

African Solutions to African Conflicts: Rethinking Eurocentric Conflict Management Strategies in West Africa

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Abstract

Various initiatives have been undertaken to manage conflicts in Africa at the subregional, continental, and multilateral levels. While sub-regional institutions like ECOWAS have commendably taken up initiatives to ensure peace in countries such as Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, the effectiveness of such efforts has been hampered by lack of internal cohesion among member countries. Another key gap is the lack of efficient conflict mediation mechanisms and structures spearheaded by credible representatives to mitigate internal conflict in member states. This paper highlights the need to rethink the Eurocentric conflict management strategies often adopted to manage African conflicts. It makes a case for more creative, contextual, and innovative approaches to conflict resolution in West Africa. Drawing on extant literature, the paper argues that the complex and multifaceted nature of many of the internal armed conflicts in the subregion necessitates hybrid conflict management strategies that combine African traditional approaches with Eurocentric conflict management strategies in the bid to entrench enduring peace, security, and development in West Africa and Africa in general. The paper concludes that concerted efforts geared towards reviving, adapting, and strengthening relevant indigenous conflict management strategies to complement the western methods are required to achieve such goals.

Keywords: *Armed conflicts, Conflict Management Strategies, Indigenous conflict resolution models, Peace, West Africa sub-region*

Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction, as it is inherent in the very structure of human society (Zartman, 1997: 197). The nature of a conflict largely depends on the approach to managing it. A creative and constructive management of conflict can lead to positive outcome and realisation of the conflicting parties' goals. Conversely, a destructive approach to handling conflict would inevitably result in a negative outcome. Most often, the approach to handling conflict has largely been destructive rather than constructive. In Africa, the protracted and destructive nature of many conflicts raises crucial issues about the driving forces behind these conflicts and the measures devised to address them.

In recent decades, Africa has arguably been the site of the highest number of armed conflicts in the world. In the West African subregion in particular, internal conflicts have been rife in Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, Chad, Togo, and Cote d'Ivoire, among others. Interestingly, Marc et al. (2017) noted that a thorough analysis of the precolonial history of West Africa showed that the subregion was less affected by conflict and violence compared with other regions. However, in the postcolonial period, West Africa has witnessed numerous episodes of bloody conflicts, most notably in countries in the Lake Chad Basin. There has also been instability in the Sahel, raising concerns about the increasing rise of violence in the subregion. These emerging security threats have severe ramifications for peace and development in West Africa. This paper therefore highlights the need to 'rethink' the Eurocentric conflict management strategies adopted to manage African conflicts and to make a case for more creative and innovative approaches to conflict resolution in West Africa. Drawing on relevant extant literature, the paper argues that the hybrid and multidimensional nature of contemporary armed conflict necessitates a hybrid and innovative conflict management strategy that combines African traditional approaches with Eurocentric conflict management strategies.

The Global Peace Index 2017 identified countries in Africa among the primary drivers of the decline in global peace, as well as being responsible for an increase in destructive conflicts that lead to battle deaths and deaths from terrorism, as well as the growing number of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the world. In the recently released 2019 Global Peace Index, African countries have

also been at the forefront of endemic conflicts that have caused widespread destruction, such as the intractable armed conflict in Sudan, the world's worst genocide in Rwanda, the humanitarian tragedy in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the civil war in Burundi, ethnic strife in Kenya, internal conflict in northern Uganda, and terror attacks by Somalia's Islamic extremists.

In West Africa, the violent and protracted civil wars and armed conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, and Nigeria, among others, have seriously undermined subregional efforts to ensure peace, long-term stability, human security and sustainable development. In Nigeria, violent conflict in the oil-rich Niger Delta region remains intractable and the insecurity is compounded by Boko Haram's terrorist activities in the northern part of the country. Boko Haram has spread its campaign of terror to neighbouring West African countries including Cameroon, Niger and Chad. West Africa has, thus, become a hotbed of terrorists that constitute a dire threat to sub-regional security.

These violent conflicts retard development, given that huge financial resources are expended to support massive arms importation, thus leaving very little of the available national financial resources for development projects (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1991; Comolli, 2015; Thurston, 2016). Of interest is the report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2015), which stated that Nigeria's annual military spending to counter the Boko Haram insurgency between 2011 and 2015 increased from \$2 billion to almost \$6 billion, which is considered one of the three largest defence budgets in Africa.

Foreign aid from the international community, which would have made huge impacts on economic growth and development in Africa if invested, is being diverted into very expensive peacekeeping operations, humanitarian interventions, and postconflict peace-building programmes. This situation underscores the urgent need to search for more creative, cost-effective and hybrid conflict management strategies that have the potential to lead to durable peace and enhance human security and development on the conflict-ridden African continent. Peace is indeed an indispensable prerequisite for development.

The conflict management approaches adopted to tackle the destructive conflicts witnessed in the nooks and crannies of the African continent have relied largely on Western conflict management

strategies, which have so far been inadequate and ineffective. The efforts of international organisations, particularly the United Nations, have achieved minimal success in mitigating African conflicts. At the multilateral level, the UN has since the end of the Cold War intervened in numerous conflicts in African states, including Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, Liberia, Burundi, Sierra Leone, and Sudan. However, the UN has also been criticised for not being committed enough, preferring to let armed constituents “slug it out” first before making an effort to intervene. Another criticism has to do with the UN failure most often to back up its facilitated agreements with effective sanctions as a deterrence strategy against further aggression by the parties in conflict. Rebel groups and national governments still find it easy to breach these treaties without fear of punishment (Osaghae, 2005). Likewise, regional organisations like the African Union have been handicapped in tackling African conflicts. On the continent, the African Union has several mechanisms in place to facilitate peaceful settlement of disputes between states but disputes within states are not addressed because of the “nonintervention” clause that hinders direct intervention by the AU (Osaghae, 2005).

Besides the efforts of international and regional institutions, subregional organisations mostly set up to foster economic ties within subregions have initiated peace support operations to tackle conflicts within their jurisdiction. Subregional organisations in Africa, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Inter-Governmental Authority Development (IGAD), have taken various initiatives to mediate in conflicts within their spheres.

In West Africa, ECOWAS, through its Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), has intervened to restore peace in countries such as Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, etc. ECOWAS leaders have also assisted in containing the crisis in Cote d’Ivoire. While these ECOWAS initiatives deserve commendation, their effectiveness has been hampered by lack of internal cohesion among ECOWAS members. Another critical challenge relates to the absence of essential conflict mediation mechanisms and structures based on African indigenous approaches and spearheaded by credible representatives that would

strive to intervene in internal conflict before they escalate into destructive conflicts.

Nwolise (2005) has argued that the present Eurocentric conflict management methods, which do not fit into the cultural and traditional practices of African societies, are part of the ways in which the colonialists seek to maintain a perpetually divided and conflict-ridden Africa, which is readily available for external manipulation, destabilization, and exploitation. Evidently, this postulation cannot be downplayed considering the protracted and endemic nature of conflicts in Africa, especially in West Africa. Scholars have not paid sufficient attention to the contributions of traditional methods emanating from local cultural traditions despite the increasing evidence of the significance of traditional conflict management models in addressing some of the internal conflicts in Africa (DeCarlo & Ali, 2010).

Until recently, little attention was paid to the potential in traditional methods of conflict management. MacGinty (2010) noted that the growing attention by states, international organisations, and NGOs to the significance of traditional and indigenous approaches to peacemaking is attributed to the increasing awareness of the complexity of internal conflicts in Africa that necessitate the application of multifaceted conflict management approaches.

The exclusive utilisation of western contemporary conflict management strategies, which have been ineffective in tackling African conflicts, has been perceived by many commentators as an extension of foreign intervention of the (re)colonisation kind (Osaghae, 2005; Nwolise, 2005; DeCarlo & Ali, 2010). Consequently, there has been a sustained call to provide African solutions for African problems. The advocacy for traditional conflict management strategies (Spear & Keller, 1996) implies the realisation that the incorporation of traditional systems will lead to more creative and context-based conflict management strategies that work.

In addition to the introductory section, the next section provides insights into the historicism of violent conflict in Africa. This is followed by a section on the nature of conflicts in contemporary Africa. The subsequent section discusses the conflict situation in the West African subregion. Thereafter, the paper highlights the need to rethink contemporary conflict management strategies in West Africa. The relevance of traditional African conflict management strategies in

addressing contemporary conflict is explored, before the concluding section.

A History of Violent Conflict in Africa

The historical context of violence is key to explaining conflicts in Africa today. Two phases of imported violence through foreign intervention have been identified. The first was the Slave Trade and the second, the violent character of the colonial state. In the 16th and 19th centuries, about 12 million Africans were sold into transatlantic slavery and transported in conditions of great cruelty (Curtin, 1969) across the Sahara, through the Red Sea, from the Indian Ocean ports and across the Atlantic (Stannard, 1993). It was estimated that approximately 1.2-2.4 million died while being transported to the Western world (Manning, 1992). Although the estimates may be debatable, they certainly depict the enormity of the slave trade in Africa. Admittedly, indigenous slave trading had been a feature of the mode of production in precolonial African kingdoms and territories. However, it was less dehumanising and destructive compared to the transatlantic slave trade in which an estimated 12 million people were forcibly taken from Africa between 1450 and 1900 (Curtin, 1969; Lovejoy, 1981).

One major consequence of the transatlantic slave trade was the destruction of societal bond, solidarity and moral values. In addition to its dehumanising aspects, the slave trade exacerbated intergroup conflicts and violence through the destruction of kinship ties and solidarity. Slavery and conquests by Arabic and other Islamic states led to the outbreak of destructive conflict in African territories (Lovejoy, 1983; Ekeh, 1990).

After abolition of the slave trade, slavery reincarnated in Africa in the 1870s and 1940s as colonialism. Indeed, what is known as Africa today is a creation of colonialism, which started in Berlin in 1885 when Britain, Germany, France, Portugal, Italy and other European countries, with the exception of Switzerland, met to define their “spheres of influence” in Africa (Prescott, 1965). The history of violence in Africa has been traced to processes of state formation, the fall of African empires and kingdoms, as well as complex wars of conquest and resistance among the various African empires labelled as “tribal wars” (Bathily, 1994). Osaghae (2000) noted that colonial conquest inflicted violence on African societies through the use of

weapons of mass destruction. Some scholars argue that contemporary violence in the form of guerrilla wars, rebellion, political assassinations, civil war, insurgency and so on are the negative outcome of colonialism (LeVine, 1965; Mazrui, 1967; 1968; Bozeman, 1976; Sundiata, 1988; Osaghae, 2000).

The violent character of the colonial state manifested in two major ways. First, the colonial regime's need to maintain law and order led to an elaboration of institutions such as the police, army and prisons. Second, the military character of colonial administration as evident in the military background of many administrators led to an almost total absence of moral considerations in the deployment of the full coercive might of the colonial state against "natives" (Ekeh, 1985; Young, 1985; 1994). By implication, the newly independent states inherited the colonial sociopolitical structures. Although replacement of the colonial ruling class by favoured African rulers might have seemed like a change of guard, the colonial structure and attributes of the state were left intact. This, perhaps, largely accounts for the military character of most states, including states not under military rule, as well as the dictatorial disposition of most rulers.

A significant aspect of the legacy of colonialism in Africa is the displacement of indigenous cultural practices and conflict management models. Zartman (2017) noted that colonialism gradually eroded the indigenous models of conflict management while introducing competing legal and conflict management systems, western religions, notably Christianity and Islam, which directly competed with traditional practices and beliefs and indirectly challenged the structure of the community.

The Nature of Conflict in Contemporary Africa

Scholars have argued that the configuration of various African kingdoms and territories into nation-states laid the foundation for the conflicts (Osaghae, 2005; Yakubu, 2005) that persist on the continent. Yakubu (2005) noted that after many African nations' struggle for independence, they were also confronted with struggles among the various ethnic groups for claims to power and economic resources. Within the newly independent nation-states, some ethnic groups claimed domination over others they regarded as minority groups, leading to various ethnic conflicts (Nnoli, 1998; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

The struggles against domination by the minority ethnic groups resulted in secessionist attempts, coups and counter-coups and, in extreme cases, civil wars as in the cases of Nigeria, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Ethnic conflict, according to Osaghae (1995), mostly manifested as communal conflict, especially intergroup conflicts ranging from violent disputes over land and conflicts among political parties (electoral violence) to full-scale civil wars in which one of the conflicting groups attempts to use its control of state power to suppress the other, as witnessed in Nigeria, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, and Liberia.

Many African countries experienced secessionist movements, e.g., Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Sudan, and Uganda. In Nigeria, the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria attempted to secede by declaring a Republic of Biafra but this was abortive (Attoh & Soyombo, 2011). In Congo, Katanga Province failed in its secessionist attempt. In South Africa, separatist agitation and opposition to the African National Congress in KwaZulu-Natal, controlled by the Inkatha Freedom Party, led to a state of perpetual war in the province in the 1990s in which over 5,000 people were estimated to have died (Osaghae, 2005). However, over time, there has been a significant decline in secessionist and separatist agitations in Africa in comparison to the period after independence in the 1960s. The only recent case is Sudan, where a referendum paved the way for the independence of South Sudan.

In the postcolonial period, in the quest to perpetuate their strategic economic and political interests, foreign powers ensured the emergence of unpopular and authoritarian regimes that ensured the sustenance of these 'super powers'' economic interests rather than encouraging African rulers to yield to the yearnings of their people for development. In many African countries the state has been captured by ethnic and factional elites who control political power and monopolise economic resources exclusively to benefit their own ethnic groups at the detriment of others. As Watts (2017) opined, the state has become a major actor in ethnic conflicts, given that the marginalisation and exclusion of other ethnic groups from economic and political resources often lead to violent counteraction by the dominated groups. The political elite usually rely on their patronage networks, ethnic and sectional constituencies and foreign support to sustain their autocratic

regimes, as well as on the maximum use of force to suppress opponents.

Asides the ethnic conflicts, many African states have witnessed regional conflicts in the form of boundary disputes between countries, although only in few exceptions had such conflict degenerated into open war between the countries concerned. An exception was the recent dispute between Nigeria and Cameroun over the Bakassi Peninsula, a case that was resolved in favour of Cameroon by the International Court of Justice. It is commendable that, in spite of the artificiality of the boundaries inherited from the colonialists, there have been very few boundary disputes among African countries.

West Africa Subregional Conflict

Many subregions in Africa have been embroiled in conflict, which in some cases has been protracted. West Africa, in particular, has experienced such prolonged conflicts. In recent times, a new wave of violent conflict in the subregion has been linked to Boko Haram, which emerged in northern Nigeria as a radical extremist group with an anti-statist agenda but eventually blossomed into a full-blown terrorist group capable of undermining subregional and regional security. Boko Haram's incessant deadly attacks in Nigeria have now spilled over to neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. But for the proactive multinational peacekeeping operation known as Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), the entire subregion would perhaps have been engrossed in deadly conflict. The Force was created under the aegis of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) as a collective security initiative of member countries to tackle the problems of transnational terrorism, insurgency and transborder crime (Malfess, 2017).

In the post-independence era, West Africa has been the theatre of conflict, most notably the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Osaghae (2005) attributed the emergence of conflict to the contagion effect, that is, the diffusion of violent conflicts from one country to another. He cited the case of the Liberian civil war where the involvement of the Mandingo of Guinea could be traceable to ethnic affinity and sentiment for their kith and kin in Liberia.

The support provided by governments of neighboring countries to rebel factions may be ascribed to the quest for territorial and religious hegemonies of some ambitious and powerful states (Yakubu, 2005). A typical example is Libya's Gaddafi's active

involvement in the Chadian and Liberian civil wars. In the case of Chad, Gaddafi almost succeeded in getting the country to merge with Libya as compensation for support provided to the powerful rebel faction. In the Liberia civil war, Yakubu (2005) wrote, Gaddafi's initial support for Charles Taylor's rebel group was part of the scheme to impose regimes loyal to the late Libyan ruler in West Africa. Gaddafi's death in 2011 had far-reaching consequences. One of the consequences, as Malfess (2017) has observed, was that foreign fighters returning from Libya with looted weapons engaged in arms trading as an alternative source of income, thus increasing the availability of the sophisticated weapons that have boosted Boko Haram's capacity for carnage.

Another significant issue relates to external influences from former colonial masters who continue to exert enormous influence on, and meddle in, the affairs of their former colonies for their own economic gain. The West African subregion provides an interesting case given the peculiar colonial structures that reflect conquests by Britain, France, and Portugal. After independence, West African countries thus inherited the Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone groupings and affiliations from their former colonial masters, who exploited the strong colonial ties with their former colonies to fuel sub-regional division in pursuit of their foreign policy agendas (Osaghae, 2005).

The Anglophone-Francophone division was very pronounced in West Africa and it has continued to worsen subregional conflict. It has been argued that the division undermined ECOMOG in Liberia (Osaghae, 2005). The contention was that the ECOMOG intervention would have been more effective if Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso's heads of state had not actively supported Charles Taylor's rebel group, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), thereby frustrating the peace moves favoured by other leaders in the subregion.

In retrospect, one major dimension of the challenge is the lack of local conflict management structures at the subregional and continental levels. The reality is that African states rely excessively on foreign institutions and western powers for intervention in their internal conflicts. One of the major constraints that impede intervention by a regional organisation like the African Union is limited resources, since the AU largely depends on support from the international community. Even when resources are available, the

intervention measures have been mainly Eurocentric. Regional and subregional organisations have so far failed to utilise indigenous mechanisms in tackling the incessant conflicts in African states, and this accounts for the overreliance on foreign intervention. Given that most of the conflicts in contemporary Africa are internal in nature, and are traceable to the negative legacy of colonialism, it is necessary to adopt contextualised conflict management measures that suit the African reality.

Consequently, internal solutions must be pursued for localised conflict. This becomes more critical given that over five decades after many of these states attained independence, they have been rife with violent conflicts that threaten national stability, peace and security. Significantly, western conflict management measures designed to tackle the conflicts have proved ineffectual. This underscores the critical challenge of designing an effective strategy for managing the incessant conflicts in West Africa that can frontally tackle the root causes of the conflict in the bid to achieve genuine reconciliation while checking the adverse implications of the conflicts, which have the potential of sparking future conflicts in a vicious cycle of violence.

Rethinking Contemporary Conflict Management Strategies in West Africa

For most West African countries experiencing protracted conflicts and civil wars, evidence shows lack of effective conflict management strategies to tackle these conflicts. Interestingly, these states rely excessively on a coercive security apparatus and peacekeeping operations mostly coordinated by the United Nations. The reality is that coercive approaches to conflict management involving the use of militarised force have not been effective in tackling internal conflict in these African states. Rebellion by nonstate actors challenging state authority and legitimacy has continued mostly unabated in many states. This underscores the contention by some scholars that the conflicting parties in asymmetrical internal conflicts often become “casualties of peace”, even in some interstate conflicts, because their ultimate goal is to win at all cost (Rupesinghe, 1998; Misfurd, 1994).

The conflicting parties tend to perceive the conflict as a zero-sum game where one party loses and the other wins. In such destructive conflicts, it is not enough to win the war; the parties to the conflict perceive their opponent as an enemy that must be neutralised

or eliminated. Most of these conflicts tend to arise from structural imbalances relating to inequity in the distribution of economic and political resources to citizens. Le Billion (2001) notes that the failure and degeneration of political systems is reinforced in weak institutional structures that allow political actors to display their predatory behaviour, which increases the propensity for the outbreak of armed conflict and eventual collapse of the state. This postulation aligns with Watts' (2017) assertion in the Nigerian case that the state lacks the capacity for fully representational politics that can effectively and democratically deliver public goods, including justice, security, and livelihoods. Such conditions ultimately produce the 'ungovernability' that contributes to insecurity, injustice and violence. The situation is further complicated by the near absence of impartial institutional structures for conflict management that is equitable, fair and just.

The excessive use of force coupled with the 'winner take all' syndrome as the major conflict management strategy may likely compel the aggrieved parties to explore all avenues and resources to prolong conflict, thereby deepening the grievance that sparked the conflict in the first and causing it to degenerate into further violence. Rather than devote much-needed attention to the comprehensive analysis of these conflicts so as to ascertain the interests and needs of the conflicting parties and design creative ways of addressing underlying grievances, governments most often opt for repressive approaches. The destructive nature of conflicts between governments and insurgent groups arising from unwillingness to shift grounds frequently leads to disastrous consequences on human life and socioeconomic activities, even as it ravages state institutions.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), through ECOMOG, took up the responsibility of military intervention in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau. Also, ECOWAS leaders played a significant role in containing the crisis in Cote d'Ivoire. However, the efforts of ECOMOG, though commendable, have not led to lasting peace in the affected countries. The contention is that the adoption of Eurocentric conflict management methods, which do not fit into the indigenous cultural practices of African societies, is one of the ways the colonial masters seek to maintain a perpetually divided and conflict-ridden Africa that

is perpetually susceptible to external manipulation, destabilisation and exploitation (Nwolise, 2005).

No doubt, the limited resources of African states is a major constraint to their capacity to set up a comprehensive conflict mediation structure. This could be perceived as a major issue in the case of military operations such as the African High Command initiative within the African Union. The AU Peace and Security architecture focused essentially on military operations. However, the adoption of indigenous conflict management strategies within the subregional organisation requires fewer resources. It entails the setting up of mediation structures that utilise African traditional cultural practices. To achieve the goal of local conflict resolution, organisations like ECOWAS, SADC, and even the AU will need to revive and adopt relevant indigenous conflict resolution models to complement Western methods of conflict management.

Even though ECOWAS has established an innovative conflict management model that entails the utilisation of traditional models of conflict resolution, there has not been much commitment to the initiative. One may contend that the core challenge with the ECOWAS initiative is the virtual absence of key personalities with impeccable moral values that can foster the culture of peace within the subregion. As such, it is imperative that ECOWAS must search for and find credible personalities that would be committed to addressing internal conflict in the subregion by adopting the relevant aspects of traditional African models of conflict monitoring, prevention, management and resolution.

As Osaghae (2005) rightly argues, unless West African leaders set aside personal animosities and colonial divisions and forge new visions and orientations of unity based on understanding, cooperation and the will to act together through joint problem-solving strategies, the quest for nation-building may remain elusive. The resuscitation of the multinational peacekeeping operation by the Lake Chad Basin Commission to deal with the Boko Haram insurgency underscores the importance of joint problem-solving approaches. At the same time, such approaches require the inclusion of traditional models rather than excessive reliance on the use of force to tackle conflicts that have their roots in structural imbalances linked to loss of the moral values that hallmarked traditional African societies.

It is high time that Africa sought creative ways of conflict prevention, management and resolution in order to find enduring solutions to protracted conflicts, as doing so will eliminate the stigma of a conflict-endemic continent. This call has become particularly crucial, especially as the contemporary methods of conflict management, processes and strategies that were introduced into postcolonial African nation-states have continued to fail to effectively and efficiently avert, manage and ensure durable peace in Africa. Across Africa, especially West Africa, considerable evidence of the potential of traditional conflict management strategies in arresting contemporary African conflicts have attested to its viability (Zartman, 2017).

This raises the need to re-examine, revive and adopt the relevant aspects of traditional West African models and strategies of peace-making and conflict management that had ensured the cultivation, nurturing and sustenance of peace and prevention of conflict in the past and still has the potential to aid contemporary conflict management.

The Viability of Traditional African Conflict Management Strategies

Zartman (2017) posited that the fact that Africa is a collection of diverse societies is not an impediment to the application of indigenous models of conflict management, since these societies generally have similar indigenous conflict management values and practices. African indigenous conflict management practices, he argued, are not dead, and in those places where they have been displaced, a case should be made for their revival. This argument he premised on the continued relevance of African indigenous methods in contemporary societies where modern versions of traditional communities have emerged and shown the capacity for resilience that serves the social and political needs of many rural communities. The exclusive reliance on modern laws focusing on punishment, establishing guilt and retributive justice has tended to destabilise rather than restore social relations (Adesina, 2015), making it difficult to reconstruct the social fabric affected by the conflict. This ultimately damages social relations in many rural communities and leads to distrust, suspicion and outbreak of 'new' conflict issues that become protracted and escalate from localised

conflicts to spread to other theatres, with potential to spill over to neighbouring countries.

The realisation of the potential of traditional conflict resolution methods perhaps informs increasing calls for their application in addressing African conflicts. In the West African subregion, studies have shown the utilisation of the indigenous methods of conflict management in Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Cameroun, among others. The consultation with elders and the roles they played in appealing to the youth was highlighted in the implementation of the late Nigerian President Umaru Yar'Adua's amnesty programme for the Niger Delta youth in 2009 (Odoziobobo & Didiugwu, 2015). The indigenous reconciliatory rituals have also been relevant to the rehabilitation of victims of torture in some communities in the Niger Delta (Babatunde, 2018). In many other states in Nigeria, for example among the Tiv in North Central Nigeria and the South-South region of Cross Rivers, the relative success of the indigenous practices has been well documented (Aluaigba 2011; Kah 2011; Zartman, 2017). In western Cameroun, traditional approaches have proved relevant in conflict resolution (Ndi, 2011). Tuareg solidarity has been the driving force behind the Ansar Dine onslaught in Mali and Niger, while the Turuq (Sufi sects) have played remarkable roles in the impermeability of Senegal to Al-Qaeda in the Arab Maghreb (AQIM) and other attempts at radical encroachment (Zartman, 2017).

Across Africa, numerous examples of the efficacy of traditional practices in conflict resolution include the idiawit, or independent elders, in Sudan that served as intertribal mediators (Chauzal, 2015). Other relevant cases include the Wajir in Kenya and the Abyie in Sudan (Boone & Kriger, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2015; Zartman, 2017). In some communities in Somalia, indigenous practices have made them remarkably impervious to Al-Shabaab (Zartman, 2017). Marc et al. (2017) identified several factors that are central to restoring peace in conflict-ridden societies. They highlighted the importance of strong institutions that can mediate conflict, in addition to other factors such as greater inclusiveness in the political system, strong civic institutions, reform of the security and justice institutions and concerted government efforts to address the socio-economic factor of fragility pertaining to subregional inequalities.

In recognition of the significant potential of indigenous conflict resolution methods, the 1998 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Summit established a blueprint for confidence-enhancing security measures that would incorporate African traditional methods of conflict resolution using the council of elders and statesmen (Osaghae, 2005). To further entrench traditional practices, in 2008, ECOWAS inaugurated the Conflict Prevention Framework, which incorporates traditional methods and practices. Within ECOWAS, a key challenge to the application of traditional methods of conflict management is the availability of credible personalities that will serve as mediators. The potential of the indigenous mechanisms may be undermined if there are no credible leaders to act as mediators or what is referred to as 'elders' in traditional African societies. That credible African elders can play a key role in conflict resolution is not in doubt. Examples abound of the important roles these elders play in societal cohesion and stability. In Uganda, during the reign of Idi Amin, the relative success recorded in the early part of his rule was achieved through proper consultation with the elders. In Ghana, the political system entailed systematic integration and consultation with traditional rulers. The relative peace experienced in Ghana has been largely attributed to this initiative. Another significant example is Swaziland, one of the most peaceful societies in Africa, a feat credited to Likoqo, the group of elders. These elders carried out conciliation and reconciliation in a manner that ensured win-win outcomes, that is, no victor, no vanquished.

The principles and values guiding conflict resolution include impartiality, fairness, accommodation, reciprocity, moderation, compromise and genuine reconciliation (Olaoba, 2000, 2008). These ideals are generally ingrained in what has been described as mediation, consensus and conciliation in conflict resolution practices. The essence of dispute settlement and conflict resolution in traditional African societies was to remove the root causes of the conflict; reconcile the conflicting parties genuinely, a process that required getting at the truth; preserve and ensure enduring peace in the society; restore peace and social harmony; set the right milieu for societal production and development; promote good governance, law and order; ensure security of lives and property as well as collective well-being and happiness (Nwolise, 2005). It is in this sense that one can

understand the views of Galtung (1996) when he defines peace as “the condition in space for non-violent development”.

On his part, Zartman (2017) stressed that the search for truth in the process of conflict resolution is more important than relations. In the reconciliatory process, punishment is punitive rather than retributive, given that the interveners (chiefs and their councils) placed infraction of societal norms in a holistic context of community welfare and not just within the limits of the infraction (Zartman, 2017). In doing so, symbolic compensations are used as a medium to mend the torn social fabric and restore societal equilibrium. He noted that such symbolic compensations usually depend on the gravity of the offence, which may be in the form of livestock, services and so on.

The culture of violence in West Africa, and Africa in general, can be transformed through intensive social mobilisation to inculcate new values. Significantly, overreliance on western methods for interventions in localised conflicts that have so far seemed impervious to these western methods tends to worsen the outcome of the conflicts, with severe consequences that breed cycles of violence. Some have argued that the adoption of customary practices in localised conflict tends to create avenues for effective functioning of the indigenous systems while insulating government from local disputes that can rise to overthrow state systems if untended at the local level through local methods (Zartman, 2017). The blend of traditional conflict management methods with modern approaches can offer viable options in addressing local, communal, intra- and intergroup conflicts. While the viability of the indigenous systems in addressing large-scale international crises may not have been registered, Benjamin and Adebayo et al. (2015) posited that recognition of the efficacy of traditional methods in resolving localised conflict indicates its huge potential and contributions to conflict resolution in a modern system.

West Africa is not likely to overcome its precarious security challenges in the long run if the underlying or root causes of conflicts are not understood and effectively handled through appropriate conflict management mechanisms as well as the promotion of good governance and democracy. In the quest for peace and security in the subregion, the significance and relevance of traditional conflict resolution has already been established in the ECOWAS framework. The critical challenge for ECOWAS is how to devise strategies for applying indigenous methods within its conflict resolution framework

and among its member states in a credible manner that fosters cultural rejuvenation and serves as a worthy model for Africa.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the relevance of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution in the management of contemporary conflicts. It highlights the endemic conflict that has led to the categorisation of Africa as a hotbed of crises. The protracted nature of African conflicts has its roots in colonial demarcations of various African kingdoms without consideration for ethnic, cultural and religious heterogeneity. The outcome of the demarcation is division, violent conflict and wars. The paper also argued that most protracted social conflicts are actually products of economic disparities among social groups. Although they may be ideological, ethnic or even religious, at the most basic level, they reflect a competition of ethno-political formations for control over economic assets, resources or systems. West Africa in particular has witnessed some of the worst cases of conflict in countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Chad, Mali, and Nigeria, with attendant disastrous consequences for human, economic and political development. No doubt, incessant conflicts pose a major threat to the attainment of meaningful development in the subregion.

This paper further argued that conflict plays significant roles in explaining the current state of underdevelopment in West Africa. Although different approaches have been adopted to deal with these problems, the subregion remains ravaged by conflict and post-conflict problems today. In proffering answers to the question of attaining sustainable peace in West Africa, the paper submitted that such questions underscore the need to rethink contemporary conflict management strategies in West Africa.

The paper pointed out the various initiatives undertaken to manage conflicts at the subregional, continental and multilateral levels. While subregional institutions such as ECOWAS have commendably taken up initiatives to ensure peace in countries such as Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the effectiveness of such efforts has been limited by lack of internal cohesion among member countries. Another key gap is evident in the lack of efficient conflict mediation mechanisms and structures spearheaded by credible representatives to mitigate internal conflict in member states. This points to the need to consider and adopt relevant aspects of African traditional models of conflict monitoring,

prevention, management and resolution. Such would, however, require a reorientation of subregional bodies in order to help Africans deal with their own crises rather than wait for foreign powers and institutions. On the continent, AU peace initiatives have been criticised for their ineffectiveness in ensuring sustainable peace in Africa, particularly because of financial constraints and overdependence on international institutions, especially the UN.

While establishment of the AU Peace and Security Architecture for peace operation through the African standby force has been hampered by reliance on the international community for funding, it is interesting to note that the initiative of establishing a council of elders within ECOWAS and the AU - an initiative geared towards promoting African traditional approaches to conflict management - has been relatively successful. The challenges inherent in the effective application of the traditional mechanism need to be tackled to ensure its efficacy in curbing the manifestation of internal conflicts in member states to forestall the outbreak of violent conflict. This implies the deployment of some form of preventive deployment vide credible personalities to mediate in the conflict and facilitate effective dialogue among warring parties to achieve mutually satisfactory outcomes.

The application of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution in managing internal conflicts in states such as Niger, Senegal, Sudan, Mali, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda, among others, points to the viability and potential contribution of such an approach to peacemaking in Africa. The sum of all these, therefore, underscores the need to revive, modify and adapt those relevant aspects of the traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution to complement Western methods in the quest for more contextual, creative and effective conflict resolution systems in West Africa and Africa in general. African states, particularly West Africa, should rethink and reform their conflict management strategies in line with these suggestions, if they truly realise that peace is a sine qua non for development.

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