MYTHOLOGY AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AFRICA: THE POLITICAL AND LEGAL IMPERATIVES[*]

Olatunji A. OYESHILE[**]

ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that contemporary African nation-states are embroiled in conflicts of multi-various nature, which have made development a daunting task. It is equally not less true that contemporary approaches at conflict resolution – whether bilateral or multilateral – have also succeeded partially. Hence, there is the need to look at other approaches, particularly that stipulated by traditional cultures, such as mythology. Mythology as an approach to conflict management and resolution has been re-emphasized by Duro Adeleke, a senior colleague at the University of Ibadan, in his article, "Lessons from Yoruba Mythology", Journal of Asian And African Studies, 39(3), 2004:179-191.

The focus of our paper is that even though myths provide a veritable approach at resolving conflicts, this approach is still limited as it can only operate at a normative level because it carries little or no sanction for defaulters and offenders in any social system. Our recommendation is that the mythological approach needs to be fortified and complemented with an adequate political and legal framework to make the resolution of conflict long lasting. The resolution of conflict, which has at its goals human development and social order, can also be realized if our system of conflict resolution is predicated on humanitarian and democratic values such as justice and equality.

***Key Words:** Africa; Conflict; Legal; Management; Mythology; Political.*

---

[*]   *Ph. D, Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. E-mail: alabi.*

ÖZET

Afrika'da Çatışmaların Çözümü ve Mitoloji: Politik ve Hukuksal Gereklilikler

Çağdaş Afrika ulus-devletlerinin, gelişimlerini engelleyecek derecede güçleştiren farklı karakterlerde pek çok çatışmalarla yüz yüze oldukları kuşkusuz doğrudur. Söz konusu çatışmalara ilişkin önerilen yaklaşımların -iki taraflı ya da çok taraflı da olsa- kısmen başarılı oldukları da bir o kadar doğrudur. Bu nedenledir ki daha farklı yaklaşımlara, özellikle de, mitoloji gibi geleneksel kültürlerin işaret ettikleri yaklaşımlara bakma gereği ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bir kriz yönetimi ve çözüm önerisi olarak mitoloji, Ibadan Üniversitesi hocalarından olan Duro Adeleke tarafından, Journal of Asian and African Studies, 39 (3), 2004: 179-191'de yayımlanmış olan "Lessons from Yoruba Mitology" başlıklı çalışmasında tekrar gündeme getirilmektedir.

Çalışmamızın problematiği, her ne kadar mitler krizlerin aşılmasında gerçekçi bir yaklaşım sunsalar da, mitolojik yaklaşım, hangi toplumda olursa olsun, ne savunucuları ne de karşıtları açısından nesnel bir dayanağı olmamasından dolayı, ancak ve ancak normatif düzlemde işlerliği olmasından dolayı sınırlı kalmaktadır. Bizim önerimiz, mitolojik yaklaşımın, krizlerin aşılmasına yönelik getirdiği önerilerin daha ömürlü olması için siyasal ve hukuksal çerçevelere oturtularak tamamlanması ve güçlendirilmesidir. İnsanın ve sosyal düzenin gelişimi amacıyla söz konusu çatışmaların giderilmesi, soruna adalet ve eşitlik gibi hümaniter ve demokratik değerler açısından yaklaşmakla da gerçekleştirilebilir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Afrika, Çatışma, Hukuk, Yönetim, Mitoloji, Siyaset.

I. Introduction: Conflict and Man

Man is a social being, he lives in a society. He possesses an array of values by which he orders his life. These values he possesses are seen in different perspectives by the people he lives with, who also have their own values and desires. Man's attitudinal and behavioral rationality notwithstanding, his values at times obtrude with and obstruct the values of others, thereby leading to conflicts of various kinds. Some of the causes of these conflicts are greed, injustice, inordinate ambition, lack of consideration for others and selfishness.

Although conflict is inevitable in human organizations due to differences in values and attitudes towards life, that however does not mean that we should fold our arms and watch. In fact, this is not even possible because it can lead to destruction and state of underdevelopment of man and society. Paradoxically however, some philosophers such as Heraclitus and Marx believe that conflict is necessary for the continued growth and flourishing of society. The kind of conflict we are concerned with in this

110

paper is that which is inimical to human progress and development. *The Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* describes this kind of conflict thus: "violent collision; a struggle on contest; a battle; a mental struggle; to be in opposition; to clash; incompatible; or irreconcilable" (1983: 264).

Given our description of conflict above, conflict can occur at various levels namely (1) Conflict between one individual and the other. This is known as interpersonal conflict. It can be between two friends; between a husband and wife; between colleagues and so forth. (2) Conflict between the community and the individual. This occurs in a situation where individual's desires and goals are at variance with that of the society in which the individual finds himself. Some times too, the society's stance may not promote the goods of the citizens, for example when there is bad government. (3) Conflict can occur among groups in a country. For instance in a nation where there are incompatible ethnic nationalities as we have in Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan and many other African countries. (4) Conflict can occur between one country and the other as can be seen in international conflicts. The conflict between Iraq and Iran; between United States of America and Iraq; between Cameroun and Nigeria are instances of conflict situation among nations. (5) The last level of conflict is intrapersonal. Sometimes we say that a man is at conflict with himself. This could be due to psychological trauma regarding decisions taken or unfulfilled ambition. In Yoruba culture such a person is said to be in conflict with his *Ori* (The personality god).

Conflict management and resolution will then involve how we can ameliorate conflicts at the first four levels listed. The fifth level of conflict may not be open to public scrutiny. When it does, it is still largely within the individual psychology. Let us take a look at Adeleke's position on the use of mythology for conflict resolution.

II. Adeleke on Mythology and Conflict Management

In the introduction he notes that:

Conflict management and resolution strategies do not pay enough attention to traditional methods emanating from local cultural traditions" (Adeleke, 2004: 179).

Adeleke then proceeded to cite some conflict situations in Africa, such as that in sub-Saharan Africa which have remained impervious to Western based approaches because, according to Zattmann, and Osaghae, these approaches have ignored the wisdom of traditional African conflict management practices (Adeleke, 2004: 179). To underscore the need for traditional wisdom in conflict management, Adeleke turns to Yoruba mythology. Citing Avruch and Black, he says that Myths provide ways of

111

seeing, thinking and feeling about the world which in essence define normality for us in the ways things are and the way things ought to be (Adeleke, 2004: 179 & 180).

Five Yoruba myths are provided by Adeleke, which show how conflict management can be undertaking in contemporary African society. These myths are (1): How Ijapa (the tortoise) cunningly dispossessed Okere (the squirrel) from his farm; (2) The role of Ijapa (the tortoise) as a third party mediator in the conflict between Asin (the smelly-Rat) and Okere (the squirrel); (3) King Alaran and Eye kinkin (the Tiny Bird); (4) Orunmila and his son , Olowo and (5) The primordial war involving ori (one's personality god) and all of the earth spirits (Adeleke, 2004: 181-187).

Adeleke believes that the five myths help to demonstrate how contemporary conflict situations are informed or have their roots in local culture and tradition. For example, a major advantage of conflict resolution through myth in traditional Yoruba culture is that: "once the guilty party takes responsibility, the aggrieved party will then be prepared to participate in the conflict resolution process" (Adeleke, 2004: 187).

According to Adeleke, the five myths cited can help us to achieve a lot in the process of conflict management and resolution. For instance, it can lead us to recognize that the resolution of conflicts among the Yoruba, or between the Yoruba and other groups, can be informed by some cultural assumptions illuminated by the traditional tales (Adeleke, 2004: 187). He lists the achievements of his five tales thus:

> In all but one of the tales (tales two, three, four and five), the role of the third party mediation is explored, providing clear, nuanced examples of the negative and positive potential of this approach to conflict resolution. Other issues addressed include the negative implications of secrecy and self-centeredness (tale one); the selective marginalization of individuals or groups by leaders (tale two); and the disregard for time-honored traditions such as respect for elders (tale four). The tales also articulate two additional insights into ways that the conflict resolution process can better resonate among Yoruba disputants: recognizing the importance of spiritual tradition and utilizing verbal codes appropriate for specific situations (Adeleke, 2004: 187).

Adeleke then concluded by stressing the need for African societies to revisit their repertoire of myths, which they should align with relevant stories and lessons from such stories to resolve conflict in contemporary society. One cannot but acknowledge the insight provided by myths as explained by Adeleke. But as we shall show in the course of this paper, the use of myths has its limitations in the contemporary conflict management practices in contemporary Africa, due largely to the complexity of modern

112

society in which political, economic and social pressures have made moral approach, which is the underlying basis of myths, very insufficient, except coupled with other frameworks such as the political and legal framework. In order to underscore our thesis then, let us take a look at the nature of myth.

III. Mythology and Conflict Management

Mythology is as primitive as man himself since it has always been a companion of man from the beginning of existence to provide answers to the baffling questions of life. Mythology which is an embodiment of myths has been defined in various ways but without leaving out the supernatural source.

Mythology is primarily defined as a fantastic reflection of reality in primitive consciousness embodied in oral folklore characteristic of antiquity (Frolov, 1980: 281). Going by this view, it is claimed that myths are narratives that came into existence in early stages of history whose fantastic images of gods, legendary heroes, big events and so on try to generalize and explain different phenomena of nature and society. It has elements of religion and morality as well as aesthetic attitude to reality. Mythology can then be seen as the science that studies myths, their origin and the reflection of reality in them (Frolov, 1980: 281). In other words, mythology encompasses "a body of myths; the scientific study of myths and symbolical meaning (Chambers, 1983: 838).

The use of myths played significant role in the entrenchment of moral values in traditional societies. In the ancient Greek society, myth was also a peculiar form of historical knowledge as well as a source of mandatory rules and standards of behaviour which were to be strictly observed at present and in future (Nersesyants, 1986: 7). Apart from this, myths also gave legitimacy to the sovereign authority of the state in ancient societies mainly because of the fusion of political authorities with divine authority. However the myth on which state authority was based soon collapse, Nersesyants aptly describes this thus:

> In the period when the mythological views of the divine (cosmic, heavenly) origin of social institutions held undivided sway over men's minds, myth constituted the basis of a totalitarian ideology unopposed by any rival notions, conceptions or doctrines. The doubts that arise later as a result of long historical development and found their expression in the rationalization of myth testified to the beginning of its disintegration and collapse (Nersesyants, 1986: 7).

Let us note that the term myth is derived from the Greek *mythos* which means "word" or story (Madu, 1996: 232). Little wonder then that it is

used interchangeably with legends, fables, fairy tales and folk tales. Myths can then be seen to involve specific accounts concerning the gods or super human beings and extraordinary events or circumstances in time quite different from that of the ordinary human experience (Madu, 1996: 232-233). This tendency has made Idowu to see myth as:

> A vehicle conveying a certain fact or a certain basic truth about man's experiences in his encounter with the created order and with regard to man's relation to the supra-sensible world (Idowu, 1976: 84).

From the above, we can then see mythology as a form of philosophy since it depicts how a people view the world. According to Irele: "There is a strong relationship between myth and philosophy since myth provides a way of looking at the universe in any cultural space" (Irele, 1998: 102).

Levi – Strauss remains the scholar who has perhaps done so much to explicate the dialectical function of mythology. According to him: "it is the nature of myth to mediate contradictions" (Douglas, 1991: 156). In doing this however, myth has to portray the contradictions in the basic premises of culture, contemplating the unsatisfactory compromises that compose social life and then make explicit the experience of the contradictoriness of reality (Douglas, 1991: 156).

Given the general description of myth in its various modes and our understanding of the term, it is obvious that myth helps us to append and respond to various challenges of social reality and the place of man in nature especially at a particular time in human evolution when the human sciences and natural sciences were not sufficiently equipped to understand man in his natural and social settings. Our claim here is that mythology has its limitations in conflict management in human societies especially the African environment. Let us now attempt to examine some of the limitations of myth.

One of the major problems with mythology is that it cannot meet the challenges of human evolution in its various dimensions. Society is dynamic and so are its various social institutions in which we experience conflicts of various kinds. Subscribing to myths in absolute terms in conflict resolution would foist on us such an attitude that could constitute an obstacle to the achievement of a fruitful confrontation with our various challenges. And this occurs according to Oladipo when:

> We regard our traditional-world views as a timeless, self-validating ones whose constitutive elements require only elaboration and not critical examination (Oladipo, 2002:162).

The import of Oladipo's position is that there is a need for caution in carrying traditional world-views hook-line and sinker, such as myths, into

the organization and management of our present day predicament as these world-views on their own presuppose a static conception of reality that we could apply same methodological approach to all times. In fact the management of conflict in contemporary Africa requires "a realist view of the world" (Oladipo, 2002: 162) in which there is need to believe and adopt an appropriate attitude to the fact that there are mind-independent causal mechanisms. Which would then douse the non-realist belief that whatever happens in the human environment, conflict or otherwise, are caused by some spirits or supernatural beings, which as we know is the mainstay of mythology.

We can then see a need to have a change of attitude towards happening in society even in terms of conflict resolution and management when we realize that our social and political institutions are dynamic ones. According to Toulmin:

> Instead of seeing society as fixed order moulded on the solar system, with classes, genders, and occupations keeping to their proper orbits, we are learning to see those changing relations and institutions as so many more or less adaptive ways of meeting changing human problems. In this sense, too, our lives and thoughts are no longer confined within the fixed Newtonian world; and, in more respects than are as yet recognized, our cosmology today is a historically changing one. (Toulmin, 1988: 344).

Perhaps the importance of Toulmin's position to our pre-occupation is that the world today in its various manifestations is defined and determined by change which a static methodology of myths isolated from other variables, such as political and legal structures, cannot effectively cope with. Let us note that even now we cannot do away with mythology because of the limitations of the positivist approach to knowledge and social organization. Also human nature still has a satisfaction in myths as an avenue to explain the mystery of human existence.

One important element in conflict management is the imposition of sanctions on offenders. Sanctions either in form of punishment, imprisonment, fines, and even the deprivation of certain privileges must be seen to be effectively carried out. With myths this is not the case. Myths only provide moral sanctions in conflict resolution and moral sanctions in an increasingly complex world such as ours cannot be relied upon. This explains why in the urban areas the normative approach to conflict resolution is failing. And that also justifies and explains the roles of law enforcement agencies such as the police in our societies.

Karl Marx and other Marxists have also shown us the evil of the ruling class in the aspect of justifying the oppression of the people by coming up with ideologies that often distort the status quo in order for them

115

to continue to sustain their hold on the people. One of such methods that can be used is mythology. And that is why some have claimed that mythology can be used as the basis of ideology of oppression. Even in Africa, there are so many political arguments based on mythology to the effect that those who rule have been ordained by God to be rulers and therefore should be obeyed even if they are tyrants.

Of course, the use of myth as a means of distorting the status quo is also found in ancient philosophical writings such as Plato's *Republic*. In the *Republic*, Plato says that the citizens of the city state would be fed with a royal lie that God created three kinds of people viz those made of Gold, silver and those made of bronze, brass and iron. These three kinds of people correspond to the guardian, soldier/auxiliary and producers/peasant classes. The myth is told by Plato to allow the citizens accept the superiority and the right of the guardian class to rule over them. Our argument in this section therefore is that myths on their own do not necessarily translate to a just, equitable and conflict manageable society unless myths are laced with enough doses of political and legal ingredients. To underscore the importance of political and legal framework in conflict management and resolution, let us start by looking at the crisis-ridden nature of African states.

IV. Conflict Situation in African States and the Imperative of Political and Legal Framework

A cursory but critical look at our African society shows that the social order necessary for sustainable development is lacking due to various sources of conflicts manifesting at the political, economic, moral, religious and ethnic levels. The African continent is so crisis-laden that her showcase to the world is in terms of civil wars, poverty, disease, illiteracy, child labor, corruption, political ineptitude and economic disintegration and disorientation.

Today, it is therefore no longer news that the African continent parades the highest number of failed states in the world due to incessant and prolonged conflicts. Sudan, Cote D' Ivoire, Democratic republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Burundi, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Angola and even Nigeria are few examples of conflict endemic states. In many of these states, things continue to fall apart leaving the centre less cohesive. The causes of these conflicts are as diverse as the people – colonialism, ethnicity, corruption, bad leadership, bad followership and military incursion into politics. Added to this is the tendency to control the political space, which has led to many evils such as election rigging, fraud in public offices and inequitable distribution of national resources.

On leadership, for instance, Kalu focusing attention on Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa notes:

> The central problem in Nigeria has been the lack of public leadership nurtured by the core values of an indigenous elite across the national landscape – political, civil society, cultural, religious, educational and in many instances, family. The absence of public leadership is directly related to the absence of national dialogue on what Nigerian identity should be about and how different nationalities that were brought together by colonialism should live together productively (Kalu, 2005: 3).

The above position by Kalu and others shows that conflict resolution in contemporary period has gone beyond the normative aspect of the mythological method. This is because contemporary society in its increasingly complex form has to confront the problem of leadership, the problem of elite, civil society cultural, religious and educational structures. This tendency then calls for an astute political and legal structure to confront these issues. There is then the need to institutionalize democratic values on the political front. For instance, participation and sharing of power by ethnic groups in African countries, which is a major source of conflict, should not just end at the theoretical constitutional level, they must be seen to obtain in the actual operation of the government. This is significant, according to Kalu, because:

> While democracy as a mechanism of governance is not mutually exclusive with such ideologies as liberalism, authoritarianism and/or other ideological variants, most agitations in Nigeria are about participatory rights within the context of liberal constitutionalism that guarantees citizenship as the dominant identity, political and economic freedoms of action. And, as long as those rights are not constitutionally guaranteed and protected, the type of regime in power will not assuage the memories and sources of agitations (Kalu, 2005: 31-32).

We can now see that conflict resolution within the political framework requires a legal framework, through constitutional entrenchment of certain rights. As a matter of fact, the legal framework in the context of conflict resolution lies mainly in the rule of law.

It is through the rule of law that people's rights are protected and offenders are sanctioned with the full backing of government, civil society and the citizens. The foregoing, then, prompts up the kind of rights, citizens are entitled to. There are three principal types of rights that a person may be said to have namely civil rights, legal rights and human rights (Bodunrin, 1987: 187).

117

According to Bodunrin (1987: 187) civil rights are privileges and entitlements that accrue to an individual by virtue of being a citizen of a state. Legal rights on the other hand are context-dependent and are also guaranteed by constitutional provisions of the state. They affect both citizens and foreigners alike. While both civil rights and legal rights derive from constitutional provisions, human rights have a broader dimension. This stems from the fact that human rights are "rights which persons have simply by virtue of their membership of the human race" (Bodunrin, 1987: 187). This means provided that one is a human being one could not be denied of such rights whenever one lives.

Various governments, institutions and states have attempted to couch these rights in one form or the other. These include the United nations Organization's declaration of human Rights and The African Bill of Rights. For instance in 1981 an African charter on human and people's right was adopted and various states have constitutional provisions for rights of people. Specifically *Chapter IV sections 33-46 of the 1999 Nigerian Federal constitution* makes an adequate provision for fundamental human rights. We should note that the enhancement of these forms of rights (Civil, legal and human) also demands from various individuals certain duties which may be in the form of obligations such as payment of taxes, obeying the law, being loyal and respecting the rights of others.

It is pathetic to note that in spite of the usefulness of the political and legal frameworks in the resolution of conflict and the entrenchment of various rights and laws in the constitutions in many African states, conflicts (violent ones for that matter) are still part of Africa's daily reality. The reasons are not far-fetched. In many African states there are flagrant injustice pertaining to people's right especially in the authoritative allocation of national resources, lopsidedness in power sharing, unlawful incarceration, arrest and extra judicial killings. Among other reasons are miscarriages of justice especially in our law courts. In Nigeria for instance, there are allegations and counter-allegations of judicial bribery, which sometimes have led to dismissal or untimely retirement of judges.

In addition, policies are imposed on the citizens without the due input and impulse of the citizens. It is our contention that if we are to have a conflict manageable Africa in which there will be sustainable development, then constitutional provisions should not only seem to be made but should strictly be adhered to by governments who in one way or the other control and determine the life plan of their citizens.

We can now see from the foregoing that although mythology needs to be fortified by political and legal structures, the political and legal structures on their own do not automatically translate into the amicable

resolution of conflict in society unless we, whether as government or citizens, respect the provisions and values which these structures are predicated upon.

Let us conclude by noting that beyond mythology, legal and political structures, there is a need for the enhancement of certain universal principles such as justice, fairness, equality and respect for the dignity of the human person in conflict resolution and management. Interestingly too, myths in traditional Yoruba universe aim at enhancing these human and universal values.

REFERENCES

Adeleke, Duro A. (2004), "Lessons from Yoruba mythology", *Journal of Asian And African Studies*, 39(3): 179-191.

Bodunrin, P.O. (July, 1987), "Human Rights, Democracy and Africa", *African Philosophical Inquiry*, Vol. I, No.2: 187 - 194.

Douglas, Mary (1991), *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*, London: Routledge.

Frolov, I. (ed.), (1980), *Dictionary of Philosophy*, Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Idowu, E.B. (1976), *African Traditional Religion*, London: SCM Press.

Irele, Dipo (1998), "African Philosophy and Mythology", *Journal of Philosophy and Development*, Vol.4, Nos. 1 & 2: 102-110.

Kalu, K.A. (March, 2005), "Echoes of Instability: Implications for State, Society and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria", *The Constitution: A Journal of Constitutional Development*, Vol.5, No.1: 1-36.

Kirkpatrick, E.M. (ed.), (1983), *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary*, Edinburgh: W & K Chambers Ltd.

Madu, R.O. (1996), *African Symbols, Proverbs And Myths: the Hermeneutics of Destiny*, New York: Peterlang.

Nersesyants, V.S. (1986), *Political Thought of Ancient Greece*, Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Oladipo, Olusegun (2002), "Rethinking Yoruba World-view and Ideals of Life" in O. Oladipo (ed.), *The Third Way in African Phi*losophy: *Essays in honour of Kwasi Wiredu*, Ibadan: Hope Publications: 155-167.

Toulmin, Stephen (Summer, 1988), "The Recovery of Practical Philosophy", *The American Scholar*: 337-352.