

Chapter 4

Conflict Resolution and Management Education: Profiting from Historical Tools

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Introduction

Conflicts, conflict resolution and management are as old as creation itself. Perhaps the first recorded conflict that required resolution was reported in the Bible and the Qurán. Both books reported the rebellion of Satan against the commandment of God, as well as the disobedience of Adam to God's instructions, "And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil..."(Genesis 2: 16 & 17). An almost similar account was reported in the Qurán, "We said: Ó ye Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the garden, and eat of the bountiful things; but approach not this tree, or ye run into harm and transgression" (Qurán 2: 35). This goes to show that conflicts in their true meaning are the product of disobedience, disagreement, disapproval and disillusionment to standards established to govern human relationships.

The world has since creation moved from simple individual, family and community disagreements and disobedience (conflict) to more sophisticated, complex and multifaceted conflicts worldwide. The world is witnessing numerous occurrences of armed conflicts and wars of different dimensions. It has virtually become a daily event across the globe. There is hardly any part of the world where there are no incidences of armed struggles, confrontations and conflagrations. The world has been turned into a theatre of war. Many parts of Africa for instance, are under siege. Hardly is there a nation in Africa that is not contending with one form of armed conflict or the other. The storms of conflicts are virtually everywhere and widespread in Africa (Olaoba, 2005).

Conflict as a part of human relations is inevitable. The interesting thing about it (whatever the type or form) is that it is always expected to be something that should not last too long. It is almost always expected to be a temporary phenomenon. The truth in most cases is that when conflicts are not addressed with the despatch it requires, they become prolonged and sometimes intractable. Thus, every human society (developed or developing) has a mechanism through which conflicts are handled or managed as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, despite every society developing a structure aimed at redressing different forms of conflicts, the world has continued to witness conflicts (different forms and dimensions), many of which may be said to have deferred solutions for several years. These conflicts have resulted in a countless number of human and material

casualties. What this means, is that perhaps the various mechanisms put in place by many societies to curb these incessant crises and violence have not been effective. Thus, a need to search for alternative means of intervening in conflicts, especially in Africa.

Conflict resolution and management issues in Africa are often treated from the precept of Western thoughts, considerations and principles. It is a phenomenon frequently discussed by contemporary scholars, as being beyond the primitive knowledge and chaotic lifestyle of the Africans. As always, the West hardly or rarely perceive Africans as having in-depth political/philosophical analysis about contending social issues. This mind set has continued to influence the writings of contemporary conflict management scholars. They hardly make any reference to African perception and narratives about conflict resolution and management. Interestingly, many authors and scholars (Akinpelu 1983, Avoseh, 2011, Atanda, 1980, Falola, 2016, Kola Kazeem, 1991) have advanced positions that Africans had their own ways of life and living. Within the context of conflict resolution and management, Ajayi & Buhari (2014), Anene & Solomon, (2018), Isurmona, (2005), Olaoba, (2005) have drawn attention to various ways through which, Africans have managed conflict in different societies and settings. There is, therefore, the need to interrogate this apparent distortion of facts and the misrepresentation of the social and political set-up of African society.

The idea of revisiting conflict resolution and management using the historical tools in this paper is more like attempting to use Omolewa's (1987) rear-view mirror concept, in describing the efficiency of the traditional conflict resolution and management practice. The mission is to discuss the conflict management strategies in Africa, long before the advent of the contemporary/conventional conflict resolution and management practice. We desire to explain conflict resolution and management from the Yoruba traditional milieu. We do not intend to dabble in reporting the chronological, sociological or political elements of conflict management. All we seek to do, is to debunk scholarships that treat African traditional conflict management narratives, principles and practices "as timeless and ahistorical" (Oluponna & Abiodun 2016). This paper falls within the "affirmation of the authenticity and validation of the African epistemic view". One that believed Africans, as all humans, have their ontology and, epistemic views, principles, practices and structures before external infiltration (Avoseh, 2023).

This paper being an addition to existing materials on the traditional approach to conflict resolution, seeks to explore Indigenous Yoruba conflict resolution and management principles, as an alternative to contemporary western-dominated conflict resolution principles and practices being used for Africa's conflicts. We shall be relying on the traditional sayings, phrases and proverbs (elements of cultural history), which address conflict articulation, moderation, prevention, resolution and management among the Yoruba. Such exploration has become

even more necessary, given the protracted and intractable nature of many non-violent and violent conflicts in different parts of Nigeria.

Understanding Conflict, Conflict Resolution and Management

It may not be trite to assume that the meaning of conflict, conflict resolution and management are well known. Aside from its nature and multiple causes, there is the general tendency and perception of scholars in recent times, to describe conflicts, conflict resolution and, management, from purely war or armed conflict points of view. This perception belied the true meaning and essence of conflict in human relations. Conflict is a social phenomenon that occurs in every social setting.

Conflict resolution and management are founded on the understanding that parties to a dispute are discontent with an existing social setup. The disputants claim a right over an issue, most times, based on different perspectives. Such a scenario requires a third party who is required, to mediate. The goal of such mediation or intervention is to bring the settlement of the matter involved and ensure compliance and peaceful coexistence, in the long run.

Conflicts are inevitable in human life and the environment, because of the nature of man. Human beings, have fundamentally the same sociological needs (wants) of food, shelter and clothing to survive, but the resources available are not only insufficient but unevenly distributed. Inequity is reflected in cultural, traditional, social, economic and political relationships in world societies. Hence, the dictum survival of the fittest or the saying that all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others. Conflict therefore entails a struggle or claims over age, wealth, power, status, attainment or territory to prove superiority, establish authority or recognition, neutralize, injure, eliminate or overcome competing thoughts and forces.

Conflicts occur at different levels and magnitude. It ranges from rage, rift, misunderstanding, family and market brawls, skirmishes and wars, public insurrections and assaults. It also includes religious, chieftaincy and boundary disputes (Anene & Solomon, 2018). It can be described as a condition in which an individual or identifiable group of human beings be it tribal, ethnic, linguistic, religious, socio-political, economic, cultural or otherwise, is in conscious competition with one or more identifiable individual or human groups over a given compatible or incompatible condition(s) or goals. It can also be viewed as disagreement over a given issue. It may occur due to differences in values held over a given situation, condition, material or phenomenon.

Conflict could be violent or non-violent; uncontrollable, dominant or recessive, resolvable or insolvable, under various sets or circumstances (Omotosho, 2004). It comes in different forms: not just overt, physical violence, but sometimes in subtly disguised forms of structural and cultural challenge (Adam, 2000). It tends to occur within an individual, wherein the individual will be battling with some

contradictions or conditions that may create self-doubt or self-worth. As such, conflicts shouldn't be seen and described from a violent perspective alone.

Conflict is not all about negatives, it has some valuable and positive dimensions. As Albert (2001) remarked, conflict can also be a critical mechanism by which the goals and aspirations of individuals and groups are articulated. A channel for a definition of creative solutions to human problems, a means to creative solutions to human problems and a means to developing a collective identity.

No society, however developed or developing, can operate in isolation from the other. The same goes for individuals and groups in their relationships. All human beings are products of interaction with human and material resources in their environment. The process of these interactions leads to conscious and unconscious disruption of principles and practices that are inherent in their cultures. Conflict management in general, and conflict resolution, therefore, are almost entirely determined by our understanding of the composition of a conflict and not only by symptoms (Kotze, 2000).

Given the diverse nature of conflicts and that they are not expected to last forever, efforts are almost always geared towards ensuring their resolution as quickly as possible, wherever and whenever they occur. Every society therefore developed a mechanism for redressing social disruptions, irrespective of the level of the conflict. The intention is that such resolution, transformation and management of conflict would move from being a win-lose situation, which conflict represents, to producing a win-win situation (Ajayi & Buhari, 2014). This goal and practice is not lost on Africans when they intervene in any form of conflict.

Conflict resolution and management in contemporary practice is seen as two different processes that can shape the way conflict is dealt with or resolved. This definitely is at variance with the way conflict is managed in Africa. Conflict from the African perspective is the conscious search for peaceful settlement over contending/disputing issues/parties. It is seen within the prism of pursuing peace wherever conflict reared its head. This is because the pursuit of peace is seen as a necessary virtue in the individual search for justice, social relevance and well-being in the society. It is also an attempt to achieve social equilibrium, in a way that the inevitable nature of conflict is avoided, prevented or moderated or accommodate, so that whatever disruption that might occur does not become injurious to the society at large.

Nature and Principles of Conflict

Conflicts are usually temporary and are to be resolved through rational means. Conflict can be constructive, and the consequences are not all about negatives. Conflicts in some circumstances are often positive in the long term. Conflict are also unavoidable, endless and cyclical with each one yielding either a change outcome in society or dying out, but new ones sprouting from various spheres of

the society. Conflicts don't end or stop among human beings. It happens almost all the time.

In traditional parlance, conflict is regarded as “a struggle over values, virtues, age, status, power and resources, in which the aims of those engaged in it are to discriminate, neutralise, demean, injure or eliminate contenders” (Onigu, & Albert, 2001). This traditional view conforms to one of Ebenezer Obey's evergreen songs, where he captured the source and possible condition that promotes conflict in human relations, “Iwo lo ju mi lo, emi ni mo ju e lo, lo n da wahala sile nile aye...” (Disagreements over seniority/status, is often the cause of discontent and conflicts all over the world). The innate desire to dominate one another at the individual, community, national or regional level is perhaps responsible for the countless cases of armed conflicts and wars all over the world. Conflict may also occur when:

1. A party is required to engage in an activity that is incongruent with his or her needs or interests.
2. A party holds behavioural preferences, the satisfaction, of which, is incompatible with another person's implementation of his/her preferences.
3. A party wants some mutually desirable resource that is in short supply, such that the wants of everyone may not be satisfied fully.
4. A party possesses attitudes, values, skills, and goals that are salient in directing his or her behaviour but are perceived to be exclusive of the attitudes, values, skills, and goals held by the other(s).
5. Two parties have partially exclusive behavioural preferences regarding their joint actions.
6. Two parties are interdependent in the performance of functions or activities. (Rahim, 2002)

Conflicts are not always based on spontaneous actions/events. It doesn't erupt like a volcano. It takes time to manifest. It has a process and what one may call a gestation period, before it assumes the stature of a conflict. The gestation period is however elastic. It can be brief, within minutes or last for years, depending on the magnitude and cause(s) of the issues or problems involved.

While violence can be a result of conflict, most conflicts do not progress to violence. The implication of this, as earlier stated is that the life of a conflict is a measure of the use of the mechanism for conflict resolution in a given society or organisation.

Modalities for Conflict Resolution and Management

There is no one-size-fits-all model for conflict resolution and management practice. Contemporary scholars agree that conflict resolution and management are two sides of a coin. They consider conflict resolution as reducing, eliminating, or terminating conflict. It is expressed in negotiation, bargaining, mediation, and arbitration to promote social equilibrium. On the other hand, conflict management

does not necessarily imply avoidance, reduction, or termination of conflict. It involves designing effective strategies to minimise conflict and enhancing the constructive relationship between parties to the conflict.

Rahim (2002) noted that there is no one best approach to making decisions, leading or managing conflict. To this end rather than creating a specific model for conflict management, he developed a meta-model, in much the same way that DeChurch and Marks, (2001) developed a meta-taxonomy) for conflict styles based on two dimensions, concern for self and concern for others. Within that framework are five management approaches: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising.

- Integration involves openness, exchanging information, looking for alternatives, and examining differences to solve the problem in an acceptable way.
- Obliging is associated with attempting to minimise the difference and, highlight the commonalities to satisfy the other party.
- Dominating in this style one party goes all out to win his or her objective and, as a result, often ignores the needs and expectations of the other party.
- Avoiding here a party fails to satisfy his or her concern as well as the concern of the other party.
- Compromising involves give-and-take whereby both parties give up something to make a mutually acceptable decision.

Interestingly, the traditional conflict management practice is all-encompassing. It has all of the identified approaches. Equally, all the five approaches have something in common with history. They all rely on the tools of history, to avail discerning minds with the invaluable opportunities offered by a look at what happened in the past. This is necessary because every attempt at resolving conflict is suggestive of an interaction with parties concerned or involved in a dispute (disagreement), with the hope of at least reducing the scope, intensity and effect of conflict.

History and Conflict Resolution and Management

The question has often been asked about the use of history in present-day affairs, by those who feel that history should be consigned to the dustbin. They argued that the past is an unnecessary digression and avoidable distraction (Kazeem & Oduaran, 2006)). This position shows the lack of understanding of the essence and benefit of history to all matters concerning human beings. This perhaps is responsible for the removal of the subject from the school curriculum during the military era in Nigeria. The repercussions of the act have continued to hunt the nation in all socio-political endeavours. Issues that should have been settled if the

leadership had availed themselves with the timely warning inherent in history, have become an albatross on the nation. We are today, witnesses, to the countless number of crises and disturbances in every part of the country. Indeed, there is no gainsaying that those who ignore the lessons of yesterday may likely lose the beauty of a better tomorrow. “Historical studies have the invaluable potential of providing needed timely warnings and practical assistance to all those who avail themselves of the guidance it offers” (Omolewa, 1981).

History for all intent and purposes remains perhaps the most significant tool that is available to those interested in addressing, managing and resolving conflicts. This is because, to achieve successful intervention in a conflict, it is necessary to get a credible background, which only recourse to historical studies can provide. As Omolewa puts it, “History informs opinion, sharpens imagination, nourishes the mind, clarifies issues and aids decision making and judgement”. Thus, there is a lot for practitioners and scholars of conflict and management to benefit if they avail themselves of the tools and skills of history. They will save those in conflict situations from falling into avoidable mistakes of the past.

This paper desires to utilise cultural history to draw valuable lessons for conflict management. By cultural history we mean, the study of significant events of the past through the lenses and revisiting of ideas, arts, literature, education, music and sciences that shape human relations. Unlike contemporary conflict resolution and management practice which rely more on adjudication, the African perspective and practice presents an all-embracing, comprehensive and holistic approach, which treats the individual as an important element in reaching an amicable settlement of conflict. Specifically, we seek to explore Yoruba language, idioms, sayings, words, sentences, phrases and proverbs, which best describe, support and aid the attainment of conflict resolution and management.

Yoruba traditional beliefs, philosophies, proverbs, idioms and sayings though rely more on oral tradition, they are all products of experiences of significant events of the past, which subsequently became a way of life. Indeed, an educated person among the Yoruba is represented in an individual who after going through many years of training, is now imbued with knowledge and ability to intervene in any matter of community concern. He is an Omoluabi (educated) when an individual is able to demonstrate knowledge and exemplary character in the community.

The Yoruba are known to have developed a well packaged and structured socio-political arrangements, which are products of their education system. The Yoruba educational training according to Falola is all-encompassing and intertwined (Falola, 2016). Fagunwa (2024) described Yoruba education as:

...raw, unspoiled education, handed over and surrendered from one generation to another, about what is native and customary to the Yoruba people. It is complex in method and style and, holistic, fundamental, integrated and not compartmentalised. Yoruba

education is sophisticated...It transmits existing knowledge of the physical environment to new generations so that they can understand how their society is maintained.

The education system equips individuals with the tools to cope with life challenges, including challenges associated with social and political relationships. It also has a well-developed curriculum for language teaching through songs, words, proverbs, myths and idioms. Yoruba words, idioms, sentences and proverbs have the potential for addressing, preventing, dousing tension and; minimising the magnitude of anticipated, ongoing, emerging or already existing conflicts, whatever the form or size.

Spirituality defines the traditional epistemology of an African society. Religion plays a vital role in the day-to-day affairs of an African. They rely on divination and spiritual consultation because nothing in their epistemology happens by chance. All happenings are destined. This is more evident in issues concerning conflict. Thus, Ifa the main source of Yoruba divination and consultations plays a significant role in determining the form, nature and effect of conflicts. As a medium of Yoruba spiritual living, Ifa is the medium of communication and link between the individual or community and the spirit world. It is expected that Ifa is consulted most often before occurrence; the outcome of consultation determines the nature, form, magnitude and repercussion of any issue among the Yoruba. This is because it is believed that only through recourse to spiritual instruction (Ifa divination) can a situation be accurately identified, diagnosed and resolved with an appropriate sacrifice prescribed where necessary (Apter, 2016).

From the foregoing, traditional African society almost always works assiduously towards addressing, preventing, avoiding, controlling and stopping the outbreak of conflicts between individuals, within the community, and among communities. They seek to utilise everything at their disposal to stop conflict at any level of society. The desire to stop or prevent conflict from rearing its head takes the verbal and non-verbal communication forms between disputants. It must be stated that Ifa diviners rely on oral translation of mythical findings to their clients.

While ifa divination can ascertain the possibility and likely outbreak and repercussion of conflicts, there are other channels of managing conflicts from manifesting. One such channel is “Aroko”, a non-verbal communication tool used by the Yoruba to communicate between two parties. Aroko is the use of symbolic objects to send messages. It carries encoded messages represented by complex symbols and patterns, which are delivered and understood by those initiated into the symbolism. It is used during peaceful or war situations. It is often used to communicate notices of war, dissatisfaction, disagreements or joy. The essence of this communication is to pre-empt the outbreak of hostilities whenever disagreement or dissatisfaction between parties. It then suggests that conflicts, especially armed conflicts don’t happen spontaneously among the Yoruba. The

process leading to it provides opportunities for intervention before conflicts are declared.

The need to exchange communication (verbal or non-verbal) before any issue degenerates into bitterness, armed conflict or war is ably captured in the saying “ibere ogun la a mo, enikan o le e mo igbeyin” (You can only speak about the beginning of crisis/war, no one can predict the outcome or when it will end). These sayings are within counselling and preventive principles of conflict resolution and management. It is cautionary and applicable at the twilight of any crisis. Other sayings fit into this cautionary or counselling element of conflict management. Such words or sentences include, “igi ganganran ma gun mi loju, a ti okeere ni a ti i wo”, which can be literally translated as ‘to prevent a sharp twig from plugging out one’s eye, you must tell it out from afar’. It can also mean ‘prevention is better than cure’ or “a stitch in time saves nine”. Words or sentences such as these were to caution contenders before throwing themselves into hostilities. The recent attempt at staging the end of bad government in Nigeria, employed this cautionary approach before the planners started it.

Many African societies, if not all hold the elders in very high esteem. They recognise elders within the community as the custodians of not only the societal customs and traditions but they were considered the ones who are imbued with wisdom to tackle knotty issues that might happen within the community. The Yoruba structure for instance, actually put the elders as one with a reservoir of knowledge and the source of providing and promoting the needed environment for peaceful coexistence. They are usually the first point of call, whenever any untoward event is about to happen, be it with an individual or individuals, within the family or the community. Thus, the saying “agba kii wa loja, ki ori omo tuntun wo” (with the elders in attendance, things are not expected to go awry)). These sayings can be applied to pre or post-conflict situations. The idea and lesson here is that the presence of any elder should be enough to douse any impending conflict. Where conflict has already broken out, the elder is expected to deploy wisdom and wise counselling in managing or resolving the matters involved. Thus, it is commonly believed that tension and crisis can only occur when there are no elders, around. In such a situation, the Yoruba will retort by saying, “Agba o si ni ilu, ilu baje, bale ile ku, ile di aworo”. Meaning, it is only when there are no elders around that things can degenerate and become chaotic. The last Ife/Modakeke crisis which raged on for some months, was deemed to have surfaced because the elders of the two communities failed to reign on the youths before the disagreement degenerated into full-scale war. It is apparent, that, if the elders stepped in when arguments about the issue started, the conflict would have been nipped in the bud. It is therefore imperative and important for conflict managers to seek the support of elders during pre-conflict and or post-conflict discussions if true and genuine reconciliation is to be achieved.

Another fundamental principle that defined conflict resolution and management in Africa is the recognition that “no war ends on the battlefield”. As such, the ultimate desire of African society is to ensure that conflicts, of any nature (personal or interpersonal) are confronted headlong before it starts. To such development, the Yoruba would counsel and caution with words like “a ki i tile ejo de se ore” (hostility may likely escalate after a court case). It is also better articulated in “ma ja, ma sa, ni a a mo akikanju logun, akikanju to moja ti o mosa, iru won ma a n ba ogun lo ni”, which can be translated to, “he who fights and run away, leaves to fight another day. This approach is often useful and, employed during employer-employee labour face-off, “a ni n fun, a ni ngba” (a matter of give and take). It is a philosophy that assists in managing relationships between parties. That sentiment is often used by third parties in the employer-employee relationship. It has helped in stopping conflicts in many African communities.

Most conflicts especially between individuals are caused by uncontrolled anger. Some persons are described as people who do not have control over their reasoning. Such individuals go into needless conflicts. The Yoruba have a way of challenging such person to reason, “bi eminrin ba n je omo eni, a kii binu lo ibon, nitori bi eminrin ba ku, omo le ma ye” (you don’t have to use a gun to kill a mosquito that bites your child, because if you succeed in killing the mosquito, the child may not survive). At another level, they may challenge the most truculent of the party involved in conflict by saying, “alagbara ma mo ero, baba ole” (the strong who exhibits no reason on important matters”. These words are meant to challenge the disputant to take a second look at the issue they are trying to draw up dagger against themselves.

Furthermore, there has been an increase in the number of depression, suicide and other mental health cases in recent times, which are related to individual conflict situations. This has continued to manifest because of the disuse of some Yoruba counselling and cautionary words. For instance, “ogun kii pa ojo, ogun kii pa akin, alaiforanporan logun n pa” (war foretold doesn’t kill the cowards, it also doesn’t kill the brave, it kills only the careless). This applies to individuals who have a penchant for ignoring advice or the recalcitrant. It attempts to raise the spirit of whosoever is falling into depression. “Orun n yaa bo, kii se oro enikan” (nothing is new in this world). That speaks to the individual who is losing touch with the reality of life.

The principle that suggests that conflict is not a spontaneous activity, resonates with the Yoruba conflict management practice. “Ati kekere ni a ti n peka iroko, ti o ba dagba tan, ebo ni yio ma gba” (Vices are best constricted at the cradle because if it grows, it extracts oblation). They believed that conflicts have a gestation period, which if not quickly handled, the repercussions may not be palatable. As such, the Yoruba would rather intervene as soon as they have an inkling that the crisis is about to start. This wise saying helps to reduce crisis points among the Yoruba.

For a post-conflict attempt at resolving issues, the Yoruba are quick to caution the party that is still showing signs of disagreement. “A ni ki a je ekuru tan lawo, enikan tun n gbon owo e si awo” (It is unethical for anyone to attempt fuelling conflict when efforts are being made to resolve it). This represents the mission of interventions in any conflict situation, wherein all efforts are geared towards ensuring and promoting amicable settlement.

Conclusion

The discussion of some Yoruba sayings, idioms; and proverbs in this paper, falls within the ambit of advisory, reconciliatory, counselling, and mediation principles and practice of contemporary conflict management practice. It fits into and respond to calls for alternative methods of conflict resolution and management. This is an addition to existing scholarships, which are aimed at promoting peaceful co-existence through adequate educational training and practice. The diverse ways and context in which the cultural history (Language) of the Yoruba fits into addressing emerging or post-conflict challenges, have the potential of reducing incidences of ethnic and tribal classes between neighbours. As it is with the Yoruba, so we have it among various ethnic groups and cultures across Africa. The world will be a better place if conflicts are addressed based on cultural sensibilities of the people/group involved. It is the opinion of this paper that the use of cultural approaches and dimensions of those involved in conflict have the potential of promoting quick resolution of the issues, than the over-reliance on legal adjudication, which has not been able to bring the desired reduction to incessant armed conflicts and wars that permeate every corners of the world.

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