

# An Indigenous Yoruba Socio-political Model of Conflict Resolution

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In indigenous and contemporary societies, different elements of social and political institutions have come up with various inner mechanisms that are unique to their societies that can adjudicate in conflict situations. In traditional, indigenous Yoruba societies, agba (elders) were usually relied upon as agents and institutions of conflict resolution in view of certain qualities possessed by this category of people. This paper focuses attention on the role of agba (elders) in conflict resolution at various levels of Yoruba life. We acknowledge that agba (elders) have performed these roles in traditional, indigenous Yoruba societies. The opinion expressed in this paper is that agba, as theoretical and practical conflict resolution mechanism, can be philosophically developed and used as an alternative model to the current means of resolving conflicts through wars and terrorism and other forms of violence by aggrieved individuals and groups in national and international arenas.

*Keywords:* agba (elders), indigenous Yoruba society, conflict resolution, model

## 1. Introduction

Human beings live in society, which is an aggregate of many individuals, relating in numerous ways with the object of advancing personal and group interests. The process of interaction ensures that interests are negotiated and are negotiable in order to ensure minimum friction in the process of determining who gets what, how, when, and why. This is why contractarian theorists have advanced their positions as explanatory models for accounting for the necessity of civil society. For existence in society, with limitations on resources at any historical point in time, means that conflicts and disputes are inevitable phenomena of life.

One of the conceptions of politics is that it is a mechanism devised by humans for the resolution, within civil society, of conflicts and issues that are in dispute. The development of politics, as a system and as a practice, is evidence of the fact that humans in society do not always fold their arms in situations of conflict; they will want to resolve them in one way or the other before it degenerates into war. The reason for conflict prevention and resolution is both prudential and altruistic; prudential, for individual human being cannot attain their life goals in the midst of conflict and rancor, and altruistic because other members of the society also have their lives live in relative peace and harmony. Consequently, every society has attempted to put in place certain measures that can prevent conflicts before they occur, or settle them in case they have already occurred.

In this paper I want to suggest a model of conflict resolution based on the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria,

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notion of agba (elder) and the different role which human individuals with the attribute of agba play in indigenous Yoruba socio-political order, especially the resolution of conflicts. The argument here is that resolution of conflicts can take place in our contemporary world if there are certain institutional agents that enjoy the confidence of members of a socio-political society and which could be appealed to for the resolution and management of conflicts whenever they occur.

## 2. Philosophy and Conflict

Frederic Schick (1988) broadly distinguishes between two kinds of conflicts; some are conflicts we have with other people while some others are conflicts we have with ourselves. He refers to these kinds of conflicts as social and psychological, respectively. According to Schick, a person has a conflict with himself/herself where he/she wants two things (or propositions) but knows he/she cannot have both of them (and make true). Such a person wants *a* and also *b* and believes that if *a* then not *b*, and thus if *b* then not *a*. In a social conflict, this is parceled out among several people. In this case, some people want *a* and others want *b*, and each of them thinks that they cannot have both of them. In the same vein, R. M. Hare (1999, 55) observes that conflicts are the result of differences, often of the most radical sort, between groups of people. The differences may be related to material interests, religion, ethnic, ideology, and any other types of things which can make people fight one another.

In relation to the role of philosophy in resolving conflicts, these two authors seem to have divergent opinions. According to Schick, the business of philosophy is not to solve social problems, but only to report and to understand them. On the other hand, Hare believed that philosophy can contribute to the resolution of conflicts by the use of reason, preferably where and when parties in conflict are willing to appeal to reason in order to have an amicable settlement. In this paper I shall pitch our tent with Hare's position and argue that in order for philosophy to be relevant as an academic discipline, it should have interests in substantive social and political issues, especially issues relating to conflict management and conflict resolution. Thus, Hare observed that the real task of philosophy is to facilitate the (communication) discussion of, and reasoning about, important problems. Some of these problems, though not all, are moral problems. We might add here that conflicts can also be caused by religious, ethnic, or racial differences. Whatever the cause or causes of conflicts, it behooves philosophy to ask about the kind of solution that is appropriate to them. Thus, one can ask, for example, what can be a just solution to the Niger Delta Crisis in Nigeria, the Palestinian problem in the Middle East, and the global terrorism problem?

It is important to note here that Hare's position has been supported by Joseph O. Sodipo's (2004, 44) observation that UNESCO has based its worldwide operations and activities on the belief that since wars and social and political conflicts spring from the minds of men (women), the best means to prevent wars and conflicts is to combat intolerance of all sorts, ignorance and prejudice, through activities that would improve intra-national and inter-national cooperation and understanding. One way by which this can be achieved, according to Sodipo, is by the use of human reason.

Social and political philosophers within the Western and non-western traditions have put up positions that are supposed to guide societies to avoid, resolve, and manage conflicts. The basic ingredient of such positions is that avoidance, resolution, and management of conflicts depend on the willingness of the parties to understand the fact that they are related to each other in a special way, such that if such relationship is violently tampered with, then no one of them can fulfill his/her life goals. For example, Hobbes (1968) believed that the state of

nature does not promote human welfare and, therefore, members of society have to make a compact to surrender the powers they have in the state of nature to a Leviathan. Rawls (1999) believes that justice is the first virtue of social institutions. Julius K. Nyerere (1976) believes in the concept of brotherhood. The Yoruba regard one another as *omo iya* (literarily, persons of the same mother [Bamikole 2008]).

We should note that there is hardly any conflict that is not resolvable if and only if parties in conflict are willing to resolve them by showing understanding to one another. Behind the unwillingness to resolve conflicts is the idea of power play which may be the product of arrogance and inordinate ambition, which is also a product of passion (as distinct from reason). When one party to a conflict feels he/she can subordinate the other, then he/she will not want to resolve the conflict through certain civil means like dialogue, arbitration, or compromise; rather, he/she will likely choose the path of physical confrontation.

Samuel Adebayo (2008) identifies some elements in conflict resolution. According to him, attempts to resolve conflicts often emanate when (1) followers of leaders press for resolution consequent upon the negative effects of conflicts on them; (2) to resolve conflicts requires sometimes a third party; (3) third party effectiveness in being able to resolve conflicts is a function of perceived credibility of the third party; and (4) conflicts can be partially or totally resolved.

Adebayo's observation presupposes that conflicts can be resolved, but we still have to ask the question of how this can be done. In other words, we want to know the modalities through which conflicts can be resolved. It is not the intention of this paper to catalogue the different ways of conflict resolution. Rather, the paper presents and argues for a model of conflict resolution based on certain social and human relations predicated upon truth, love, equality, sincerity, veracity, friendship, and mutual understanding. These qualities are possessed by elders which make them enjoy the confidence of their fellow human beings in a political society.

### **3. An Indigenous Yoruba Mechanism of Conflict Resolution**

#### *3.1. The Notion of Agba in Yoruba Culture*

The word "agba" may refer to certain noticeable attributes in a person no matter the age and it may also refer to an elderly person in Yoruba community. As an attribute, agba suggests the quality of being reflective in the sense that data presented are not just accepted hook and sinker but put into the court of reason, looking at the pros and cons and asking questions about the motive of the person who presents the data and the possible consequences which the data might have for the person or other persons or the society at large. Intelligence is also an attribute of agba. Here intelligence is not only the ability to read or write; rather it is the ability to follow data correctly, identifying interconnections between data and having the ability to arrive at a correct conclusion from many given premises and propositions and the ability to apply the conclusion to solve life problems. Intelligence also includes the ability to remember and recall certain situations in the past which bear relationship with certain current issues under discussion. There are also emotional qualities like tolerance, courage and moral qualities like truthfulness and selflessness, kindness and being longsuffering. Within indigenous and even contemporary Yoruba society, a person who possesses these attributes is referred to as agba. Consequently, agba is a leader in the Yoruba society.

However, we have to note here that the agba of our model is not the elders of our present world that have been influenced by the prevalent consumerist societies. In this regard, Olufunke Adebayo (2007) has observed that in modern and contemporary times, agba can be acquired through education and wealth. Those who acquired

agba through education were the stooges of colonial rulers who follow their masters. While those who acquired agba through wealth are connected to politics, a young man who is both educated and connected can also be called agba. Adeboye also observed a kind of degeneration in a national leader who, because of certain behavior, can make him/her lose the respect and reduce him/her to the level of a “youth” (*omode/odo*). In contrast, the agba of our model are elders, who are endowed with traditional values that mark them out as leaders in their various families, communities, nations, regions, and the world.

The attributes of agba in our model can be likened to Obafemi Awolowo’s (1966, 158) notion of the regime of mental magnitude, which is supposed to characterize good leadership. According to Awolowo, good leadership involves self-conquest; and self-conquest is attainable only by cultivating, as a first step, the regime of mental magnitude. For Awolowo, the regime of mental magnitude is cultivated when we are sexually continent, abstemious in food, abstain totally from alcoholic beverage and tobacco, and completely vanquish the emotions of greed and fear. The reason why these attributes are important for leadership is also connected with Plato’s belief in many of his Dialogues that emotions have the tendency of blurring the vision of the mind to reflect the Forms, which is the domain of wisdom and all things that are excellent.

One further observation which Awolowo made, which is also applicable to our model, is the Aristotelian aphorism that “Let him (her) that would move the world, first move himself (herself).” As applicable to our model, we can as well say that “Let the *agba* who wants to resolve conflicts first of all put his/her own house in order.” House here may stand for family, community, nation, or region. In other words, if an agba wants to mediate in conflict at the community level, he/she should put his/her family in order. This is in consonance with the Yoruba wise saying that *ile lati nko eso rode* (charity begins at home). An elder who wants to resolve conflicts at the national level should also put his/her community in order; likewise an elder who wants to resolve conflicts at the regional level must put his/her own nation in order; and lastly an elder who wants to reconcile differences at the world level should have put his/her own region in order.

*Òkú òrun* (ancestors) can also be regarded as agba. This is based on the Yoruba (African) belief that the old and dead members of the family are still alive, so to say, and that is an ongoing communication between the living and the dead. The ancestors come in the event where living agba are unable to resolve the conflict due to the dissatisfaction of one or both of the persons that are in conflict. Here it is believed that ancestors can be appealed to because they are on the other side of the world and as such they are wiser, having undergone the experiences of both the world and the thereafter.

The process of conflict resolution requires the composition of elders from *baálé* (the head of the family) to *baálẹ* (the head of the village). Each party to the conflict is usually asked to state his/her own side of the story without interjection from the other party. It is believed that the persons will speak truthfully and in some cases they could be asked to swear on certain deities. The parties to the conflict are able to present themselves before the elders because of their confidence in the elders for their steadfastness, shrewdness, integrity, and the length, breadth, and depth of their wisdom. The actual process of conflict resolution starts from the introduction of the parties concerned and the elders’ sitting in council. Each of the elders would begin to review the case, starting from the “junior elders” and they will do this in turn until the most “senior elder” rounds off the case. During the review of the case each elder makes use of proverbs, wise-sayings, and other artistic expressions that are contextually relevant to the case. By the time the most senior elder, who is the *baálẹ* of the village, completes his submission, each party to the conflict would have known where the pendulum is swinging. In most cases, it

is not the objective of the elders to say who is guilty or not, but to strike a balance in the case so that the parties are reconciled.

Chinua Achebe (2002) illustrated this position with a dispute resolution mechanism among the Ibo of Eastern Nigeria, a people of which the Yoruba have much in common culturally. In *Things Fall Apart*, the families of Odukwè and Uzowulu were reconciled by the nine elders of the clan represented by *egwugwu* (ancestors). The leading *egwugwu* made it clear to the parties in dispute that: “We have heard the both sides of the case, our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute” (Achebe 2002, 66). Thus, just like the Yoruba, in the unlikely event that one or both parties to the conflict is/are not satisfied with the decision of the elders, the elders will reconstitute the council; but this time the ancestors (*oku orun*) would preside and their decision is always regarded as final by both parties to a conflict.

### 3.2. Methodological/Conceptual Arguments in Support of the Model

The focus of this paper is not to present descriptive accounts of types of conflicts, but to identify and classify different avenues through which they can be resolved. Thus interpersonal, intergroup, and intra-group conflicts can be resolved on the level of kinship relationship, which in most cases rely on primordial affinities; intra-national conflicts are resolved by means of a conscious effort by the parties concerned by establishing certain institutional norms that can form the basis of resolving their differences; while international conflicts can be resolved on the basis of people seeing one another as human beings, irrespective of race, status, and creed.

Avenues for conflict resolution make sense on the assumption that human beings might be different in many ways, but that they are related in certain ways, which differentiate them from other non-human beings. One term used to describe such relation is that of “brotherhood”/sisterhood (Erumveba 1985). According to him, brotherhood (sisterhood) relation can mean three things: brotherhood (sisterhood) as family kinship, brotherhood (sisterhood) of social cooperation, and brotherhood (sisterhood) of man (woman) as man (woman).

### 3.3. Brotherhood (Sisterhood) Relationship as the Basis of Conflict Resolution

At all levels of human relationship, there are certain norms that constitute the basis of people living together. Some of these norms are natural, while members of the society consciously put some of them in place. What is important in the relationship between persons is that they must see the basis of their living together as a project in which all of them are stakeholders. Thus, within indigenous Yoruba society, relationship among persons is natural, blood relation. This is why people refer to each other as *omo-iyá* (literally persons born of the same mother). Therefore, a conflict between one person and another or that among communities is regarded as a conflict between persons of the same maternal origin and, whatever the nature of the conflict, there is a common basis of entry into resolving it. *Omo iya* may also refer to relationship between people who are living far away from one another but which historically and biologically are linked together. On the other hand, different persons that are not related by birth but have been living together for a very long time—*aladugbo*—(neighbors) are also related together in a special way which inspires a feeling of oneness that transcends personal interests.

The notion of human relationship that is in vogue here is an allusion to Akinsola A. Akiwowo’s (1983) notions of *àjobí* and *ajogbe*. For Akiwowo, human society (*asuwada eniyan*) is made up of two primordial forms, *ajobi* and *ajogbe*. He translated these two forms of relationship as *consanguinity* and *co-residentship* respectively. *Ajobi* relates to the facts of lineal and collateral relationships based upon blood and birth; while *ajogbe* relates to the fact of sharing the same or contiguous shelter whether or not the sharers are related by blood or birth. For Akiwowo, the derivative concept *alajobi* may be defined as that which sustains all kinds of

lineal and collateral relationships—*okun omo iya* (the thread that binds persons of the same maternal origin together); while the derivative concept *alajogbe* will be that which sustains persons or groups who are living together, under one roof or in contiguous shelters in a community.

The essence of these kinds of relationship is that in situations of conflicts, it means that the cord that binds together *omo-iya/alajobi* on the one hand and *aladugbo/alajogbe* on the other is about to break. The elders *agba* who are in the position to identify and recognize the basis and importance of human relationship would not allow this to happen. The Yoruba says that *agba kii wa loja kori omo tuntun wo* (literarily, an *agba* does not look unconcerned when certain things are going wrong around him or her).

However, we must appreciate the fact that with the contact with Western culture and the attendant erosion of African culture in which the indigenous idea of human relationship and what it stands for have been replaced with unbridled individualism, one cannot say that the naturalness of primordial affinity is still in place without conscious efforts at making the people feel this sense of relationship. This is where the idea of talking, communicating, and reasoning becomes important. As we previously mentioned, there is a need for certain class of persons (*agba*) who are responsible for motivating persons to be aware of their primordial origin and who should not allow any conflict to jeopardize this in any way. Identifying this primordial origin requires certain skills and it is believed that *agba* possess these skills. Such skills involve the ability of the elders to refer to historical events that bear similarity with the current conflictual situation, the ability to connect these events by means of proverbs and wise sayings, and the ability to convince the parties in conflict to see the point in the linkage between the past and the present, and how they can move toward the future in a mutual manner so that they can achieve their life goals individually and collectively.

The notion of *aladugbo/alajogbe* can be extended to apply to a modern state in which there are diverse people and groups that live together under the same geographical space. This is the idea of a nation state. Given the fact that the people are not bound together by blood and birth and yet they find it necessary to live together, what they have to do is to consciously invent a process that defines the basis of their association. For instance, in Western political thought, there are different theories of political association, the most prominent of which is the social contract theory. Contractarianism, as such theories are called, represents a hypothetical situation in which a group of people made a pact with one another given the fact that they could not fulfill their human aspirations in what has been regarded as the “state of nature.” The importance of this form of relationship is that members who are in the pact with one another are inspired by their mutual feeling of need for survival to put the public interests over and above individual interests.

The modern theory of social contract can take different forms. In Nigeria, for instance, some people may call it constitutional conference, while others may call it sovereign national conference. The difference between the two is that the latter involves autonomous individuals and groups coming together of their own accord without being affiliated to competitive political parties or ethnic groups that can impose their wills on individuals. Consequently, the people are their own legislators, to make use of a Kant’s (1949) language. Thus when it comes to the time of decision-making or resolution of conflicts, they will be under an obligation to obey the laws that they themselves have legislated. It will then not be difficult for *agba* to draw the attention of these people to such relationship in order to settle differences when the need arises.

#### **4. Community of World Inhabitants**

It is possible to make a case for a kind of relationship that binds all human and non-human beings together,

in virtue of the fact that they belong to the same world community. This is both natural and prudential relationship that requires dialogue on a higher level than the one that takes place in local and national politics. Here, states are expected to come together to dialogue in order to reach agreement about putting in place an institution that can sustain their interests and the interests of other non-human beings as members of a world community.

The inspiration for members of the world community to embrace the type of institution predicated upon this kind of relationship is that there are certain things that bind inhabitants—both human and non-human—of the world together and that it is the duty of the world as a whole to protect and sustain them. Thus the world community has obligation to protect the ecosystem, to take precaution against gas emission, to prevent the depletion of the ozone layer, to prevent the world population from being consumed by the scorch of HIV/AIDS and Bird Flu, and to prevent a situation where the whole world can be wiped off by chemical and biological weapons. We must be committed to the kind of relationship that will ensure the continuing existence of the world for there is little evidence that we can survive in another planet. Consequently, if there is a conflict that will affect our survival as world citizens, we must do all things possible to prevent and resolve it.

### **5. The Indigenous Yoruba Model of Conflict Resolution as an Alternative in Contemporary Politics**

Our model can be applied to all areas of human relationship, in local, national, and international political arenas. What is important is that the level at which a particular agba would be operating will depend on his/her level of exposure. Exposure here refers to parameters like quality of experience, quality of reflective thinking on the basis of skill acquisition from formal and informal institutions, expertise in different levels of human endeavor like economics, science and technology, the arts, law, agriculture, communication and information technology, etc.. Given the fact that there are different types and levels of conflicts, the elder with appropriate qualities relevant to the areas of conflicts would be appointed to mediate in such areas.

One great lesson that may be learnt from our model is that it can adjudicate in conflict situations between and among persons across legal boundaries. A situation where our model is applied will likely guarantee complete reconciliation between and among persons in conflict. The legal route of resolving conflicts through the courts can resolve conflicts but may not be able to reconcile conflicting parties to a life of harmony in the same society. There is a common saying among the Yoruba that “*a kii ti kootu de se ore*” (we do not return from the court to become friends). In other words, court only delivers judgment in a formal way, but it never reconciles.

On the international level, our model is replicated in different truths and reconciliation institutions. One of these was the Truth and Reconciliation program on BBC World chaired by Desmond Tutu, the retired Bishop of Johannesburg, South Africa, where persons were reconciled even on criminal cases such as murders. In the recent past, Tambo Mbeki of South Africa brokered peace between Robert Mugabe and his erstwhile political rival, Morgan Tsvangirai; also Kofi Annan, the immediate past Secretary General of the UN, reconciled President Kibaki of Kenya with the opposition party leader, Odinga Odinga. He was the UN Envoy to Syria in the ongoing political crisis between President Assad of Syria and the opposition groups in the country. Given the antecedents of the persons mentioned here, they could be regarded as agba in accordance with our model. This is because they have shown exemplary leadership in their various domains of human relationship. Thus Desmond Tutu was a retired Bishop with many years of service both at the spiritual, social, and political levels in South Africa. Tambo Mbeki, an erstwhile president of South Africa, has a distinguished career as a freedom

fighter, who along with Nelson Mandela brought Apartheid to its knees. Kofi Annan was the former Secretary General of the United Nations whose tenure witnessed sweeping reforms in the Organization, especially at the level of human rights advocating. He openly apologized for his son's misdemeanor, a rare thing that could be done by leaders of such position because of arrogance. This is leadership by example.

It might be the case that the political leaders are not fully reconciled, especially in Zimbabwe and Kenya, but this might not be as a result of any fault in the model, rather it is due to the type of leaders and political systems that is operated in Africa and in the Middle East in which people see power not as call to service but as an avenue for self, group, and religious aggrandizement.

## 6. Conclusion

Our model may be criticized as being utopian and there are no persons in our world today that can qualify to be agba according to our criteria, and the type of humanistic relationship that is envisaged in the model is no longer feasible. As the hypothetical criticism goes, what we have at present is a situation in which our agba are practitioners of politics which enables them to run after contracts from political leaders. There are also cases where community leaders are conspirators to heinous crimes in their communities. Furthermore, the society in which we live is one in which human relationship can be regarded as market relationship (Macpherson 1962). In this regard, Moses Oke observed that "it is doubtful if there are any existing experts (or elders) from whose lessons about the traditional institutions would be taken" (2006, 338).

However, we shall only take this critique as an empirical critique. In as much as empirical evidence has some bearings on philosophical theories, we shall observe that it cannot totally falsify them. For philosophical theories are admixtures of *a priori* and empirical elements; even if the empirical elements are falsified, the *a priori* element cannot, for as a matter of fact *a priori* means independent of experience. Apart from this view, it might be suggested that the agba in our model and the type of human relationship embedded in it can still be found in villages, hamlets, and families. The argument then is that as a model these characters and institutions can still be appealed to for the resolution of conflicts without recourse to a show of force. There is a need to visit African towns and villages to see that there are still agba and that people are still related to one another as *omo iya/alajobi* and *aladugbo/alajogbe*.

Another point that has to be emphasized is that our position is only a model. As a model, we do not expect it to capture all realities; what a model is expected to do is to offer an explanation of how a system works from a particular point of view and to recommend it for adoption by other points of view in virtue of its relative comprehensiveness. It is in this sense that our model is recommended to all levels of social and political organizations in our world for the prevention and resolution of conflicts.

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