

Epistemological Analysis: Conflict and Resolution in Africa

by

Dr. Nana Adu-Pipim Boaduo FRC

nboaduo@wsu.ac.za, pipimboaduo@yahoo.co.uk, pipimboaduo@live.co.za

Senior Lecturer: Faculty of Education, Department of Continuing Professional Teacher Development, Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha Campus and Affiliated Researcher: Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, Centre for Development Support, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein Campus, South Africa.

Abstract

The colonialists have had vested interest in the numerous African resources and will stop at nothing to get them irrespective of the consequences of their action. The post independence conflicts that have swarmed Africa leave much to be desired. Epistemologically, these conflicts have their roots in the cunning propaganda of the colonialists who have resurfaced in independent African countries fomenting these conflicts. Most Africans wonder about all these and do not have the slightest idea about how these conflicts surface. This paper presents detailed epistemological analysis of conflicts in Africa and provides suggested solutions to overcome them.

Key concepts: peace, terrorism, xenophobia, political culture. Ideological sabotage, epistemological, epistemologically, investment in conflict prevention, conflict resolution

Introduction

In theory, we must understand the conflicts and crises that have engulfed Africa from a broader perspective and that the starting point must be from traditional Africa society before the advent of colonial intrusion to the time the colonialists hacked their culture and tradition into African societies. Furthermore, another theoretical postulation is that during the African independence struggle, the colonialists left us with but conflicts, which they nurtured through their cunning strategies of partitioning and divide and rule.

The most significant of them all are their tactics of 'divide and rule' and 'partitioning of Africa' where ethnic communities were cut into pieces by an imaginary line called boundary which was generally not based on ethnic sentiments, which they fomented to work to their advantage, which still continues up to today.

Thus, we ask, what is going on in Africa, dubbed as conflict prone continent, is the harvesting of the 'divide and rule' and 'partitioning of Africa', crops planted by the colonialists eternal? And unfortunately, despite the problems created by these crops, African governments allow them to grow and produce uncontrollable seeds, spreading like wild fire throughout the continent, heralding xenophobia and terrorism in their midst. And we are all witnesses of this dilemma, but are helpless to curb its spread, and know that in theory, divide and rule breeds xenophobia which gives birth to terrorism (Shillington, 1995; Curtin, Feierman, Thompson & Vansina, 1998).

Conflicts are intrinsically an integral negative dynamic implicit in much of the academic and policy literature on peace operations where the concepts 'conflict' and 'conflict prevention' typically refer to situations of crises characterized by actual or potential outbreak of widespread violence. Yet, in all cases of violence, certain level of xenophobia and terrorism are inherent, but it is analytically limited and misleading when considered in total isolation. Violent conflicts have killed and displaced more people in Africa than in any other continent in recent decades (Commission for Africa, 2005). This has driven poverty and exclusion, undermined growth and development, and deprived many of their right to life, liberty and security as enshrined in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Accordingly, how we understand conflict in Africa at a general level has a critical bearing on our response in specific situations; if we regard the phenomenon as inherently destructive. The theory of ethnic sentiments, (also called native sentiments by the colonialists) have had a deep root in African communities as a result of a systematic colonial hammering of the ethnic sentiments through the divide and rule strategy. In this way, our efforts would be directed towards eliminating it. However, this has been a feature of authoritarian regimes in the continent, for instance the Idi Amin regime in Uganda, Siad Barre in Somalia, the upheaval in Ivory Coast, and more recently in the Darfur region of Sudan which may heighten rather than reduce tension as has been the case in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Chad. And if in theory conflict can be viewed as a means to change or at least, a desire for change, then something has to be done to bring that change about, especially in eradicating the ethnic sentiments and applying a negotiation strategy. Thus, an assessment of whether conflict is positive or negative depends on a contextual judgement of what is to be changed, to what end, and by what methods, and theoretically, acts of xenophobia and terrorism do not contribute to peace-making and peace-building.

Nonetheless, the implicitly theory is that if we view conflict as normal and inescapable, then the challenge is to manage it in constructive ways. The indication is that states which are stable are not free from conflicts, but instead portray mature sentiments and are able to deal with its various manifestations in a manner which is generally acceptable to the parties involved. Africa has not come to that stage yet either because some do not want to give in to communal welfare or somebody is behind all of what is going on in the continent and thus benefits from the conflict, and therefore will do everything possible to see that conflict continues, unabated.

In theory and from the national context, constructive conflict management is the essential, and an on-going business of good governance; which is the formal responsibility of the executive, parliament, provincial, regional and local authorities, the police and the judiciary. And in all cases where conflicts and crises occur, the lack of capacity to resolve them, conflicts loom. Therefore in the absence of creditable institutional means of addressing disputes and grievances by the state, individuals and groups may grab the opportunity and resort to violence, and careful examination in this scenario will reveal that instances of xenophobia and terrorism will reign in all cases.

As indicated above, as a result of the dissection of ethnic communities by colonial boundaries, some ethnic/religious communities are excluded from state institution formation, and the mainstream political and social life via ethnic cleansing. Hence hostilities may be intense because the issues at stake are fundamental to physical security, the protection and advancement of interests and rights, and psychological needs regarding cultural identity as seen in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Ivory Coast, the Darfur region in the Sudan, Burundi, and Rwanda which relate as much to perceptions as to material conditions, and thus important to the ruling group as to the marginalised. Therefore, crisis resolution is further inhibited by entrenched cultural stereotypes and deep feelings of animosity, such as fear, uncertainty and mistrust which triggers a violent explosion of tempers laced in elements of xenophobia and terrorism has seen in the case of Burundi and Rwanda.

In other instances, where diversity is a source of strife, stability might be sought through the physical separation of antagonistic groups as seen in Somalia. But since that is seldom feasible throughout, the most viable alternatives are structural arrangements which accommodate the aspirations of the majority and the fears of the minority through the institution of basic rights for citizens. This is seen in Ghana, Botswana and South Africa wherein democratic forms of majority rule and structural diversity accommodation incorporates exclusivity and respect for diversity in the constitution, the government, the political system, and in state institutions.

Besides, many of the crises in Africa, if critically analysed, have common, deep-rooted causes. These include the lack of cultural identification between nation and ethnicity resulting in ethnic tension (the grounds for xenophobia to germinate); coupled with the suppression of minority groups, corrupt and dictatorial regimes, and the support for these regimes by the Western world.

They also supply the arms and trade in technical support systems cumulating in unstable civil-military relations, chronic underdevelopment, poverty, and an inequitable economic system (debt burden, the imbalance in trade and financial relations between the West and the developing world) via the Structural Adjustment Programme of the West that has made millions unemployed, again exacerbating underdevelopment, creating frustration and consequently sparking violence, at the least provocation.

It is very unfortunate to note that within and outside of Africa, the attention paid to these formidable problems is largely rhetorical; especially by the developed countries, because the resources and energy of the international community are mobilised mainly around these symptoms, when they reach catastrophic proportions like civil war, genocide and mass starvation. This is not to undermine the importance of emergency action by the international community, but rather to make the point that the symptoms will persist, and the crises will recur for as long as the underlying causes prevail.

Yet, apart from what have been painted, the theoretical origins and dynamics of state and intra-state conflicts in Africa differ markedly from country to country as a result of historical, political, cultural, geographical and other factors. However, xenophobia and terrorism are the key elements that help to inflame conflicts in Africa. Therefore, broad generalizations about a continent characterised by diversity are not helpful in addressing this crises. And at the risk of undermining the propositions advanced in this paper, it must also be stressed that different cultures perceive conflict and conflict management differently (Salem, 1993).

However, this position is not widely appreciated by foreign governments who intervene in African crises, and even where they have good intentions. Generally, their interests, ethnocentric world view and preoccupation with quick-fix solutions result in superficial analysis and a profound lack of respect for the local actors. And generally, they regard Africans as villains or victims, and therefore as the objects rather than the subjects of development and peace initiatives. It is therefore, not surprising that these initiatives are frequently ineffective. However, it is prime opportunity for the international community to change its approach in support of African efforts to promote peace and security. Thus, Africa and the developed world should invest in the prevention of violent conflicts in Africa, because, prevention is better than cure, as the old adage goes.

Culture of Peace: Understanding the Concept

Our theoretical understanding of conflict informs the nature of peace as well as our concept of peace. Yet, for all the governments and citizens of stable Western democracies, the concept is unproblematic and defined as the absence of widespread physical violence and peace is held to be an unqualified good in terms of orderly politics and the sanctity of life.

However, in Africa, where large numbers of people are being killed in civil wars, it becomes obvious that the paramount goal is to end hostilities. And from the context of these civil wars, this perspective may have very little relevance when generally, oppressed groups in any part of the world may prize freedom and dignity more than peace and may be prepared to provoke and endure a high level of violence to achieve the rights of citizenship. But in all these circumstances, authoritarian regimes and the foreign powers which sustain them are interested in peace only in so far as popular resistance threatens the status quo, and as a result, the cessation of hostilities is less a goal in its own right than an outcome of the antagonists' willingness to reach a settlement which addresses the substantive causes of the violence (Commission for Africa, 2005).

Theoretically speaking, the absence of justice is frequently the major reason for the absence of peace in Africa. Thus, the theory of acute injustice, in all respects, gives rise to popular struggles which, in all cases, are met by systematic repression. The Somali people saw Siad Barre as such, and they rose against him. However, at the helm of conflicts when no one has taken up leadership, chaos reigns after the overthrow of a dictator as is the case in Somalia. And we know those foreign powers which supported and still support dictators for the sake of stability as was the case in the former Zaire; are simply postponing the inevitable and other manifestations of injustice when they are themselves forms of violence usually termed as structural violence (Galtung, 1969).

Ethically and analytically, the primary objective of external and local efforts to prevent and resolve African crises should be about the establishment of peace with justice (Galtung, 1969). Hence, a formulation that helps to explain why the termination of civil wars is so complicated and difficult for the antagonists; and where the disputant parties have a common interest in peace. They will have significant different perspectives on the constituent elements of justice in a post-settlement dispensation. In such a situation the major differences may derive from cultural norms, historical experience, or in the case of minorities who have a need for special protection against discrimination and exclusion depending on the balance of power, and where in some cases, the parties would have to compromise their position in order to accommodate those of their opponents.

It is very important to add that during transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, the imperative of peace and justice may be in conflict with each other. This tension is always acute when groups and leaders responsible for oppression have to accommodate the new order because of their popular support. They also have the capacity to thwart the transition as a related debate and this concerns the alternatives of prosecution and indemnity in respect to previous violations of human rights. Even though prosecution would be consistent with justice, the prospect of war trials may heighten the perpetrators' resistance to a settlement as has been seen in Uganda, Burundi, Liberia and Sudan.

Furthermore, international bodies which view justice and human rights in absolute terms tend to enter such debate with a hard-line position. Thus, in the complex and tenuous process of forging a democracy, the tensions between peace and justice are better understood as dilemmas which have no easy resolution and may entail trade-offs, without detracting from the importance of international human rights standards, yet it meets the requirements of a settlement regarded by the disputant parties and their constituencies as sufficiently just.

Strategic Framework for a Culture of Peace in Africa

Attempts have been made to provide a brief schematic overview from the above discussion that reveals some implications for the provision of a strategic framework for lasting peace in Africa. At this point, it would be ideal to highlight the distinction between conflict and crisis that underlines the significance of managing the former and addressing the causes of the latter. As conflict is ever-present and the causes of crises are numerous, complex and structural; both processes have to be undertaken in a sustained and systematic manner. There is no single, simple or short-term approach to resolving crises. Peace operations should, therefore, be viewed as a component of long-term endeavours rather than as an end in themselves.

It is also very important to note that preventive diplomacy, peacemaking and post-conflict peace-building are not inherently sequential activities. According to Boutros-Boutros Ghali (Agenda for Peace, 1992) preventive diplomacy is to avoid a crisis and post-conflict peace-building is to prevent a recurrence. Thus, peace-building encompasses entrenching respect for human rights and political pluralism; accommodation of diversity; building the capacity of state institutions; and economic growth and equity. Correspondingly, these measures are the most effective means of preventing crises; they are consequently as much pre-crisis priorities which juxtapose the concept of 'post-conflict peace-building' which is inapt since peace-building has everything to do with the on-going management of social and political conflict through good governance.

Conversely, an important issue in this discussion is that the international community should abandon the delusive notion that it is responsible for resolving crises and managing conflict in Africa, and what must be identified and recognised is that the functions of crises resolution can be properly performed only by local actors involved in the crises. Hence, peace-making and peace-building are not sustainable unless their form and content are shaped by these actors, and thus, the international community's contribution should be reoriented from the delivery of products to the facilitation of the processes. What is being advocated here is that the context of peace-making should entail supporting local negotiations and problem-solving rather than prescribing outcomes based on Western experiences. In the case of peace-building, efforts should be directed towards strengthening the capacity of government and civil society through the transfer of skills and knowledge. Literally and metaphorically, teaching people to build bridges is more useful than building bridges for them; and more useful still if the education draws on their expertise and experiences, and thus, not reliant on foreign technology.

Secondly, the greatest need for capacity-building is in the area of national and local governance. In the post-crisis reconstruction, sectors of the international community are preoccupied with democratic governance; a condition which they believe is met through free and fair elections, and thus less emphasis is placed on efficient and effective governance. Yet without viable systems the principles of democracy, such efforts cannot become operational. For instance, it is hard to imagine how President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe could hold free and fair elections by giving the opposition a fair share in campaigning through the government media and not rig the process during the election at the polls, as expected by the international community.

Furthermore, the adherence to the rule of law presupposes the existence of a competent and fair judiciary, police service and criminal justice system. And the requirement that police personnel respect human rights is unrealistic if they have not been trained in methods other than use of force. Hence, stable civil military relations depend not only on the values of the armed forces but also on the functional expertise of departments of defence and parliamentary defence committees (in each of these areas, capacity can be built only through long-term programmes).

And again, one of the most significant contributions the international community could make would be to attend to the ways in which foreign powers and institutions deliberately or inadvertently provoke and exacerbate conflict in Africa. These include excessive and injudicious arms sales; political and economic support for authoritarian regimes, the debt crises and the structural adjustment programmes as well as international trade relations. And with respect to development aids and humanitarian relief, their desire to do well should be secondary to the imperative of not causing harm. Hence, the first effort of the international community should address the causes of African crises. The second is to prioritise long-term capacity-building, especially in the area of governance. This must be grounded in a sound analysis of national and regional dynamics, be based on real respect for local parties and communities and seeks to support and empower them. In short, against the above background, we can now consider the strategy of peace education, mediation, the utility of military operations, and the contributions of the UN and African nations in the peace-making and peace-building process in Africa.

Culture of Peace Education

When we talk about the theory of the culture of peace, the first most important ingredient that comes to mind is education. Specifically, education is the only means through which people can be brought together to deliberate on issues that affect their general well being. Education forms the base of every development – political, industrial, economic and social. Education buttresses successful governance of nations. Education eliminates ignorance and dictatorship.

In short, education opens up whole new vistas of understanding enabling people to learn to tolerate others, what they believe in, and what they would want to achieve collectively. It is both theoretically and practically and it is impossible to talk about a culture of peace if people lack the basic understanding of that very culture and the role it can play in bringing about peace. In brief, education liberates. And the basic significant aim of any form of education, be it formal or informal, is it to transform the educated into responsible, progressive, dynamic and reasonable individual who would be able to play a role in the advancement of humankind; through the transfer of societal, traditional and cultural norms and values.

Education, therefore, serves as the only single weapon that can be used to change and liberate society and direct its activities in a positive direction. If people have received relevant, applicable and responsible education, it is expected, therefore, that they will exhibit an advanced level of change in attitudes, values, knowledge and skills; and generally, they will display advance behavioural attitudes compatible to the level of education received. Furthermore, due to the level of education that people have received they are expected to think and reason better, know and argue better so they are able to contribute positively to bringing about meaningful changes in society that will benefit the immediate and distant communities which should reflect their understanding of events, issues, people, places and things. Thus, their level of interaction, tolerance, judgement and above all cooperation and sacrifice should be at a stage pertinent to their level of education, therefore establishing the main ingredients for peace, an ingredient very important to survival, advancement and development in a time perspective (Binn, 1993).

I contend that whoever receives peace education should be able to use the acquired knowledge, skills and the expertise to live better, contribute better to human advancement, interact better with other cultural groups (thereby eliminating xenophobia), tolerate still better and help to bring about the ever-awaiting positive societal changes thereby leading humankind closer to the allegorical Biblical heaven. When such ideal is achieved through peace education, when cultures are fused and the globalised world has been realised, then the peace we so badly need could be ushered in throughout the world.

It is very surprising to observe that many of the so-called civilised world leaders who are supposed to have received peace education and are supposed to know better and do better to uplift human expectations to new heights, use the same education to suppress, subjugate and undermine the progress of others, thereby eluding humankind the peace we badly need. President Bush and Prime Minister Blair are two of such leaders; they have used their position and education to place the whole world into crises unparalleled in the history of humankind.

Peace Education: A Multiplicity of Approaches

Geography is a subject that must be looked at seriously if global peace is to be attained, thus geographical literacy can help buttress peace initiatives. Nature knows why the locations of areas on earth are what they are. Probably, it is nature's way of refinement of humankind which leads to excellence and excellence leads to perfection, and what is very important in this analogy is that perfection can find solace in geographical education because it helps to orientate human acts of ignorance to acts of informed mind (Fairhurst, 1993). Informed minds always think about peace and how to bring it about, and make it available to the rest of humanity. Thus, geographical education paves the way for people to study the relationships among people and culture including the environments they manifest (Harper, 1992). Furthermore, geography, with its integrative emphasis provides the logical vehicle for bringing together diverse natural and social worlds (Simmons, 1990). And last, geographic education helps individuals and groups to recognise differences from diverse perspectives leading to the understanding the concept of diversity in unity, which in turn, helps individuals and groups recognise each other as part of a whole, despite their cultural differences.

After the end of World War I, the noble minds of the world came together to form what came to be known as the League of Nations whose sole mandate was to see to it that another world war did not materialise. In doing that all peace-loving nations of the world were invited to become members of the League of Nations. Unfortunately, the provisions in the documentations of the organisation did not put effective and efficient mechanisms in place that would help in the achievement of the aims and objectives of the organisation. For this short-sightedness, the Second World War surfaced, and countless millions of innocent people suffered the blunt of the holocaust, including dedicated combatants who were roped into the war by their colonial masters.

However, the conversion of the League of Nations to the United Nations Organisation (now known as the United Nations or UN) identified the shortcoming of the League of Nations, but up till today, they can't seem to stamp out the tide of conflicts in many parts of the world, and one wonders about the exact reasons for the failure of UN, in our modern era, to bring about world peace. For example, in the provision of the UN Charter, the "sovereignty" clause needs revalidation and reframing, because while states should be accorded their sovereign rights, there are times when non-delay in action is required to save millions of lives, i.e., the Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burundi-Rwanda and the Darfur region in Sudan crises required intervention, but the UN was delayed by the sovereignty clause (UN, 1992). Therefore member states of the UN should be required to surrender part of such sovereignty in times of need to save lives; such surrender will thus enable the UN to intervene in good time when conflicts are imminent so as to be able to save lives, indeed, this idea needs considering if world peace could be forged in the 21st century.

Next in our effort to advance peace education, we must also remember that in the course of state conflicts the parties may come to believe that the cost of perpetuating hostilities is too high and that their interests would be better served through a political settlement, and thus the initiation of negotiations may nevertheless, be inhibited by intense animosity and fear of a disadvantageous outcome (Badat, 1997; Avis, 1996). In these circumstances, a skilled mediator can help to create a climate of confidence, facilitate talks and guide the parties through setbacks in the negotiating process.

However, many mediators make serious mistakes by believing that their authority and mandate derive from their personal stature or the body which appointed them, rather than from the disputant parties. Mediators need to promote or impose a particular solution rather than assist the parties reach a collectively acceptable settlement. Most seriously, they disregard the cardinal principle that mediators should be non-partisan; if they display an overt bias; they are likely to lose the trust of one or more of the disputants and become a party to the conflict. Such has been the case of Zimbabwe where President Mbeki played silent diplomacy at the expense of several Zimbabweans lives, but nevertheless, this perspective does not negate the necessity for advocacy and enforcement action in certain circumstances. In the case of Zimbabwe, the international community should oppose authoritarian rule and support the cause of oppressed communities. Yet in other situations, the use or threat of diplomatic and economic sanctions may constitute effective pressure on minority regimes and push hard-line groups to engage in negotiations and abide by their agreements. Hence, in many cases economic sanctions achieve the opposite effect as in Zimbabwe wherein advocacy and enforcement may complement mediation, however they should not be pursued by the mediator, because by definition, a mediator is something like an umpire, and certainly not a player.

And when conflict escalates to the point of imminent violence on a large scale, the international community is sometimes, though not always, moved to consider the option of military intervention. The cases in Darfur and Somalia are examples. The objectives might include containing hostilities, establishing safe havens, protecting refugees and ensuring the delivery of emergency aid. In order to expedite the deployment of a multi-national force at the speed at which crises break, a United Nations standby arrangement system should be launched together with the African Crisis Response Initiative. And as indicated already, part of the sovereignty of the nation (you may question what percentage which is not part of the debate here) should be surrounded to the UN to be able to act decisively and promptly.

Henceforth, in all cases, the deployment of the military should occur after the consent of all the parties involved in the conflict. If this is not the case, the possibility of the ineffective action by the military will be excessive and a waste of resources (the use of excessive force would always lead to loss of civilian lives). It must be indicated that military interventions cannot address the causes of conflicts and therefore cannot be a substitute for a negotiated settlement between the antagonists.

The revelation is that specific peace-keeping has been more successful than quasi-peace enforcement, because it takes place with the consent of the disputant parties; subsequent to a cessation of hostilities and as a result, not reliant on force to fulfil the mission.

Conclusion

This paper has provided the epistemological analysis of the bases for conflicts in Africa and how these conflicts can be resolved. Secondly, it has discussed the necessity of looking into conflicts and crises from different perspectives, especially xenophobia and terrorism; and provided a framework for conflict resolution through the provision of protracted peace education, geographical and historical education, the change of mindset of African leaders, surrender of sovereignty by states to the UN, mediation and military intervention. Hence, in a full disclosure posture, conflict and crises in Africa can and should be managed by Africans themselves, because they know the causes and for that reason they should be able to abate them through their own efforts, and not through external efforts; except when the external efforts can be useful with the consent of the parties involved in the conflict, in order to bring about peace. This is the way Africa needs to go to resolve its conflicts.

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