

African proverbs and conflict management: a study of selected Shona, Oshivambo, Yoruba and Swahili proverbial expressions

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Abstract

This study employs a Dialectical – Relational Approach to analyse selected Shona, Oshivambo, Yoruba and Swahili proverbs in a bid to show that African proverbs have vast potential in mitigating and possibly preventing conflict that has ravaged the continent thus almost threatening to reverse gains made in economic, political, educational and social spheres in recent years on the continent. Informed by Ubuntuism, the study argues that African proverbs have a role to play not only in the economic development of the continent, but also in maintaining positive social relations with the rest of the world as is demanded by modern diplomacy and the quest for dignified social existence. In the study, I reveal that the Aristotelian three proofs of ethos, pathos and logos are inherent in African proverbs and can be used in all spheres of life in modern Africa to add value in education, commerce, politics and socialization systems both for the youth and adults. The study makes a critical analysis of proverbial expressions that deal with love, respect, endurance, care, goodwill and humility to reveal not only how proverbs should inform African education systems, but that their incorporation in many spheres of life would provide answers to vices such as greed, brutality (e.g. killing of people for various reasons), lack of ethical conduct, lack of respect for adults, sexual promiscuity and corruption. A purposive sampling of proverbs has been employed in this study.

Introduction

Africa has been dogged by all sorts of economic, social and political problems. From the perspective of this article, many of Africa's socio – economic and political problems have largely been a result of the choice made to foreign, as opposed to local solutions, to remedy such problems on the continent. And yet independence means, among other things, being capable to defend ourselves "...culturally" (Onyeani, 2008: 110). Despite gaining political independence, Africa's conflict management systems are still foreign. In this paper, one views this dependency as a source of African problems on conflict management. On foreign solution to African problems, the Yoruba proverb: "O tò eniketa ni i dākùn ijà" (It is third person's intervention that fuels the conflict), says it all. It

is however, paradoxical that, since colonial days, Africans, particularly those in decision making positions (e.g. government officials and leaders of industry and commerce) have been reluctant to seek African solution to African problems. There has been reluctance to “match brain power for brain power” (Onyeani, 2008: 13) with former colonizers. Onyeani (ibid: 97) adds, “We prefer to be parasites of a culture which we had no hand in creating, a Caucasian culture which took them years to perfect , and which we cannot easily emulate in its basic tenets) Consequently, indigenous knowledge systems were sidelined as preferences were made to continue with readymade and somewhat attractive pro-western inherited systems of conflict management. It is only recently that we have heard mixed reaction and even reservations to foreign prescriptions over African problems even from the echelons of erstwhile and current highest offices on the continent. Fairly recently, in an article titled, ‘What went wrong in Cote D’Ivoire,’ the former South African president, Thabo Mbeki, had this to say about foreign interventions in African conflicts, “ Africans can and should take the lead in resolving their own disputes” (Mbeki,2011: <http://www.southerntimesafrica.com/article.php?>). The question is, “How?” Onyeani (Ibid: 48) makes it succinctly clear when he avers thus, “... if you don’t understand how to articulate and conceptualise your concerns to your people, there cannot be a solution.” Comments made by the Ugandan head of state, Yoweri Museveni, on what appeared to be a United Nations – cum - Western – centered quick – fix type of approach to the Lybian conflict reveals growing resentments about foreign solution to African problems. The message goes thus:

If there is doubt about the legitimacy of a government and the people decide to launch an insurrection, that should be the decision of the internal forces. It should not be for external forces to arrogate themselves that role, often, they do not have enough knowledge to decide rightly. Excessive external involvement brings terrible distortions. Why should external forces involve themselves? That is a vote of no confidence in the people themselves.It should be for leaders of the Resistance in that country to decide their strategy, not for foreigners to sponsor insurrection groups in sovereign countries. ... If foreign intervention is good, then African countries should be the most prosperous countries in the world because we have had the greatest dosages of that: slave trade, colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, etc. ... If you promote foreign – backed intervention in small countries like Lybia, what will you do with big ones like China which has got a different system from the Western systems? Are you going to impose a no-fly -zone over China.....? (Museveni, <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/opinion-4745-Museveni>).

Commenting on the same conflict and reiterating the need for Africans to seek local solution to resolve conflict, Madhimba writes, “The African Union should wake up and smell the coffee. ... Come on, AU, take some concrete action or at least, say something with clarity on the war in Lybia” (The Namibian, 21-06-2011: 7). It should be observed though that in the above examples, there is no explicit reference made to the use of

proverbs and indigenous knowledge systems as resources in conflict management in the African continent. This article argues that proverbs are a vital component of the indigenous knowledge systems which can be used to resolve conflict particularly at the micro – level of the conflict cycle for macro-level conflict is an offshoot of the cumulative effect of micro-level conflict. The article, thus fully subscribes to the view that, “Black dependency on the rest of the world to continue to solve its problems cannot continue”(Onyeani, 2000: 71). Africa has to develop through the use of its own resources and knowledge systems particularly proverbs.

Through the use of selected examples of Shona, Oshivambo , Yoruba and Swahili proverbs, the article demonstrates that African proverbs can be used in conflict management. In the article African proverbs are viewed as records of collective memory bound to historical conditions. It is argued that African proverbs can be a solution to problems of conflict management on the continent. Proverbs are further conceived as a genre of orature and wise sayings which present well established ideas derived from real life. Yankah (1989: 327) also rightly conceives the proverb thus:

... a short saying of a philosophical nature, of great antiquity, the product of the masses rather than the classes, constantly applicable and appealing because it bears a semblance of universal truth.

Literature review

Literature on inductive research confirms that conflict management should incorporate local cultural practices. For example, a study conducted to establish conflict management strategies employed by Chinese and American managers revealed that whilst Chinese managers resorted to “embarrassing one’s colleague and trying to teach a moral lesson “ , American managers employed hostility and vengefulness as salient considerations in conflict management (Doucet, 2008: 355). In Asian countries, it was found out that embarrassing or shaming peers (Chen, 1995; Wall, 1990; Wilson, 1974 in Doucet, *ibid*) and moral education (*ibid*) were important strategies of social control than in Western societies (Creighton, 1990, Demons, 1996 in Doucet, et al., 2008: 370) such as America in which managers prefer private discipline and therefore tend to separate behavior from the person when dispensing discipline (*ibid*, 371). It was also revealed that individualistic cultures (e.g. the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia) use coercive ways of resolving conflict unlike collectivist cultures (e.g. Africa, Asian countries and Latin America) which give preference to withdrawing, compromising and problem solving (Doucet, et al, 2008).

Current scholarly research about conflict management in Africa has culminated in the verdict that ‘traditional’ approaches should take precedence over ‘conventional’

approaches to conflict resolution in Africa (Osaghae, 2000 in Adegaju, 2009: 56). Arguing in this line Zartman (2000: 3 in *ibid*: 56) observes:

Yet African countries remain impervious to these attentions. Though they involve the activities of seasoned peace makers using the best of personal skills and recently developed knowledge about ways of managing and revolving conflict, international efforts at conflict management have not been effective or efficient in overcoming the disasters that have brought them to the continent.

Studies have also revealed that African proverbs are very logical (Kazeem, 2010) and can be used in conflict management (Adegaju, 2009). There has developed a general consensus among African scholars that "... before conflicts in Africa rose to an intensity that justified international attention, domestic measures would be expected to come into play (Zartman, 2000 in Adegaju, 2009). Traditional conflict management strategies should take precedence over conventional mechanisms. As embodiments of collective wisdom and reality, proverbs naturally fit in the realm of solution to conflict management problems in Africa. As repositories of knowledge and commonly held truisms, proverbs can play a pivotal role in conflict management systems and processes on the African continent. Arguing in this line Adegaju, (*ibid*), makes an apt citation of Olatunji (1984:175) who puts it thus:

The proverbs, more than any other poetic type, outline a rule of conduct. They state what should or should not be done and lay conditions for certain actions and attitudes. They serve as social charters condemning some practices while recommending others. These statements can be negative, positive or conditional. The negative statements usually assert what things are not or should not be done. They often embody a moral or practical precept or a rule of conduct.

The use African indigenous knowledge systems, particularly proverbs to resolve conflict in Africa cannot be over emphasized.

Theoretical framework

The study employs the "Discourse – Historical Approach (DHA), a socio-philosophical orientation of critical theory" (Wodak and Reisgl, 2009: 87 & 88), to examine how African proverbs can make a contribution in conflict management processes on the African continent. First, the approach enables the researcher to adhere to a critical stance thereby gaining distance from the data. Second, its use of the socio – diagnostic critique makes it possible for the researcher to "demystify the – manifest or latent – persuasive or 'manipulative' character of African proverbs as discursive practices. Third, it permits the researcher to use "contextual knowledge" (*ibid*: 88) via the emic approach, thereby enabling him to "draw on social theories as well as other theoretical models from various disciplines" (*ibid*: 88) to unpack African proverbs as discursive events.

Last, it seeks to “contribute to the improvement of communication” by elaborating on how the intertextual and interdiscursive nature of proverbs, coupled with sociologically significant variables, position them as a vital resource for conflict management in various social settings in Africa. Finally, the DHA’s focus on perspectives and argumentation facilitates analysis of discursive strategies that make African proverbs persuasive hence a vital tool for conflict management.

Data discussion and analysis

The data discussion thesis is propelled by the rhetorical point of view that, the mere utterance of proverbs evokes positive and negative contingent emotions associated with collective memory and wisdom of generations. Thus, to initiated minds, proverbial expressions are logical truths difficult to contest and can be a resource in conflict situations. The Yoruba proverb, “Amòràn-mo-òwe ní í làjà òràn” (It is the informed proverb adept who settles problems), (Adegoju, 2009: 57), says it all. Citation of proverbs thus persuades through ethos (character), pathos (emotions) and logos (reason). Proverbs reflect culture. They depict collective perception of morality. For proverbs are a manifestation of collective intellectualism and wisdom. To this end, as locutions their utterance is associated with ‘illocutionary’ and ‘perlocutionary’ force that evoke positive and negative emotions which cause people to double check their actions and intentions (Yule, 1996: 48, 49). Basically, proverbs persuade through the use of various discursive strategies. Discursive strategy refers to a more or less intentional plan of practices (including discursive practices) adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 94). They include anecdotes and or short stories (for short stories can be proverbial), metaphors, intertextuality , thematisation, symbolism and argumentation.

In real life, the production and consumption of proverbs can be direct or implied. An example of the latter is a Kenyan story in which hare is involved in a protracted conflict with a traditional chief over ownership of a cow. The story goes:

Hare has no bull. He wants his cow to be fertilized, so he sends it to the chief who agrees that his bull fertilizes it. Hare’s cow finally conceives and delivers a health calf. The king claims it to be his. Hare sends a petition which makes it a court case.

On the day of trial, hare deliberately comes late. This surprises judges who ask as to why hare arrives late. Hare ‘seriously’ and ‘innocently’ replies that he had been delayed by his father’s bull which was giving birth to a new calf. The judges laughed off, and requested whether hare was mad. ‘Since when did a bull give birth?’ Judges inquired. Hare had won the case (Adagala, 1985: 74 in Makamani, 1992: 83).

It can be noted that in his argument here employed an inductive "... genus / species model of argument ..." (Cockcroft and Cockcroft, 2005: 98) to demonstrate to the judges and the king that a bull does not conceive.

Some examples of Shona, Swahili, Yoruba and Oshivambo proverbs which judges could have used to directly address a similar situation involving excesses of the king are:

Gonda chako pfuma yenhaka inoparadza ukama Gudo guru peta muswe kuti vadiki vakutye. (Shona)

(If you occupy a powerful position in society, you should humble yourself so as to earn respect of your subjects).

. (One should work for his/her livelihood, for inheritance destroys family relations).

Teleka kuku hali mwumizi mwanawe. (Swahili)

(A hen's kick does not hurt her chick).

Waa na mutanda ku na ngombe. (Oshivambo)

(If you don't have a calf, you don't have a cow).

In Yoruba a combination of proverbs could have been used to address the problem. For example, the following proverb could be used to call the elders to action as well as to psyche the king to accept judgment:

Agba ki wa loja kori omo tuntun wo.

(When there are elders in a place issues will not be allowed to go wrong.)

In addition, the following proverb could be used to warn the two conflicting parties about the need to view conflict as a passing phase in life which should not be allowed to undermine existing relationships:

I ja lo de torin dowe.

(If friends are quarrelling it does not mean that they are no more friends.)

It should be noted that utterance of such a proverb would also remind the king not to employ excessive powers in his approach to the case. Further, the utterance of the proverb, *Abo ora la nso fomoluabi to ba de nu æ adi odidi.* (A word is enough to the wise.) , would persuade the king to accept the court's verdict.

Since many proverbs use metaphors to persuade through ethos, pathos, and logos owing to their graphic vividness, it is critical to address the metaphor as a persuasive

import of African proverbs. In the given examples, metaphorical language is used to symbolise acceptable and unacceptable human conduct. For example, in one of the above Shona proverbs, the humility expected from one in authority (*Gudo guru*) is to be reciprocated by the subjects / juniors (*vadiki*), thereby defining an acceptable code of conduct and social order. Similarly, the Swahili proverb makes use of the negative formative (*hali-*) to connote (by implication), the expected conduct of the hen (any person in authority e.g. parent, chief, CEO, Head of State and Government) which brings about a desired social order. In the Oshivambo example, the negative formative (*na-*) is repeated in a cause and effect model of argument to present a scenario that has to be conceived in order to create a desired social order. Another example of an Oshivambo proverb that persuades through the graphic mental picture created by the metaphorical expression is: *Onime nai kwate, inai lya*. (When the lion catches you, beg it not to eat you.) In the example, the lion (*onime*) symbolises the chief who can only be asked for forgiveness by a wayward subject. The negative formative */-ai/* clearly shows the consequence of a wrong deed about which one can plead for clemency.

In all the examples, metaphors persuade by force of the graphic vividness associated with mental pictures they create in the minds of interlocutors. Metaphors recreate history which is vital in defining the desired code of conduct particularly in conflict situations. Perhaps this is what Onyeani (2008: 116) had in mind when he wrote thus, “If Africans understood their history, they would be incapable of fighting wars with one another.” The history of an African is that of kinship, friendship, and or religiously informed close mutual relationships rhetorically expressed variously as “*ujamaa*”, “*unbuntu*” and “*hunhu*”.

Intertextuality

Proverbs are also persuasive because of their embeddedness. Their reference to parallel experiences in life makes it impossible for one to challenge their propositions unless with other proverbs. The logic is, it would be out of sheer folly for one to be courageous enough to challenge a valid truth based on a collective experience as observed by elders. The following examples of proverbs demonstrate intertextuality and its use to resolve societal ills.

Yoruba:

1. Ogun agbo tele ki, paro to ba gbon.
(To be forewarned is to be fore armed.) The literary meaning of this proverb clearly bears the embeddedness thus, when a leper is informed of a forthcoming war, that war cannot destroy or kill him. This means that upon hearing this proverb the wayward is expected to take heed and amend his / her ways before it

is too late. One would resist out of sheer folly and will bear the consequences. Another Yoruba proverb with similar semantic reference and intertextual import is the following:

2. *Eni ti a wi fun Oba je o gbo.*

(When you are warned, you should take the advice.)

A Shona proverb similar to the above is:

Akubaira zanhi ndewako. (Take heed of advice.) The point being made by this proverb is you can only ignore advice at your peril because being given advised implies that people do care for your welfare. In the Oshindonga dialect of Oshivambo, the following proverb can be used in similar situations with the Yoruba and Shona examples: *Okwenga kwi iyageka ombizi.* (This person gets angry upon being given advice.) It should be observed that these proverbs can be used either to prevent conflict from occurring or to resolve conflict at various levels in society. The intertextual referencing in the proverbs makes them both historical and experiential truths whose dictates can be trusted.

Argumentation

Proverbs' moral authority emanates from their being inductive arguments reflective of collective human experiences. They are summaries of experiences of people sometimes spanning for months, years, even decades. As such one would rather comply with their dictates rather than oppose them for such a contradiction is synonymous to being a social misfit whose folly makes one to oppose conventions established by the collective wisdom of society. Being inductive arguments logically woven together as summaries of long established and absolute truths, proverbs fill an enviable gap qualifying them as law that regulates societal codes of conduct. This makes them not only persuasive but useful in preventing conflict from happening and stopping conflict once it would have broken up. The following examples of proverbs show that their persuasive force is partly driven by inductive reasoning:

Bi oba maa jo Osaka ki o jo Osaka, bi aba maa jo osoko ki ojo osoko, o saka nsoko, ko ye omo enja.
(Yoruba)

If you want to dance to the Osaka drum, dance to it; if you want to dance to the osoko drum, dance to it; to dance to both drums at the same time does not benefit a human person.

(Kazeem, 2010: 5)

Kazeem (ibid) used this proverb to demonstrate that African proverbs have logic. This article uses the same proverb to show that its persuasive import is derived from unquestionable historical conditions faced by people in life. The experiences being summarized here are of people who would have been observed say by having two lovers at the same time with disastrous consequences. The fact that the same habit

would have produced many failures in life makes it highly persuasive to the target audience in a communicative event. Consider the logicity of the following Yoruba proverb: *Ti Omode ban se bi omode agba a se bi agba*. (A child behaves in a childish way; an elder behaves like an elder.) This proverb can be used to warn an adult person to behave accordingly. It can be used both to prevent and to resolve conflict. Just like a rhetorical question, it forces an individual to indulge in self examination and amend one's antisocial behavior patterns. The following Swahili proverb also demonstrates that proverbs cannot be challenged unless by citation of another proverb, owing to their being based on experiences carefully sifted by the elders who use their expertise: *Baa daya dhiki faraja*. (After hardship comes relief.) This proverb can be used to encourage people to forget about the past (e.g. family feuds, wars et cetera) and look ahead into the future. It can be used by management to encourage workers who might be contemplating industrial action say due to poor wages, as a form of assurance that conditions will be improved upon thereby averting confrontation. The Shona and Oshivambo (Oshindonga dialect) equivalents of, Half a loaf is better than nothing, which, for example, could be used by managers to encourage employees not to embark on industrial action whilst their grievances will be looked into are:

- *Okaanza okashona ke vule to lala pevi* (Oshindonga dialect of Oshivambo)
- *Chidiki chirera mwiri; Chikuru chinouzouya wakora*. (Shona).
- *Majiyakimwagikahayazoleki*. (If water is split, it cannot be gathered up.) (Swahili)

Thematically, African proverbs encourage cooperation and oneness. They teach collectivism rather than individualism. They celebrate collectivism as way of social organization and order. Examples are the following:

1. *Gunwe rimwe haritswanyi inda* (Shona)
(One swallow does not make a summer.)
2. *Ihadhi gwanene omutse gumwe*. (Oshindonga dialect of Oshivambo)
(Two brains are better than one)

It is clear from these proverbs that African philosophy socialise people to think about others in society. Success and failure are viewed collectively and not on individual basis. Similarly, problems are resolved through consultation with the elders playing a leading role. Modern society could benefit from this approach by revitalizing components of the African thinking which celebrated team as opposed to individualism. In organizations, managers could reduce conflict that stem from competition among individuals by rewarding team effort rather than individual effort. Similarly, conflict resolution should be based on consultation in which identified responsible individuals should employ conflict resolution using pro-people genres and practices.

Proverbs in the resolution of political conflict

Prominent African leaders have used proverbs in conflict situations. Healey (2001, <http://www.afriproverb.org>) demonstrates that the Swahili proverb, “*Wapinganapo tembo nyasi huumia*”; (When elephants fight the grass (reeds) gets hurt), has been used in many conflict situations in Africa. The following are some of the cases in which it was reportedly used:

1. In the 1970s the then president of the Republic of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, used it in one of his speeches to the United Nations. Through the use of this proverb, Nyerere sought to implore powerful countries to seriously think about the effects of their disputes to the developing world particularly Africa. The same proverb was also used by the Democratic Ambassador to Great Britain in reference to the then conflict between the United States of America and the Soviet Union which he said had been hurting third world countries in Africa.
2. In most recent history, it was used in reference to the civil wars in Somalia, Burundi and the struggle between Arap Moi of Kenya and his rivals. In all these situations, the proverb was consistently used to protest against the suffering of innocent people like child soldiers (Burundi) and defenseless civilians.

Elsewhere in Africa, while addressing members of the Kenya Africa Union in 1952 the late Jomo Kenyatta used a proverb to avert a potential blood bath. Kenyatta warned, “ If any of you here think that force is good, I do not agree with you: remember the old saying, ‘He who hits with a rungu returns, but he who beats with justice never comes back.’” (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1952> . As said earlier, Kenyatta resorted to the use of a proverb to manage a crisis situation that could easily have culminated in a bloodbath. The proverb used by Kenyatta revolves around the oppositional model of argument in which parallelism, drawn by the contrast between ‘returning’ as a symbol of unfinished business and ‘never coming back’ as symbolic of finished business is aimed at persuading through logos.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that African proverbs are a vital component of the indigenous knowledge systems of Africans that can be used to resolve conflict at both the micro – and macro – levels of society. It has been shown that African proverbs use discursive strategies to persuade people to conform to established conventions. The discursive strategies used range from metaphors, intertextuality, symbolism and argumentation to thematisation. It has further been revealed that proverbs incorporate the Aristotelian three proofs (ethos, pathos, logos) to persuade, and, as a manifestation of collective wisdom, a proverb can only be challenged by citing another proverb.

Therefore, if used wisely, African proverbs can make a significant contribution in developmental processes on the continent. The paper argues that African educational systems and think tanks should revitalise the teaching and use of proverbs both at the micro- and macro- levels of society where they remain a vital resource in conflict management. The study demonstrates that Africans should, and, can utilise their own knowledge systems to overcome challenges hence become truly independent and thus experience a developmental boost guided by Ubuntu/Unhu and, or, Ujamaa way of life enshrined in African proverbs.

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