africans agreed that, given the horrendous and gruesome human rights abuses committed in the period leading to the democratisation of governance in South Africa, a length of time may elapse before forgiveness can be granted, they nevertheless believed that a foundation for the process of stock taking and healing needed to be put in place. The establishment of this foundation was carried out through the constitution of the *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in 1995. The Commission had three terms of reference, including,

- Discover the causes and nature of human rights violations in South Africa between 1960-1994
- Identify victims with a view to paying reparations
- Allow amnesty to those who fully disclose their involvement in politically motivated human rights violations (South Africa, 2024).

The post-public phase of the South African conflict resolution process that stands as the third phase of the process aims to facilitate the implementation of the recommendations of the *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. The implementation of those recommendations continues even as I write this chapter. Righting the wrongs inflicted over about two centuries is not a light affair. Time and genuine human efforts are needed. Fortunately, recent events seem to prove that the South African conflict resolution process has not been in vain as the South African voting population, exercising its civic and political power during the 29th May 2024 South African general election, facilitated the inclusion into the South African central governance, of one of the political parties that has been responsible for all the atrocities of the apartheid era. In addition to the progress that has been achieved by way of national reconciliation during the post-apartheid years (e.g. 1994-2024), the facilitation of the integration of an apartheid apologist group into national government through voting is a great positive symbol of goodwill and a signal that healing is being attained and that general forgiveness is happening across the South African populace.

Conclusion

For all intents and purposes, the 29th May 2024 election experience is only the beginning of a mightily visible success of the South African national conflict resolution experiment. It is suspected that a number of other indicators exist that would in the near future amplify the success recorded on 29th May 2024. For

example, by 2024, about half of the sixty million people making up the South African population were born around or after 1994 (Cowling, 2024), the year the country broke free from the apartheid policy. The good omen of the presence of such a high population of persons that may be said not to have experienced apartheid is that animosity towards those perceived to have championed the promotion of apartheid has been reduced to at least half as a result of the high level of acceptance past apartheid apologists may now enjoy among the post-1994 youth within society that did not experience apartheid.

Additionally, but independently of the events taking place in South Africa, the world has been promoting the values of global citizenship from 1990 onward. Global citizenship is a concept that makes every human being a citizen of the world, in so far as s/he would learn about and accept the values of democracy, justice, fair play, inclusivity, lifelong learning and sustainable living (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong learning, 2022). Apart from deliberately promoting global learning conferences aimed at conscientising the international community on the need for global citizenship education, the specific typologies of learning that may be termed as global citizenship education have been outlined. The global conferences and meetings that have so far advocated for global citizenship education include but are not limited to the 1990 World Conference on Education For All (EFA), The 1997 Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), the 1998 World Conference on Higher Education, the 2000 World Education Forum and the 2013 First International Conference on Learning Cities, Lifelong Learning for All, Inclusion, Prosperity and Sustainability in Cities. The types of learning making up the range of global citizenship educational spectrum include competency-based learning, moral-based learning and critical thinking learning (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong learning, 2022).

Consequently, any person who would avail himself or herself of the opportunities offered by global citizenship education, may profit from the global citizenship compliant supranational regulations that facilitate traveling, residing, working and vacationing in any parts of the world of his or her choice. Most South Africans (youth and adults alike), are currently working to qualify as global citizens so as to enjoy the advantages offered by this global perspective. It is hoped that concentration on a global project such as this, would ultimately reduce any attention to human rights abuses of the past among the citizenry leading to greater speed regarding the national reconciliation.

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