

Urhobo Traditional Perspectives on Conflict Management and Peace-Building: a Model for Conflict Resolution in Nigeria

Samson Ikunvwẹariębe Emusi

Department of Christian Religious Studies, College of Education, Warri. Nigeria

Abstract

This paper explores the traditional models of conflict resolution in Urhobo society. The objective is to present these as adaptable and better alternatives to the contemporary models of conflict management in Nigeria. The identified levels of conflict management in Urhobo are Family Peace Talk – ‘Ota ę Orua’, Quarter Peace Talk – ‘Ota ę Uduvwo’, Community Peace Talk – ‘Ota ę Orere’, and Clan Peace Talk – ‘Ota ę ękuoto’. The researcher further noted the various truth-eliciting cults such as ‘ogwan ę esemo’ (ancestral cult) and ‘iyori eduvwo’ (cult of the deities). The paper strongly advocates the adaptation of these traditional conflict management methods to enhance conflict resolution in Nigeria.

Keywords: Conflict, Conflict Management, Peace, Urhobo.

Introduction

Conflict is disharmony, antagonism or hostility in a relationship, arising from incompatibility of the goals being pursued or incompatibility of the means adopted in pursuing such goals. As Akpotor (2008) and Agbu (2006) noted, conflict is the existence of non-compatibility or disagreement between actors in their interaction over issues of interest, values, beliefs, emotions, goals, space, positions, and scarce resources, among many other factors. It is a struggle over values and claims to secure status, power and resources, a struggle in which the aim of opponents is to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals (Closer, 1956). Whenever incompatible activities occur, conflict is inevitable (Deutsch, 1973).

Although destructive if left unresolved, conflicts are nonetheless necessary for social change (Faleti, 2005; Otite and Ogionwo, 1979). As Akpotor (2008) noted, society would be static if conflict is suppressed. Since they are normal

phenomena in human relations; since they can occur within and between families, within and between communities, intra- and inter- organisationally, conflicts in human relations call for proper management so as to avert their ill effects. Given that conflicts cannot be completely eliminated, we can at least prevent them from escalating into violence and transform them into a creative mechanism for social change.

As a pluralistic society comprising diverse ethno-cultural and socio-religious groups, Nigeria has witnessed several crises. (A pluralistic society is one which consists of co-existing but distinct cultural and social diversities which shape the individual and group behaviour of the people.) One of constituent ethno-linguistic groups in Nigeria is Urhobo. In terms of language typology, Urhobo belongs to the Niger-Congo language family. Within this language family, Urhobo is classified as a South-Western Edoid language.

The Edoid languages make up a sub-branch of the West Benue-Congo branch of Niger-Congo, and are spoken in the southern part of Nigeria. They are classified into four coordinate groups, namely Delta Edoid (DE), North Central Edoid (NCE), North Western Edoid (NWE) and South Western Edoid (SWE)... SWE is made up of five languages: Eruwa, Isoko, Okpe, Urhobo, and Uvwie (Aziza, 2008:1–2; my emphasis).

In terms of ethnography, Urhobo is located in the western part of the Niger Delta of Nigeria, south of latitude 6° N. It is a contiguous territory of about 5,000 square kilometers in the southern part of Delta State of Nigeria...bounded by latitudes 5° 15' N and 6° N and longitudes 5° 40' E and 6° 25' E' (Aweto, 2002). Urhobo territorial neighbors are the Isoko to the South-East, the Itsekiri to the West, the Bini to the North, the Ijo to the South, and the Ukwani to the North-East (Aweto, 2002; Otite, 1982).

In pre-colonial times, Urhobo society had her traditional methods of conflict resolution which were generally effective in insuring peaceful co-existence among the people. The advent of colonialism on the African homeland and the subsequent imposition of Western values and models of conflict resolution weakened the traditional judicial system of adjudicating between aggrieved parties and belligerents (Erhueh, 2015). The traditional values of African societies were supplanted by Western values which did

not define what an African society is (Danjibo, 2006). The current upsurge in violence across the Nigerian landscape testifies to the ineptitude of the Western judicial system in managing conflicts. Against this backdrop, it is imperative that we re-visit the traditional judicial system which proved effective in managing crises in pre-colonial Africa. In this paper, we shall examine the traditional conflict resolution methods adopted by the Urhobo in pre-colonial times in the hope that these methods can be modified and adopted in resolving conflicts in contemporary Nigerian society.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: In 2.0, we shall examine some of the causes of conflicts in contemporary Nigerian society; in 3.0, we shall discuss two contemporary approaches to conflict management; in 4.0, we shall explore several approaches to conflict resolution in traditional Urhobo society; and 5.0, we shall draw conclusions from these traditional approaches.

Causes of Conflicts in Contemporary Nigerian Society

A prime cause of conflicts in Nigeria is religious intolerance. Although Nigeria is a secular state where every citizen is at liberty to choose whatever faith or religion he or she desires, some persons and groups frequently attempt to impose their religious convictions on their neighbours. The dominant monotheistic faiths in Nigeria are Christianity and Islam. Between adherents of these two religions, there have been frequent clashes, many of which occasion colossal loss of lives and property. The *Boko Haram* crisis is a ready instance.

Another cause of conflicts is land dispute. Such disputes may be between

individuals, families, communities, or even states. Many of the conflicts generating bloodshed and displacements of whole populations in Northern Nigeria are land ownership disputes. There are allegations that armed nomads routinely invade communities, sack the indigenous population and move in with their cattle and families to settle on the farmlands of the displaced indigenous people. Land ownership disputes are particularly intense because the land is where people live, work, and earn their livelihood (Tasie, 2011).

A third cause of conflicts is government policies which are perceived by the populace, rightly or wrongly, as being unfavourable to their wellbeing. Economic policies which are perceived as exacerbating the privations of citizens are almost always resisted by the people, whether by means of organised protests by labour unions and civil society organisations, or spontaneous and very often destructive protests by rioting mobs. Examples of such (proposed) government policies in Nigeria include the RUGA bill and the so-called Water Bill, both of which are perceived by some Nigerians as a subtle attempt by the government to dispossess communities of their ancestral lands and hand over such lands to non-indigenes. Another instance is the recent CAMA bill which is perceived by a section of the religious community as an unwholesome attempt by the government to meddle in the internal workings of their religious organisations.

Conflict Management Strategies

As we noted, conflicts are inevitable. Their impact on society may be constructive or destructive, depending on the management strategies adopted in response to the actual

or potential conflict. The aim of conflict management is to contain the destructive effects of the conflict or to resolve the underlying issues. Two common strategies or approaches in conflict management are the coercive method and the integrated conflict management model.

Coercive Method

When inter-communal conflicts occur in Nigeria, the government often adopts the coercive method. Security forces are drafted to the belligerent communities to enforce peace and order. Usually, the regular police are the first responders; where these fail to contain the violence, special anti-riot police (usually referred to as 'mobile policemen') are drafted in. Where the situation degenerates further, soldiers are sent into the warring communities. More often than not, the deployed forces do not have the capability of acting as facilitators to bring the belligerent parties together to work out mutually acceptable solutions to the underlying cause or causes of the conflict. In fact, the activities of these security forces, particularly the military, very often occasion colossal damage and gross violation of human rights in such communities.

Integrated Conflict Management Model

This approach to conflict management seeks to eliminate or mitigate the issues that created the conflict. The model places emphasis on intensive negotiation as the means to a satisfactory resolution of the conflict. As we shall show presently, the Urhobo conflict management approach tends towards the integrated conflict management model than the coercive approach.

Urhobo Approach to Conflict Management

In Urhobo traditional society, when there are intra-family disputes, the matter is resolved within the family without recourse to any external authority. That is why the Urhobo often say: ‘Amwa rẹ ehun, ẹgboto ọye avwo kpirho’; literally, ‘A loincloth is folded with the chin’, meaning that a family dispute should not be taken outside the family for settlement. The same principle applies at the inter-family, quarter, and community level.

Family Peace Talk – ‘Ota rẹ Orua’

In Urhobo traditional society, when there are intra-family disputes, the matter is resolved within the family without recourse to any external mediator. The head of the family settles every issue between family members; he ensures that the family live together harmoniously. Instances of disputes which fall within the jurisdiction of the family head include spousal disagreements, misunderstanding between siblings, or disputes between parents and their children.

Quarter Peace Talk – ‘Ota rẹ Uduvwo’

Conflicts between families are settled at the level of the community quarter (‘uduvwo’). The mediators at this level are the heads of all the families who constitute the quarters, excluding the heads of the two disputing families. Their decisions are usually respected by the contending parties because of the age, maturity, experience and objectivity of the peace mediators.

Community Peace Talk – ‘Ota rẹ Orere’

Issues which are not satisfactorily resolved at the family or quarter level may be referred to community executives for settlement. Here, the executives comprise the elders of the community who are usually the heads of the various quarters which constitute the community, as well as delegated representatives of women

(‘ighweya’) and youths (‘ighele’). This communal court has fixed days for sitting, although in rare cases, emergency sittings may be convened by the community executives. All meetings are held in the Community Hall (‘ogwan orere’)

At these three levels, the focus is on truth and justice as prerequisites for peace. Therefore, where it is impossible to objectively establish the truth, both parties to the dispute may be required to take oath either at the cult of the family ancestors (‘ogwan rẹ esemọ’) or before the community deity (‘iyori eduvwo’). It is believed that those who engage in falsehood would be punished by the departed ancestors or the deity because the ancestors and deities, being all-seeing and beyond bribe, would invariably expose falsehood and adjudicate impartially between the guilty and the innocent.

Clan Peace Talk – ‘Ota rẹ Ẹkuoto’

When inter-communal conflicts occur, peace is sought at the clan level. At this level, the mediatory functionaries are the clan executives or spokesmen (‘etota’). They adjudicate between the belligerents. Most inter-communal conflicts are usually over issues of land, which (not infrequently) degenerate into bloody conflicts. The duties of the clan executives (‘ivie’ – kings; ‘etota’ – spokesmen; ‘imiragua’ – chiefs) include boundary adjustment to settle land disputes.

The ultimate settlement of bloody conflicts is for the two warring communities to engage in a peace treaty or blood covenant (‘opho ẹruo’). Each of the two communities resolves never again to take the life of anyone from the other community. Should anyone violate the terms of the treaty, he or she is punished

by the ancestral fathers of the two communities.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the methods of conflict management in traditional Urhobo society. The underlying objective is to present these methods as possible (and adaptable) models to contemporary Western models of conflict management

which have had little impact on conflict resolution in Nigeria. The paper submits that Nigeria will achieve a greater level of harmonious intra- and inter-communal harmony if these traditional conflict management strategies are adapted to our peculiar African environment.

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