Full Length Research Paper

The position of African traditional religion in conflict prevention

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African (Traditional) and modern religions may offer African solutions to many problems of conflict in the region of Africa. This article builds a case for the use of some African religious values in modern conflict prevention, mitigation and response in Africa (CPMR). One of the burning moral issues in Africa is that of conflicts. The contemporary multi-ethnic states have not yet succeeded in creating a pluralistic and homogeneous state that is able to overcome inter-group rivalry and conflicts. Rather than the utopian idea of peaceful co-existence dubbed the "global village" that was anticipated with the end of the Cold War, the latter part of the Twentieth Century is witnessing conflicts and divisions within nations and ethnic groups. This article endeavours to come to grips with the roots, meanings and ramifications of the conflicts among the African communities in a bid to find effective strategies of averting them in Africa. By so doing, an attempt has been made to explore the unifying aspects of African religion by giving due regard to religio-cultural values that can be revitalized, enriched and implemented to redress the predicament of CPMR in Africa.

Key words: Religion, conflict, prevention, mitigation, response.

INTRODUCTION

The hunt after dream of nation building may be alive in some parts of Africa, but in recent years many African states have been fractured ostensibly on conflict grounds and still, brutal battles between African groups have erupted with devastating consequences. For example, the conflicts among the Karamajong of Uganda and the Pokots and Marakwets in Kenya, The Muslim and Christian conflict in Sudan and the Rwanda and Burundi genocide.

The objective of this work therefore is to find out the role of African Religion in conflict prevention in Africa.

METHODOLOGY

The information contained here comes from two sources: library and field research. Primary data was derived from first hand infor-mation through personal interviews, observations and questionnaire and document analysis methods. Primary data was the core of our data, which was supplemented with secondary data from relevant library data gathered from published books, unpublished books, articles, government records, archival materials and local dailies.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In connection with the role of religious organisations both traditional and modern in CPMR in Africa; the author posits that in an African mind, the pre- occupation with the religio-cultural heritage is almost incorruptible. In practically every known religious tradition, notions of human values such as social justice, peace and strivings for harmonious co-existence, have been recognised by both the great personages and founders as constitutive of the belief system in a society. This is an indication that the presence of Religion in an area is a tool of conflict management. Given the cultural significance of African religious beliefs and practices, the knowledge of the past can be of practical value in the present. Such knowledge may provide the people with a fresh awareness of their own history, cultural and religious values, wisdom and

religiosity as they grapple with complex conundrums of human existence. Hence religions serve as early warning and service delivery. This is regardless of whether the religion is modern or traditional.

CAUSES OF CONFLICTS IN AFRICA

The African system of inter-group co-existence was very intact in the traditional set up and very ideal for CPMR. The colonial government shattered the African system of administration by creating institutions which conflicted not only with African traditions, but also African mentality (Colson, 1969; Brewer and Campel, 1976; Bozeman, 1976; Francis, 1976; Ogot, 1986; Nordquist, 1990). To impose these changes, a new society was created, new group structures and new system of governance. Traditional African moral principles, social norms and religious beliefs and practices were affected by new systems.

The hypothesis that religion is sometimes one of the major causes of war is borne out of the fact that some of the current international conflicts have religious overtones. A few examples may suffice: the civil war in Sudan and the ethnic clashes within the Rift Valley in Kenya were interpreted by some Agikuyu as persecution of "God's chosen people". For the Kalenjin in Kenya, they saw the clashes as a "Holy War" for what God has rightly given them, as well as a means to safeguard the powers that be, since "there is no authority except from God". In Sudan Islam is the only Religion the rest are derails and should be fought till they believe. In Ethiopia Orthodox church is the religion why should Catholics be there anyway.

Religious beliefs and misinterpretations thereof have increasingly fuelled conflict in African Traditional Religion and today, it may be central to many disputes and is often used to justify and fuel violence. Thus, the manipu-lation of religious beliefs by certain vested groups often spurs the beginning, as well as the intensification, of conflict. Religious traditions have important resources for addressing conflicts that often divide peoples and nations. The constructive role of religious institutions and communities in providing peaceful paths towards resolution is very significant.

Despite the diversity in ethos and religious traditions, they share common characteristics like the promotion of mutual respect for ones' neighbours regardless of their race, ethnicity, creed, culture, sex and age.

THE ROLE OF AFRICAN RELIGION IN CONFLICT PREVENTION

An African is notoriously religious he is deeply religious. Wherever an African is there is his religion. Throughout the great part of humankind's history, in all ages and states of society, religion has been the great central unifying force in culture. In the African traditional society, religion was and is the guardian of tradition, the dispenser of morality, the standard of reference and the teacher of wisdom. Religion also had a creative, conative and dynamic function as energizer and life-giver. Religion held the society in its fixed pattern. It 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. These values may be found in modern religions but whatever is traditional holds more water than what is modern and that is why there is a call for inculturation.

Notably, Africa is a deeply religious continent. It is paradoxical that such a continent is groaning under the ravages of conflicts, wars and injustices. The human agony caused by such conflicts is a challenge to our religio-cultural heritage. African religion can contribute something towards prevention of the same, to alleviate the suffering. African religion can use its many channels of enhancing peace - for example, through traditional values - life is highly valued, abortion is an abomination, beliefs - the fear of God and spirits is the highest element of traditional African spirituality, the African name children after their dead ancestors for fear of misfortune coming from their dead relatives and pouring of libation to appease them, rituals - these were used for cleansing those who contravened the taboos, in the case of murder or incest, worldviews-African religious ideas are transmitted orally and whatever is held sacred is respected and upheld by all. Social relations - Religion plays a central role in the inner life and social behaviour of hundreds of millions of human beings.

In the indigenous African communities, there were well-defined religious methodologies of enhancing peaceful co-existence and settling disputes (Shenk, 1983). African religio-cultural beliefs and practices played a catalytic role in averting conflicts. Religion has great influence on the African people. In this case we cannot say that it has not caused problems in Africa. Currently, these institutions have fallen prey to modern institutions of social control. The problem of conflict is not a recent phenomenon in Africa. In the traditional set up, considerable eruptions took place among communities. However, there were well defined methodologies for settling such eruptions (Waruta, 1992; Getui, 1999).

The institution of ancestor hood

In the African society, each community 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 the community. One of the most important structures that played a great role in promoting peace and harmony is the institution of ancestor hood.

The ancestors were very much active in the universe under various forms, affecting the good or bad experiences that were dependent on the behaviour of the living. Thus, the living strived to observe the moral values so as to be in good relations with the ancestors. Any bad experience such as killing or pouring of kinsman's blood in a conflict would cause anger to the ancestors. Such an action demanded a sacrifice to propitiate the angry ancestors; otherwise a calamity would befall the wrong-doer. When ancestors are unhappy about the attitude of their descendants, they make this known and employ painful means against those who misbehave. Keeping the ancestors in good humour is an essential task of the living. Among the Amba people of Uganda, calamities that befall human beings may be a warning that something is not right in their relationships with their ancestors. When a misfortune befalls an individual it may mean that an ancestor has become annoyed. If this was not followed it could cause conflict in the community. To prevent conflict a community had no choice but to work in collaboration with the ancestors. This is common among many if not all African tribes.

Elders

The elders also played a catalytic role in promoting peace and harmony in the community. Elders were ethical professionals in the community. They played the role of teaching, guidance and counselling on moral values in the community. They were venerated patriarch, who themselves were blessed by God with long life and fecundity. These patriarchs led an ethical life and as such their leadership was acceptable to the Community. They were therefore close to the living, as well as the living-dead especially remembered-dead 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 under the prevailing circumstances to restore peace and harmony. If the elders fail to act on their part in connection with involving the ancestors in community matters this could cause anger on the side of the ancestors and lead the society lack peace leading to conflict either from within or from without. This is a belief among African communities and there is no natural death for an African whatever happens to an African has spiritual bearings. There is no clear cut demarcation between what is secular and profane. This is surrounded by many beliefs like in the morning meeting a black cat is

a bad omen also a squirrel crossing the road ahead of you may bring bad lack on your journey so you are advised to go back. Also an innocent bird like owl coming to sing near your home is an indication somebody of your family will meet death.

Religious leaders

Religious leaders also guided and counselled the community in issues of relating to God, the spirits and the ancestors. These leaders taught, orally and by examples, the moral codes of the community. Their role came handy especially during inter-community wars. Warfare disrupted peace among people, as well as peace between the people and spiritual forces and God. Religious leaders ensured that peace existed between the visible and the invisible world. This was done by offering sacrifices and pouring libations to the ancestors. Peace was restored through prayers, sacrifices and offerings and solemn oaths. Offering sacrifice without ritual purification could have brought conflict because this was displeasure to the spirits and ancestors from the religious leaders. All went well if there was no contravention of the taboos by the religious leaders. Today Catholics intercede through the saints for peace on earth and amongst different communities. Every year interdenominational prayers are held for peace and unity.

Covenants

Notably, peace has always been a major need in a society. In all African societies, there were covenants drawn up to cement a wide range of human relations and interactions. These involved issues such as marriage agreements, settling of disputes, adoption of individuals, admission into societies, arrangements for buying land and trade. These operated more formerly and served as preventive measures against the potential threat of peace and tranquillity. Their intention was to cultivate peace, good relations, mutuality, friendship, respect, love between people and nature and love between people and spiritual forces.

Peace and reconciliation

In African religion, there was more action for peace than more talk about. An offence once forgiven was never recalled. It was forgive and forget. Today it is I forgive but I keep the grudge. This happened at many levels of life, including peace and reconciliation in a person-to-person relation, in a family and among people of different ethni-

city who may be in disputes. African religion played a fundamental role in integrating human society. It offered its members certain common values and objectives, which bound them together. Values like respect for life, moral uprightness, ethical codes and restitution among others. These values were subjective and so influenced the behaviour of members of the society. The most profound dimension of African beliefs and practices was embedded in covenants of peace after warfare. These covenants restored the relationships of warring communities. They affected the entire communities at loggerheads and were witnessed by the members of these communities, the living dead, the ancestors and by God as well. To break such a covenant was an ana-thema. The philosophy was I am because you are and since you are therefore I am. Living contrary to these values and breaking the covenants and taboos lead to ethnic conflict or tribal war.

Currently, many communities in Africa are ravaged by eruptions. The level of animosity and havoc caused by these conflicts is previously unknown. Examples of such conflicts include: the Hutu and Tutsi genocide conflicts in Rwanda, challenges for power in Liberia and Sierra Leone, divisions between Northerners and Southerners in Sudan, conflicts between Nanumba, Konkomba and Dagomba in Northern Ghana, ethnic cleansing in the Kenya's North Rift Valley and Democratic Republic of Congo war among others. The underlying reasons for these conflicts are as varied as the locations and the people.

KENYAN CASE

For almost a decade, Kenya has experienced conflicts and robberies and the government seems helpless to combat them. These conflicts have claimed many lives, maimed thousands of people and displaced many. Hitherto, for example in Kenya there are clashes among the Abagusii and Maasai, the Luo and the Maasai, the Pokots and Marakwets, the Ormas and Pokomos, the Agikuyu and Kalenjins and many more, which go, unreported.

The Luo - Maasai peace covenant, exhibits a strong feature of religious dimension in peace and reconciliation process. It started with convening of inter-communal meeting on the boarder where the battle ensued. This was as a result prolonged war or conflict. The participants comprised men, women, youth and children. Branches of poison trees and weapons of warfare were placed along the boarder so as to form a fence between the antagonists. A dead black dog was placed across the fence, cut into two and blood allowed to spill 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 (Shenk, 1983). The chopped off branches of poison trees, whose sap was used to poison arrows and the slain black dog symbolised that evil had been severed, thus vicariously bringing peace. The exchange of the babies across the fence by the mothers and the suckling of one another's babies implied that the warring parties had become kith and kin.

Case study 1

In case of conflict Among the Abagusii, the covenant of peace between them and their antagonists entailed the pouring of libations by the elders of both sides. This happened after a prolonged conflict between the two groups. Sacrifice of a white goat, a bull and a black cock was made. The blood of the sacrificial animal was allowed to spill into the earth. The flesh of the animals was eaten and later a ceremonial beer was drunk from the same calabash by both sides (Shenk, 1983). The pouring of the libations and the blood was a way of placating the aggrieved ancestors so that they may accept the covenant. Very serious consequences were believed to befall anyone who broke such solemn covenants, the most obvious one being death or serious suffering from a natural calamity by the offender. Making covenants of peace was a cultural practice with a concrete foundation. This process was also used by the Gacaca system of mediation in Rwada It was a balancing process based on the idea that conflict is basically a clash of interests. This process made the parties involved come out feeling satisfied because there were no winners or losers .The Somalis had the same process of mediation, for them the parties involved were forbidden from discussing the subject matter at any time. The offender had the responsibility of paying for his offence and protecting the other community and itself from a repeat of the offence. The bottom line in either case was peace and reconciliation.

The African religion and modern religion has the role of liberating people from all that oppresses them on political, social and economic planes. For the Africans there is no clear cut demarcation between what is sacred and profane what is secular and religious. Whatever happens to an individual has a religious bearing. In connection with inter -religious conflicts there is a need for interfaith dialogue. The religious role of any religion in nation building requires that believers encourage all to love one another regardless of whether they belong to any ethni-

city, race or religion (Okullu, 1982; Kobia, 1985; Mbiti, 1993; Mwikamba, 1993).

COUNSELLING SKILLS

The article has articulated on the fact that African religio-cultural beliefs and practices and the socio-cultural institutions provided vital channels of restoring and enhancing peace among warring communities. In African societies, any evil action was abhorred and the peace pacts; oaths and curses could be generally trusted as ultimate mainstays of social order and solidarity. These were the mechanisms that served as balances and controls of community's social order. These balances and controls, intricate and precarious as they were, have naturally been upset in the last decades by the sudden and intense impact of literate thought-ways, laws and institutions.

Societies that had well developed methodologies of settling disputes have fallen prey to moral chaos when their people have chosen to destroy the traditional institutions of social order. The methodologies that have been employed to restore peace and order nowadays have constantly failed. With the breakdown of traditional religio-cultural norms, making of peace through oathing and sacrificing is taken as unlawful, as stipulated in the Chiefs Act in Kenya's constitution. Wonder arises as to how much peace and harmony could there be if some of these vital traditional practices were allowed to exist. Thus, a revitalization of African religious values to redress the problem of conflicts in Africa is imperative.

SKILLS IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND PEACE BUILDING

The concerned authorities have wrongly assumed that conflicts can be resolved through threats, the police, the army, or other relevant forces. Again, these authorities have overlooked the principles that enhanced peaceful co-existence among African groups and various religio-cultural mechanisms that were handy in resolving conflicts. Priority has therefore been given to contemporary mechanisms of conflict resolutions. This has led to escalating cases of conflicts practically among all neighbouring communities in Africa.

Consequently, animosity has continued to grow between different groups, especially due to struggle for shared resources, political and religious differences. The warring groups seemingly end the conflicts when the government forces like the police intervene, only to retaliate if these forces withdraw. The African traditional religion systems of CPMR are economical, do not leave

the parties involved feeling bitter, are reconciliatory and there are no losers or winners, only reconciled neighbours. In today's world most of the African traditional religious ways need to be modified to suit prevailing circumstances and be ecumenical to embrace all denominations. This is because people of similar religious conviction, customs and culture no longer live together within the same physical borders, most of the values that protected and silently enforced the resolutions are no longer present and above all, underlying systems of authority have left a sour practice in many of the GHA people.

RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION

The article underlines that for CPMR in Africa between neighbouring groups would be achieved, if and only if inclusions of African religious indigenous methods of social control are revitalized. These methods, though labelled "out-dated" by many people, would be relevant in conflict prevention, not only warring communities, but also preventing the recurrence of conflicts in Africa. Result to the elder tradition. This does not mean consulting only the old in the village. African elders today include politician, economists, scholars, diplomats, church leaders of different denominations, members of NGOs and elders in the village.

According to Bozeman (1976) an authentic African leader will therefore be expected to provide a link with the spiritual world. Promote the traditional value of peaceful dialogue. Having brought the elders together, they must, in the spirit of the traditional African value of a common consensus, sit down to talk. We do not need expensive conference halls or hotel rooms. We can use natural shades or village huts away from the modern worries and hurries of life. We should bank on the African ability to forgive and forget painful experiences past. In fact Prof. Ali Mazrui has said that Africans, generally have a short memory of hate. The practice of restitution for wrongs done to others should be explored. We should use both moral and spiritual authority of African spiritual leaders. The progress of any society in connection with the conflict prevention largely depends on the knowledge of its history, culture and religion (Gathigira, 1942). On this score there is a need to revivify the fundamental aspects of our African religion and culture in a bid to identify those that can be sustained for enhancing conflict prevention among the communities. Africans should not disregard those beliefs and practices that were instrumental in promoting peace among diverse groups. The focus of African religion is LIFE.

Any endeavour of finding out effective strategies of ending conflicts in Africa must take into consideration the

social, religious, political, ideological and economic factors. These factors contribute greatly to the understanding of conflicts. Unless we understand the deep fears of a people, their yearnings, their social relations, their mentality, their cultural themes and emotional responses, it will be difficult to develop an effective strategy in our struggle against the counter-productive conflicts in Africa. Research is an essential part of CPMR; based on the findings of study, there is a particular need to carry out research on what the religious leaders ecumenically are not doing. As we have indicated religion can be a cause of conflict as it is evident in Sudan: the Christians and Muslim conflict. Records are likewise important because it ensures that what has been explored is recorded, stored, distributed and are gladly available for use by reconciliation and clash researchers, practitioners and strategy makers. The storage can be in written form, audio cassettes, films and if possible video cassettes- we learn 80% by vision.

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