The Use of Traditional Communications in Conflict Management: The Case of Uganda

By Livingstone Sewanyana

Abstract

Conflicts have always been part of human society and mechanisms to resolve them have often tended to reflect the level of political organisation in a particular society. The traditional African society is rife with varied approaches to conflict management. Uganda, for example, is a heterogeneous society which prior to colonial rule was organised around chiefdoms among some tribes and clan elders among others. In the Kingdom areas such as Buganda, Ankore, Bunyoro, Toro and to some extent in Busoga the king ruled through institutions such as the hierarchy of chiefs and laws. In segmentary societies such as Kigezi, Bugisu, Bamba, Bakonjo and the Iteso, the political and social organisation was clan based, regulated by customs and values. In pre-colonial Uganda each society had set conventions, customs and traditions which regulated social behaviour, harmony and stability. These unwritten laws provided a set of acceptable behaviour and controlled deviants in society. Despite the differ-

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ences in political organisation, it is generally agreed that each of these societies had elaborate systems of governance, rule of law, justice and administrative organs. Each member of society was supposed to know his rights and sanctions were imposed on those individuals who did not comply with the norms.

This article will address the issue of conflict, how it was dealt with in traditional African culture, the methods of communication both in traditional and modern Uganda and the question of rights and responsibilities in promoting cross- cultural amity.

Rôle de la Communication Traditionnelle dans la Résolution des Conflits Le Cas de l'Ouganda

Par Livingstone Sewanyana

Résumé:

Les conflits font partie des sociétés humaines depuis toujours. Souvent, le niveau de développement des mécanismes de résolution de ces conflits constitue un bon reflet, du niveau de développement de l'organisation polique d'une société donnée. En Afrique, les sociétés traditionnelles adoptaient des approches diverses dans la résolution des conflits. Avant l'ère coloniale, en Ouganda, qui est un bon exemple d'une société hétérogène, l'organisation sociale fut la responsabilité des sauvereinetés traditionnelles ou des conseils, selon les ethnies. Ainsi les rois des royaumes Buganda, Ankore, Bunyoro, Toro et Busoga régnaient par l'intermédiaire d'institutions judiciaires et une hiérarchie de chefs. L'organisation des sociétés moins élaborées, tels Kigezi, Bugisu, Bamba, Bakonjo et Iteso fut la responsabilité du clan: perpétué par un système de valeurs traditionnelles. Donc, avant l'ère coloniale, les sociétés ougandaises desposaient des conventions, des traditions et des moeurs, qui régissaient le comportement social des individus, l'harmonie et la stabilité

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des organisations sociales. Malgré des différences sur le plan des détails, on constate que ces sociétés ougandaises se trouvaient à un niveau d'organisation politique très élaboré. Les membres de chaque communauté étaient censés conna"tre leurs droits. Ceux qui violaient les lois traditionnelles furent sonctionnés selon les réglementations.

La communication de Sewanyana cherche donc à exposer les approches adoptées dans la résolution des conflits pendant l'ère traditionnelle. On appréhende également la question de droits et de responsabilités, tout en soulignant le rôle de ceux-ci dans la promotion d'une amitié inter-ethnique.

Understanding Conflict and Communication in Uganda

Conflict is often understood to refer to a wide range of situations. It could be a debate or a contest; a disagreement, an argument, a dispute or a quarrel. It could also refer to a struggle, a battle or confrontation; a state of unrest, turmoil or chaos. A conflict could characterise the inner emotional and psychological state of the individual to relationships within or between different social groups such as the family, town, states, cultures or even civilisations. Conflict could be understood as the opposite of cooperation, harmony, accord or even peace. Whereas conflicts are destructive as they are seen as a social aberration to be avoided, contained and eliminated, if well managed, they could be healthy and could restore normal order.

Resource Pack[1] sees conflict as "a product of disagreement between parties about the distribution of material or symbolic resources and an act on the basis of these perceived incompatibles". Dr. Bakwesegha perceives conflict as the "pursuit of incompatible objectives by at least two parties."[2]

Conflict can therefore be seen to be both perceptual and behavioural. Conflicts in Uganda can be attributed to a range of factors, namely, social inequality, ethnicity and unequal state formations; ineffective conflict resolution mechanisms; ethnic and religious factionalism; absence of an indigenous property owning class; misuse of the military; the land question;the leadership crisis; language barriers and the inequitable distribution of resources.

Social Inequality

By the time of independence, Uganda was structured around various inequitable and potentially volatile social relationships. Some of these predated the colonial era while others were a

creation of the colonial masters. The inequality manifested itself in overlapping cleavages and disparities between regions, races ethnic and religious groups, classes and gender.

Among the Baganda, royal power was the basis of political organisation in the kingdom. This royal power had developed from small beginnings around modern day Kampala. Between the 16th and 19th century Buganda expanded territorially at the expense of its neighbours. The Ganda kings increased their power pragmatically by displacing local leaders with royal appointees who became leaders of clans.

The political system evolved around a hierarchy of chiefs who wielded tremendous power at three levels. First the *Bakungu* who were the territorial chiefs administering the ten counties into which Buganda was divided. These dispensed justice in the king's name; collected taxes on his behalf and assembled soldiers for his plundering expeditions.

Below the *Bakungu* were the *Batongole* who catered for the immediate needs of the court but in addition played the role of elephant hunters and border guards. They, like the *Bakungu,* possessed estates scattered through the ten administrative counties of the kingdom.

In addition Buganda had four great chiefs namely *Katikiro, Kimbugwe* (kin's first and second ministries), the *Namasole* and Lubuga (queen mother and queen sister). The chiefs possessed estates in each county and they were exempt from paying taxes.

Below the ranks were the palace pages who distinguished themselves in bravery as well as flattery. Gallantry during plundering expeditions was as important for future chiefship as differential behaviour at court. The successful acquisition or honour called *ekitiibwa* required both qualities to be cultivated assiduously.

The political system was characterised by a system of privileges. For example, Ganda chiefs who hunted elephants for ivory were entitled to certain privileges from the Kabaka and more so their followers were exempted from the general ban on smoking

hemp in Buganda and could even be allowed to grow their hair very wild and brave.

Class distinctions have always been a source of conflict as they provided and limited access to power and resources depending on the social stratification of the individual or community.

Ethnicity and inequality of states

At the time of independence, the present day Uganda consisted of sub-states with varying social and political organisation. The four sub-states were Buganda, Bunyoro, Toro and Ankore. Buganda had a sense of its nationality and occupied a privileged and dominant position, which was resented by the other states which, though much smaller or less dominant, considered their smaller kingdoms equal in status to Buganda and demanded similar privileges from the central government. The other ethnic groups, though more cohesive, each with its own culture, language and history similarly considered their own collectivity to be equal to the kingdom sub-states. Busoga for example demanded semi- federal relationship with the central government.

Lack of an effective conflict resolution mechanism

Before 1950 there was no Uganda-wide representative political institution to unite these diverse ethnic groups for the realisation of a common and shared destiny. Even the colonial authority did not create a central position for resolution of conflicts, development of common legislation and mapping of a common strategy. Even at the time of independence, the legislature lacked the vision and professionalism to create the tenets of a united state.

Ethnic and religious factionalism

Ethnic fragmentation increased the possibilities of conflict as ethnic groups competed for the country's meagre and underdeveloped resources. These cleavages were exploited by greedy politicians who used premodial loyalties to further their own selfish ends. In the same way the politicians of religious factions expanded the domain of conflict and further undermined the building of a peaceful national consensus. Religion became not only a basis for identity but also a tool for political mobilisation. At the time of independence religious affiliation influenced voting behaviour as much as ethnic and personal considerations. It is a well established fact that Uganda is on record for the religious wars among the Protestants and the Catholics and the martyr's shrine at Namugongo is a good testimony to the conflicts that arose due to religious misunderstandings.

Language barriers

Many African countries are heterogeneous societies. Uganda's indigenous communities by 1926 are recorded to be fifty-six.[4] The diversity of languages often poses communication difficulties as they cannot be used equally. The preference of one or some of them has often bred ill feelings among the others thus breeding mistrust and conflict.

Other causes of conflict include the lack of an entrepreneurial class which can act as an effective check on authority; land has always bred conflict at all levels of society whether within the family, the community or state. The states tended to have an imperialistic approach to land acquisition which took the form of aggression against the weaker society and over time the ambiguity of the land tenure systems often resulted in land fragmentation; compulsory acquisition of land and sometimes the social stratification marginalised others by relegating them

to serfdom.

In Buganda for example, plundering neighbouring states was a major economic activity by the late 19th century as war was seen as a legitimate process of acquiring territory. This is well illustrated as follows:

"My name is Kimoga.
I was born at Kungu.
My clan is Mpewo (Oribi Antelope).
Whoever meets me in battle, I will fight until I die:
I will fight until I snap like a needle"

The lack of orderly succession to power has also been a contributory cause of conflict in Uganda. Even in pre-colonial times, the succession to power often involved the elimination of a rival to the throne. This was a common trend until the different societies evolved better methods of accession to power. The colonial and post-colonial governments unfortunately have relied on the use of force, involving the military, often causing massive internal displacements of people, loss of life and property to capture and maintain state power.

Access to resources is perhaps another major cause of conflict in both the pre-colonial and modern day Uganda. Political "correctness" as it is often dubbed is the surest way to quick riches. This uneven distribution of wealth among the different social classes or regions has often resulted into conflict, with disastrous consequences.

Conflicts therefore can be seen to arise as a result of disputes over power relations; who has the right to make decisions; nature of social relations and to a large extent can be attributed to the question of property such as land- who has right to it and how are these rights exercised. Whether property-related, social or political in nature, these conflicts have always been dealt with at different levels such as the family, clan, society or at the chiefdom level and presently at the court level.

Finally conflict is often driven by unfulfilled needs of the people, be it in terms of autonomy, sense of justice, identity, basic needs or rights of individuals. Most of these needs are of a collective character and are more often than not provoked by official neglect, persecution or denial of human rights.

Traditional Communication Methods: Effectiveness and Challenges

Management of any conflict naturally necessitates communication. What is communication and how has it been used traditionally to manage conflicts?

Communication is sharing information or providing entertainment by speaking, writing or other methods.[4] People communicate in many ways, including by talking, by moving their hands, and even by making faces. People today use telephones and letters for personal communication. Communication could take the form of mass communication where messages are sent to a large audience either through newspapers, Television, radio and now the internet.

Early people are known to have communicated with one another by sounds and gestures. After the development of language, people exchanged news chiefly by word of mouth. Runners carried spoken messages over long distances. People also used drumbeats, fires and smoke signals to communicate with other people who understood the codes they used. Later paintings and drawings took shape.

Communication for conflict management in traditional Africa was centred around traditional laws and customs. These laws and customs depended on the reliance on the parties concerned to accept the judgement of the people and the fear of the balance of nature or of the community. The disregard of either principle leads to the punishment and destruction of the individual or the community at large. Traditional communication culture

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emphasised that the individual or his/her family, owed a duty of care to each other and to the community at large. In exchange the individual enjoyed certain rights and was protected and sustained by the respective units. The superiority of family and communal interests was so respected under the African traditional society that any individual adjudged guilty and punishable would be dealt with by his or her own members of the family and community without having to rely on other external forces.

Besides prescribed compensation and fines which were expressed in tangible goods and recognised services, the traditional African society developed and nurtured various fictional but effective remedial notions such as magic, the swear, the curse, taboos and ritual sacrifices of appeasement, which notions were intended to supplement the enforcement mechanisms of the law. They were considered with awe and were obeyed by those they applied to.

Traditional African culture emphasised the confinement of disputes and their settlement amongst the immediate parties and their families, encouraged unity and cohesion in society. Its preference for compromise and arbitration as opposed to punishment and deprivation of property in the name of the impersonal state enhanced people's belief in and respect for the law.

Communication in traditional Africa meant getting news around and this took many forms: songs, story telling (legends), drumming, proverbs, use of signs and even by the use of mouth;

*"Horns and drums were often used. A difference in the tone of the horn or beat of the drum communicated danger of war, the presence of strangers in the area, the death of a chief and so on. Smoke signals were also used by some of our tribes to communicate such messages over great distances more quickly. Specific loud cries were raised to communicate particular messages to our immediate neighbourhood. The village crier gave out more detailed messages to other villages. Specific signs were curved into pieces of wood to communicate information to those who knew the meaning"*5

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All these and other means of traditional communication still exist in the African society today. Below is an examination of some of the above means of traditional communication and how they applied in conflict management among the traditional societies in Uganda.

The use of parables and proverbs

Of all forms of verbal art, proverbs are the most valued by the Africans themselves. Parables and proverbs are seen as distilled wisdom of the ancestors and are unmistakably so regarded by the African peoples. Parables are very appropriate in a society whose bulk of the population is illiterate and therefore most likely to pay attention to parable stories than to direct speech or abstract words.

Proverbs had a deterrent effect on wrong doing. If a man is tempted by his own desire or by the suggestion of an evil friend and in the process remembers a proverb, he would desist immediately.

Proverbs cannot be dismissed as a simple form of amusement as a deeper meaning lies beneath their great deal of humour. Proverbs and folktales provide an opportunity for people to talk about kinds of behaviour which society prohibits them from indulging in and about kinds of success which they can scarcely hope to achieve themselves.

In arguing cases in traditional courts, proverbs are cited in much the same way that western lawyers cite statutes and precedents. The more proverbs a man has at his command and the better he knows how to apply them, the better spokesman he is considered to be. A proverb once misquoted or applied badly could tarnish the whole case. Proverbs or for that matter verbal communication is an important mechanism of maintaining the stability and continuity of culture. This form of communication

inculcates customs and ethical standards in the young. It transmits and validates social institutions and forces individuals to conform to them but at the same time provides socially approved outlets for the repression which these customs and institutions produce.

The use of songs

One of the best means of communication is through a song. The highlights of the Ugandan life cycle have always been expressed through song. By song is meant not only the systematic sounds that come from a human mouth but also the accompaniment to them i.e. musical sound and dance. Birth rites, initiation ceremonies, weddings, exorcism rites, work, recreation, war, sacrificial rites and death rites were marked by song.

In a song one expresses deep-seated feelings not permissibly verbalised in other contexts. As it was observed by Merriam:

"You can say publicly in songs what you cannot say privately to a man's face, and so this is one of the ways African society takes to maintain a spiritually healthy community ".[6]

Among the Bagwere people of Eastern Uganda, women occasionally assembled in order to judge a woman suspected of stealing from another member of the group, gathering together at the home of the accused. In order to summon all the women to the court, the group sang a song:

[Any] Women who will not come out in this place,
let the millipede go into her sex organs,
let earthworm go into her sex organs.

Through song therefore, such messages would be communicated which ordinarily would not be uttered. Such a message in this song acted as a force to urge women to turn up in large numbers

Among the Bagisu of Eastern Uganda, a song was once sung

to the plantation owner by a group of girl workers on his plantation. Using traditional melodic and rhythmic songs, the girls took the occasion to inform the plantation owner, through song texts improvised on the spot, of a series of grievances that had been troubling them for a considerable length of time. The discontent was unknown to the planter, while the girls were unwilling to express their doubts directly to him.

Songs can serve also as political weapons against oppressive regimes in Africa. Owing to the special kind of power that singing apparently gives in Africa, it can contribute effectively to conflict management processes.

The use of ritual symbolism

A symbol is a landmark, something that connects the unknown with the known. The process of ritual symbolisation is to make visible, audible, and tangible beliefs, ideas, values, sentiments and psychological dispositions which cannot directly be perceived. Symbolic forms or communication were used in conflict resolution by the traditional societies in Uganda and this will be illustrated.

Among the Baganda, the ritual of blood brotherhood *(omukago)* was commonly applied. This practice involved the sharing of a coffee bean smeared with the blood of another and this in effect meant that the two warring parties would not go to war again or it was evidence that every member of the clan treats another as brother no matter what. The act of *"okutta omukago"* (creating a blood brother) imposed a duty of one clansman towards another in addition to true friendship. The act bound every member of his own clan to the same obligations that he is under in relation to his blood brother.

Among the Batooro of western Uganda, a man could make blood brotherhood with a woman. The main ingredients of the ceremony included coffee berries, a new bark-cloth, a knife, tow branched of a fig tree and sprouts of a type of grass called

ejubwe. The climax of the ceremony was the taking with coffee berries of one's blood got from a cut made just below the navel. Then the two blood brothers would take an oath to behave as real brothers in all respects. Two men and one old woman would usually act as witnesses to the occasion. The two celebrants would utter the following;

> *"Brothers fight and shave each other; they cut each other's nails; they beat each other and help each other. If you become dishonest to me your stomach will swell. When I come to you with a horrible disease you will not send me away. When I come naked you will not send me away. When I come to your home I will not go away hungry. We shall not do evil to each other nor shall our children and clans "*

Among the Banyankore of western Uganda the ceremony of becoming blood-brothers involved two men of different clans. The two men would sit so closely that their legs would overlap. In their right hands they would hold sprouts of *ejubwe* type of grass and a sprout of *omurinzi* (erythina tomentosa). The Bairu would hold in addition a sprout of *omutoma* (fig tree). The master of ceremony would make a small cut on the right hand side of the navel of each man. The end of the *omurinzi* tree and *ejubwe* grass were dipped in the blood on the incision and put into the hands of each person. For the Bahima only the *Omutoma* sprout was used. Then a little milk was poured in the blood and milk or a little millet flour in the case of the Bairu and each man would swallow the blood and milk or the blood and millet flour in each other's hand at the same time.

Blood brotherhood created a sense of a strong family tie and a corresponding duty to assist one another in case of trouble. Like in the case of the Banyankore, the Bahima (ruling class) and the Bairu (peasant class) had their tensions reduced through this practice which was extended to foreigners including the Europeans.

The use of evening fire

The evening fire served as one of the most effective traditional ways of solving intra-clan conflicts in the tribe. The clan elders would sit around a fire and discuss their grievances or conflicts. It was a peaceful symbol and means of resolving conflicts by the men, women and children.

Such symbolic ways of communicating did reinforce the culture of learning, tolerance and acceptance of all peoples and groups to help build confidence among peoples in society. Often the traditional way of acknowledging guilt and asking for forgiveness was an act by the guilty person drinking a glass of water, spitting it while asking for forgiveness. It would also involve the guilty person who would touch the feet of the aggrieved in a bid to achieve the same.

Drums were a very effective medium of communication. The drum is a common instrument among the peoples of the interlacustrine region. In Buganda for example, the drum could summon people in case of trouble (gwanga mujje) or to call for hard work (sagala agalamidde). It was also a symbol of royalty, power and authority.

The Ganda *shield and spear* symbolised on the one hand the king's readiness to protect the interests of his people while on the other hand the people expressed their readiness to fight in defence of their king.

Gestures (prostration) were often used to express gratitude say before the throne if a chief was appointed or was an act of total surrender to the superior.

Legends sought to explain the origin of states and how the ancestors settled disputes. Among the Banyankore, they have the legend of Ruhanga (the creator) and the Kingdom of Ankole they recite how among his sons, Kairu, Kakama and Kahima were tested for kingship. The legend tries to explain the social stratification and the creation of classes to minimise conflict within their society.

Among the Luo there is the legend of Gipir and Labongo. This explained how two sons of the King (Rwoot) had a quarrel over the spear and bead. Their inability to resolve the quarrel peacefully and the consequences it had on the two are illustrated.

The risks to life which culminated in the death of Labongo's child in an effort to recover the bead and the subsequent separation of the brothers, one going North of the Nile and the other North East demonstrated the impact of conflicts and stressed the need for peaceful resolution of the same.

Finally **totemism** featured in traditional Uganda with both religious and social attributes. The religious aspect emphasises stern observance of commandments and a tremendous restriction as totem members are brothers and sisters and pledge to help and protect each other. If a member of a clan is slain by a stranger, the whole tribe must fight back.

Traditional Conflict Management in Uganda : Case Studies

The concept of conflict management entails the sharing of a goal to reach mutual understanding. The parties involved must have an equal and open chance of entering the discussion and there must be no external or internal constraints preventing participants from freely assessing evidence and argument. The ideal outcome is an agreement about truth and rightness achieved through rational discussion.

Traditional modes of communication and settling conflicts and disputes have been described over the years as being focused on retaliation and or/restitution, collective instead of individual responsibility, and the supposed absence of general doctrines i.e. conflicts are supposedly resolved by instance, situationally rather than according to principles.

However, other legal anthropologists argue that all societies

had some form of negotiation but that only some had adjudication in addition. They further argue that evidence (ethnographic) from non literate, non-state systems suggests that intention in such societies mattered. Even where collective liability lies between groups, individual responsibility is very much in evidence within groups. General principles are lacking but they have a different place in the thought, discourse and practice of a society without writing than they do in literate societies with professional jurists and a highly elaborated and documented system of argument and legitimation.

The Baganda

Ganda royal power was managerial. The kings enjoyed physical power as it was based on royal authority. Externally this power depended on the effective management of frequent plundering expeditions. Internally, it depended upon the skilful management of an intricately interlocking network of appointive chiefs together with the associated structures of clientage and chattel slavery. The political system was tolerated by more than one million Baganda who saw the king as a source of patronage as well as punishment. Unlike other kingdoms the system of justice was relatively open ended.

The Ganda legal system observed the rights of the less advantaged, devoid of class bias and encouraged even the lower class to bring actions against other class as with high possibilities of a remedy. The rights of a free Muganda were thus observed in an intricate system which was based on the control of power relations. The Kabaka maximised his power by keeping his chiefs entirely subordinate and dependent on themselves. In this system royal jealousy checked the power of subordinate groups hence ensuring more freedom of the individual. In Buganda the individual valued this freedom and used it to seek his own advantage by changing allegiance. These much cher-

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ished freedoms were not universal as they were not available to chattel slaves nor ordinary women as these were not free.

The Kingdom of Buganda was almost always in a state of conflict internnally or against her neighbour. Ganda kingship was a competitive institution . These seemingly conflict situations were resolved through the Namasole (queen mother) who normally provided the princely contender her support. The support was also built through a system of alliances with the Bataka, the *Batongole* who would be linked to his kinsmen through the special attachment of blood brotherhood. The century however witnessed hidden class struggles associated with the intensification of slavery.

The Ganda system of conflict management was built on respect for individual values: the superiority of the family system within which conflicts were resolved and punishments given; at all times there was a high sense of morality with each individual owing a duty of care to another and the whole community. This had the net effect of minimising conflict and promoting a sense of responsibility.

The Alur

The Alur of northern Uganda believe that death cannot occur of natural causes but only through the ill-will of other human beings, living or dead. The Alur have a constant accumulation of diverse accusations and charges in relation to every death. Tribunals are therefore set up on the occasion of the second funeral of the deceased to establish the cause of a death which has occurred. The tribunals arise mainly at the instigation of elders. These accusations inevitably give expression to the tensions and disputes in the community, revealing the hatreds, enmities, quarrels and wrong doings which impact on the network of interpersonal relations.

The accusations at the time of death often set kin and neighbour at one another's throat. Resolving these issues was

done in a public debate by local leaders on the accumulation of charges and counter charges as they were discussed at each second funeral. This practice constituted a negotiated and bargaining collective moral judgement on the community itself. The system of justice resolved around tribunals which were open, free and non- authoritarian forum limited however by rules of age and gender generally observed by the community.

The Kiga

The Kiga of the extreme western part of Uganda had highly decentralised social control system. They had a high degree of consensus without government which served as the sole basis of their unity to defend themselves from their neighbours. Their common customs included voluntary mutual obligations, need for each other's assistance in matters of kinship bonds and relationships between clan lines constituted the basis of their unity, distinctiveness and strength. May Edel observed on the social control of the Chiga that: *"there is no formal authority beyond that exercised by the father over his immediate household......"*

Sanctions were on the whole imposed on the principle of self help by the individual or the group directly affected by some misconduct or failure to meet obligations rather than by the group of the offender or by any neutral authority. The same pattern was followed for very serious offences within the group as these were settled there and then and no person external to it could have any more than a conciliatory role.

Fratricide and incest for example were problems affecting close kinship groups, who are the ones actually injured. A man who killed his brother was supposed to be put to death by his own father or brothers or traditionally be buried with the corpse of his victim. Like other tribes so far examined, these people were strong believers in their traditional ways and individualism was the basis of their society.

The Karamojong

The Karamojong political community was a policy group which pursued particular values and actions based on the common interests of its members, who interacted and had a strong sense of oneness on the basis of their commonly acknowledged individual rights, privileges and obligations. These included the right to graze and water one's cattle in any part of the Karamojong county without interference from other members of the political community and the right to immediate assistance by members of the community when a member conflicts with any other members of the political community.

The Karamojong regarded any violation of rights, privileges and obligations as wrongs to the community which was only punishable by the political community. Neville Hudson Dyson observes that: *"such political rights may be expected by tribal birth or residence to depend ultimately on commitment to the policies which the group pursues "*.

The social organisation and allocation of authority was based on age; adult males who were organised in a series of groups based on age provided both the source of political authority and the main field in which it was exercised among the Karamojong.

The elders were respected and credited with wisdom in worldly matters. Besides having experienced life they were the ones who had the ability and right to intercede with the deity for assistance; they made peace and war between Karamojong and outsiders; they also made public decisions and they were the ones who could hand down authoritative decisions concerning individual conflicts within the community. Age was a key to political power but no power was vested in a single individual although some elders were more influential than others. Hudson points out:

".....Cutting the matter is in the hands of the elders who state a decision after hearing all who wish to speak. The decision

is then binding on both parties who are sent off to settle their grievances in terms of it. No further action was taken by the elders unless the plaintiff returns to complain that the decision had been ignored. In this case the elder calls upon the young men to enforce their decision. The assembly of elders was the legislature and court of law. The society had no police agency but the decisions of the elders were always carried out. The elders recognised the ability to use the supernatural to enforce their decisions and to carry out their orders; to accomplish policies."

Traditional African society had strong emphasis on the past, present and the future in solving a problem. They always referred to similar problems and how these were solved in the past without having to break the relationship with the future. The ultimate goal was to maintain peace and harmony in the society.

While African legal and customary systems recognised the place and value of the individual, the recognition was invariably linked with the sustenance and survival of the family and the community. The interests of the latter always prevailed over the claims of the individual. This was a legal and political concept to be taught and memorized by every child.

Each individual and his family owed a duty to each other and the community at large. Decisions were always enforced even by the remote members of the family. Besides prescribing compensation and fines often expressed in tangible goods and services, the traditional legal system developed and nurtured various sanctional fictions which, with the passage of time gained credence and unquestioned obedience. These sanctions included magic, swear, curse, taboos and ritual sacrifices though these were intended to supplement the enforcement mechanisms of the law.

The African traditional law's preference for comprise and arbitration between litigants before their immediate families as opposed to punishment and deprivation meted in the name of

the impersonal modern state enhanced people's respect for and obedience of the law and in turn a culture of rights was maintained.

Towards a Culture of Rights: The Way Forward

Human dignity entails understanding our rights and responsibilities. The Universal Declaration of human Rights, 1948 proclaims in its preamble:

"Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world..."

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law...

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedom is of the greatest importance for the full realisation of this pledge...

The General Assembly proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society... shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures both national and international to secure their recognition and observance both among the peoples of member states themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction."

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that "all human beings are born free and equal in

dignity and rights..."

Human rights in their absolute terms represent the broadest human ideals of justice, liberty, equality and community for individuals and groups.

The development of a human rights culture, a culture of mutual respect and tolerance is important in conflict management and building of a democratic culture. Lack of a human rights culture accounts for the devastating conflict in Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Liberia and Uganda. A human rights culture has to be nurtured, simple promulgation or legislation is not enough as observed by Umozurike:

" without human rights, there cannot be a just society. Human rights were not brought by the Europeans but have always been part of us. Human rights therefore should be taught from its traditional background ".[7]

In order to foster and nurture a human rights culture communication will be very vital. The formal teaching in class, the use of theatre, radio, television, and written literature will be vital alongside the traditional communication methods which would be even more effective given that a large number of our populations are illiterate.

Human rights educators could explore the use of songs, proverbs. ritual symbols. greetings in communicating human rights messages along the modern, ways including internet.

Nurturing a human rights culture would necessitate the appreciation of duties of a good citizen; these would have to be balanced in the notion of rights. These include but are not limited to respect for rights and freedoms of others; protection of children and vulnerable groups against any form of abuse, harassment or ill-treatment; protection and preservation of public property; defence of one's country, respect for the rule of law and order; duty to pay taxes and duty to elect responsible leaders among others.

'The development of a human rights culture requires the

contribution of all key actors in society: the government, civil society, the private sector and the international community.

Each of these organs of society could embark on a progressive sensitisation of the people about their fundamental rights and freedoms through an elaborate education programme that brings in its ranks the use of traditional communication methods. The analysis of policies and programmes to bring them in line with the societal aspirations and values; and the revitalisation of traditional institutions of justice such as the judiciary, the police and the legislature.

As it could implicitly have been noted, the traditional methods of conflict management could have had their shortcomings as could have lacked the necessary infrastructure and machinery for adjudication and enforcement of rules: identification of suspects by the "hue and cry". However, married with the modern methods such as negotiation, arbitration, adjudication and mediation they could have a far reaching impact on social harmonisation.

Modern communication methods also have limitations. For example, radio has programmes for only major languages thus marginalising the rest; film shows may require interpreters; audio visual materials may be limited by lack of appropriate equipment and facilities and often audiences are limited. These communication methods if married with the traditional ones, the results would be astounding. For example, in Uganda, the local council courts seek to recreate the conciliatory systems of dispute resolution. The local council courts dispense popular justice, have jurisdiction over customary matters and settle disputes using traditional forms of communication for instance through mediation, counselling, payment of fines, and allowing contemplation for the parties involved (think about their respective positions). The Local council courts still have a limitation when applying customs since these tend to discriminate against women on issues such as property ownership, succession and custody of children.

Recommendations

- Conflicts are inevitable but could be a healthy process if well managed. We need a proper understanding of their root causes in order to prescribe the best solutions.

- Conflict is inherent in every aspect of human life and can be positive as a source of creativity and change. However, conflict becomes destructive when it is allowed to degenerate into violence. The aim of a culture of peace and human rights is therefore not to eliminate conflicts but to find ways to deal with them non-violently.

- Some forms of non-violent conflict management, in the form of negotiation and consensus building, are already so much a part of our traditions and everyday behaviour that we take them   for granted. A culture of peace and human rights must begin by recognising, strengthening and institutionalising these everyday values and practices. For this reason, conflict management includes training in mediation and negotiation techniques.

- Communication is an important feature in the management of Africa's socio-political conflicts. It is important to explore those culturally relevant methods and marry them with the modern methods to enhance understanding, social cohesion and the notion of peace within our contemporary societies.

- Conflict management should emphasise the notion of reconciliation as a viable step in the peace building process This healing process would produce harmony among the victims as well as the perpetrators of violence.

- Peace on earth is not the monopoly of any one individual but rather a responsibility of us all: conflicts should be seen and appreciated as a people-centred problem rather than purely a state-centred question, since conflicts occur at various levels __ between states and within states; between local communities and aliens; between governments and opposition groups; as well as between individuals within a clan or a sub-clan and even within families.

- Human dignity is possible when we embrace the principle of equality, respect for human rights, exercise freedom with responsibility and practice participatory democracy.

- Meaningful conflict resolution remains a function of how power is exercised in addressing issues of poverty and resource allocation and developing a culture of rights will largely address the problem.

- Nurturing a culture of respect will need the efforts of everybody: Government, the religious groups, non- governmental organisations, professional associations, the academics, the private sector and the international community to work in unison for the protection of rights through all available means at their disposal.

Conclusion

The dynamic nature of society makes conflict unavoidable. However, though we cannot avoid conflict, we can try to manage it by dealing with it in a way that shows due respect to human dignity and the concomitant rights.

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