

Conflict and African Spirituality: *Agĩkũyũ* Perspective

Human blood is heavy, and hinders the one who has shed it from fleeing

A Sotho Proverb

Rev. Dr. Sammy Githuku

*The 2007 elections in Kenya were followed by nationwide conflict. The violence shocked the nation and caused immense damage to families, communities, and to the nation. Rev. Dr. Sammy Githuku reflected that the violence reflected the behaviour of the colonialists. This paper was written in 2009 and he reflected on how the *Agĩkũyũ* (more commonly known in English as the Kikuyu peoples) handled their conflicts in a way that limited the damage to themselves and their neighbours.*

What is Conflict?

To be in conflict is to be in a state of disagreement or opposition. As a noun, the word conflict means fighting, struggle or quarrel. Conflicts can take many forms. They can be domestic, racial, religious, political, ethnic, economic and social. Participants in a conflict vary depending on the nature of the conflict. Conflicts can be an open dispute or clash between two opposing individuals, communities, groups or nations.

In the traditional Africa culture, conflict is part of spirituality. In African culture, the relationship between God and human being is not divided between sacred and secular. The divine will is sought in every human activity including conflict. Raids for example were carried out under strict ritual rules. Participants are ritually cleansed and *Ngai* (God) is consulted before any raid is undertaken. Since the era of colonialism, the *Agĩkũyũ* like many other African communities have adopted foreign cruel

methods of conflict management. This is clearly seen in modern conflicts in Africa today.



Rev. Dr. Sammy Githuku
Senior Lecturer, Biblical Studies
St Paul's University
Limuru
Kenya

History and nature of conflicts

Conflict is as old as human beings. In the Old Testament, the word sin is mentioned for the first time in the context of a conflict of the first two brothers Cain and Abel (Gen 4: 7). Conflict between individuals, clans, and nations form a substantial part of Old Testament history. The nature of

conflict was sometimes very inhuman. King David carried out massacres against those who engaged him in a conflict (1Sam 30:17). Amasias killed 10,000 prisoners of war (2Chro 25:12).

During the British colonial conflict in Kenya: for example, the *Agĩkũyũ* witnessed unprecedented inhumanity. Massacres were carried out, women and innocent children were not spared (Caroline, 2005: 72, 7, 88, 219). Africans who employed as home guards carried out these atrocities with their employers. These inhuman treatment on people engaged in a conflict was also exercised in different parts of the world. In Canada for example some of the First Nations in were decimated by invading European powers in the 19th century (Richardson, 1992: 267).

Africa is not new to conflict. Long before the continent was colonized by the Western world, different communities were in involved in conflicts. Historians call these conflicts tribal wars. These primitive conflicts were carried under tribal guidance of warfare and their destruction by today's standard was minimal. These conflicts live on. In the recent years we have witnessed internal conflicts in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo, and in Kenya to mention a few countries. These conflicts have led to civil wars of a magnitude never witnessed before in any African community. Ugly crimes, hand and leg amputations, torture, indiscriminate killings, and millions of both internally and external refuges are marks of this continent. The loss and human suffering encountered in these conflicts are beyond words.

Kenyan Post General Election 2007 Conflict

Immediately the disputed General elections results were announced, Kenya was engulfed in a crisis. What started as an election dispute soon escalated to domestic¹, community, regional and ethnic conflicts. Communities abandoned their traditional methods of crises management and employed what they had experienced during the era of colonialism or what they had heard from other conflicts in the world. No peace terms were sought. One community sought to annihilate the other. The traditions laws of conflict were not observed. Shopping centres and homes were burned and reduced to rubble. Property left behind was plundered and animals taken away as booty. The dead were stripped off everything the attackers thought was valuable. The robbing, raping, and murder seemed to bring joy to the attackers. Captured women and children were treated barbarously. In one ugly incident children and women were burned in a Church in Eldoret. Different communities were displaced and many found themselves in the most inhuman conditions ever. This conflict was of nature and magnitude that was foreign to many participating communities in Kenya. It was aimed at annihilating the “enemy” community. New unknown terms such as “tribal cleansing” and “*mandoandoa*” (spotted) were

¹ Individuals who had married from different communities were engaged in domestic disputes either among themselves or with communities they lived with.

developed. Everything that was identified with the “enemy” was destroyed. Even churches were destroyed.

The consequences of this conflict were enormous: Food productivity went down. Unending suspicion and mistrust between different communities was created. Minor historical differences that existed between communities were deepened. Above all a lot of government energy and resources that would have been used to further development was spent on this conflict. This conflict was an important obstacle to reducing poverty, upholding human rights, and achieving sustainable development in Kenya for a long time. The Government and the churches still have an uphill task to reconcile communities involved in this conflict. The destructive nature of this conflict is antithesis to many Kenya communities conflict management. In the following paragraphs, we shall examine some aspects of this conflict through the lens of the *Agĩkũyũ* conflict management. Hopefully in the current trend of reviving lost useful African cultural values these will help us address future conflicts.

Conflict is Inevitable

Like many other communities in the world the *Agĩkũyũ* were aware of the inevitability of human conflict. In our daily lives since time immemorial there has always been conflict and there will always be disagreement about what is fair and best for all of us. Through their history the *Agĩkũyũ* had learnt that conflict is not only inevitable but could be destructive and threaten the survival of the whole community.

Accepting this inevitability of conflict therefore, the *Agĩkũyũ* developed rules and regulations to ensure that conflict is minimized and controlled. Furthermore, in cases where it is unavoidable, it did not threaten the whole group.

Conflict was not meant, and was not to be used as a means to render extinct an individual or other community or your enemies. They were managed in such a way that, as unpleasant as they may be, they did not kill to the point that the other could not survive. Life was still sacred. Whether the conflict was domestic, regional, or national, the *Agĩkũyũ* had civilized way of dealing with it. Anger, blind rage was tamed by a set off taboos. Today this heritage has been forsaken and we are exterminating one other.

Common Responses to Conflict

Conflicts are an expensive undertaking. How an individual, a community, a group or a Nation responds to conflict and the behaviour towards the situation determines how destructive the results of that conflict will be. When faced with a conflict, the *Agĩkũyũ* commonly employ one or a combination of methods to control conflict. The bottom line is to solve the conflict with minimal cost and human injury as possible. The three methods of managing conflict were withdrawal, surrendering, and fighting.

Withdrawal

The *Agĩkũyũ* were aware that conflict deepens differences. If a person engages in it may lead to irresponsible behaviour such as fighting. They, therefore, developed a ritual that was enacted by people engaged in a conflict. This ritual gave the opportunity to either party to pull out of the conflict or engage in the conflict. If one party to the conflict chose pull out, the other party respected the decision and did not take the advantage. This art was instilled early during childhood conflicts. Let us illustrate this with an example: Two boys engaged in a dispute did not jump into fighting after a disagreement. An alternative to fighting as means of solving the conflict was sought. This is how it was done: A “star” mark was put in the hand of one of the aggressors who was willing to fight. He then asked his counterpart in the conflict to disrupt if. If he did, then the two joined in a physical combat to settle the dispute. If one of the parties to the conflict felt that he was not strong enough, or it was not wise to engage in conflict, he would choose to give up his demands and walk away. This way the conflict was settled peacefully without potential physical injuries.

Surrendering

Conflicts are expensive. They may take too much energy and sometimes yield not gains. The *Agĩkũyũ* had a philosophy called “*njũra na ago*” (inevitable loss through witchdoctor”). This involved surrendering and giving up was another way of solving dealing with a conflict. This involved and individual or a community giving up their rights. This may seem cowardly, but it was less expensive that engaging in fighting. Life is sacred and it is not cowardly to protect it.

Sometimes *Agĩkũyũ* and Masaai raiding warriors came face to face. One raiding party with the booty of girls and animals may be caught up with by their pursuers. In such circumstances the two parties did not jump into bloody battle. The two conflicting parties stood against each other. The captors asked their pursuers to bring forward their hero the challenge a corresponding hero. The two representative warriors fought each other as the conflicting warriors watched. The party whose warrior lost in the fight owned the defeat, surrendered and left in peace with only one casualty. These actions may be mistaken as cowardice, but it not. It is part of the *Agĩkũyũ* prudence to manage conflict.

Fighting

One of the irresponsible behaviour conflict produces is fighting. Whether started by one side, both parties are involved and both met the cost. A fighting response may be the most appropriate when there is a legal point which must be decided, when a crucial moral issue is at stake, or when having a clear winner and loser will not cause long-term damage to an ongoing relationship. Let us now examine how each of this was applied in different context of conflicts.

Domestic Conflict

Domestic conflict between members of the family is not unusual. Some of these conflicts arise from the breach of moral values, disagreements or psychological problems. The *Agĩkũyũ* people managed and regulated these conflicts so that sanctity of life was respected and preserved. This was done using a number of taboos. It was forbidden, for example to violently shed blood of *mũndũ wa rurira* (a relative). Any such person would be contaminated with *thahu*. Furthermore, a husband, who hit his wife and drew blood or the *vise visa* becomes contaminate with *thahu*. *Thahu* was so dreaded that it deterred relatives from engaging in physical conflicts rest a member is injured. A convicted individual and his relatives had to meet the cost of purification.

Conflict with a neighbour.

Conflicts can arise between neighbours. If they are not properly managed, they can deepen and produce irresponsible behaviour. This can obstruct cooperation in times of need between neighbours. Normally, a conflict between neighbours should was settled through the council of elder. It was forbidden for neighbours in a conflict to engage one another in anger. It was customary among the *Agĩkũyũ* to express ones wish in a conflict with a ritual. This involved violently breaking a pot in the neighbour's house. Symbolically, this ritual was wishing death to the neighbour and all members of his family (Leakey III, 1031). Such an act is potential of furthering conflict that may result in a bloody confrontation. This was against the *Agĩkũyũ* the ethics of conflict management. It was completely forbidden. The seriousness of this offence allowed the offended party to report the case to the council of elder without first paying the customary fee. The aggressor was heavily punished ritually cleansed.

Clan conflicts

While the *Agĩkũyũ* accommodated and managed conflict so that sanctity of life was respected and preserved, fighting was sometimes allowed as a means of managing conflict. Different *Agĩkũyũ* clans had territorial units. These territories were held in common by the members of a given clan. Sometimes borderlines between these territories were ill defined. Disputes over borderlines, pasture and domestic animals were not uncommon. In the struggle for these sometimes merge resources, conflict emerged. It could also be possible that two adjacent clans have historically bad blood between them. Normally such disputes were settled by a council of elders from both clans. Either side of the conflict may disagree with the ruling of the council of elders. In such circumstances, it was not unusual for such conflicts to result into an inter-clan fighting. If such fighting broke out it was refereed by the elders of both sides (Leakey, 1970: 1073). Each warrior participating in the fight was attired with distinctive marks so the elders could identify him. In such fights *Agĩkũyũ* was not allowed to kill a fellow *Agĩkũyũ*. If he did, he

would have to pay for his blood. Such inter-clan fighting did not cause ill feeling. It did not take long before the warriors were in fellowship again.

External Conflict

Geographically, *Agĩkũyũ* and the *Masaai* were neighbors. There is no historical record that the two communities were engaged tribal wars. However, tribal conflicts over resources existed with different neighbouring groups. This resulted frequent raids of cattle sheep and goats on either side.

These raids were not war. They were not driven by hate and pleasure to kill. In their execution, these raids were guided by strict rules. Every action was censured by taboos. Sanctity of life was observed, respected and preserved. The primary purpose was to help the individual, or the community acquire wealth. The raids were not an opportunity to kill, rape, and wantonly destroy property. On returning from a raid in *Masaai* country, for example a warrior who had not killed a *Maasai* during the raid was happily received by family members. As a gesture of appreciation, the sword untied, received together with the spear by his mother. A warrior who had killed during the raid did not receive this gesture and was not allowed in the homestead. He was withdrawn from the community and could not touch or greet any person until he was purified. Killing during a raid or even an enemy was tabooed. It was expensive when it occurred.

In any given conflict, women and children are the most venerable because they cannot defend themselves. When the *Agĩkũyũ* warriors carried raid in *Maasai* country, they were forbidden from killing women and children. This it was believed could defile the warrior and jeopardize the raid. The conflict would in turn threaten the whole group. According to Leakey (1067) no *Agĩkũyũ* warrior should blood his spear on a *Masaai* woman, girl or child. Any warrior who did this received no honour.

A prisoner of war was a “sister” of the captor.

On the occasion raids of the *Agĩkũyũ* warriors to *Masaai* country *Agĩkũyũ* warriors captured girls and young women as “prisoners of war”. It was a taboo for a warrior to have sexual contact, with these girls, and women during the journey back to Kikuyu country. Once the warrior had brought a prisoner home to his parent, he was required to treat her as his own sister. Any sexual contact would be counted as incest. It was believed that a girl captured is a “sister” or a child of the captor (Leakey 1068). Furthermore, the captor was required to send message to *Masaai* country through women traders asking for ransom. If the *Masaai* wanted to rescue the girl, they would safely come to Kikuyu land and negotiate the return of their child by paying a ransom. If this was not forthcoming, the captive became as member of the family. Never did she ever come a concubine of her captor. It is worthwhile to note

that these conflicts involved warrior only. They did not destruct other business between the communities.

Sometimes the *Agĩkũyũ* warriors raided at opportune times when the *Masaai morans* were partying. In these parties, *Masaai* warriors were usually accompanied by their girlfriends. If a *Agĩkũyũ* band of warriors attacked such a party and, in the event, capture a young girl, they were forbidden from killing any *Masaai* warrior present at the party. This was a serious taboo. The *Agĩkũyũ* understanding was that the captured girl was the captor's sister, and if he killed any *Masaai* warrior present at the party, he might have killed his "sister's" lover.

Asylum

One of the most devastating incidents in the 2007 post-election conflict was the burning of sanctuaries. The climax was the burning of a Church with those taking refuge in it at Kiambaa. Such an act is a taboo to the *Agĩkũyũ*. The *Agĩkũyũ* did not normally kill murderers. However, habitual murderer would be sentence to death and be sought by the community police. If such a person under the pursuit of the community police sought refuge at the sacred tree or at the grave yard his life was spare. The murderer was asked to leave the *Agĩkũyũ* country. The community police escorted him out of the country. He was expected to go away and seek asylum elsewhere. Such a person left his left community and migrated to another "country" and never to return.

Laws and taboos are often broken. This is the nature of human beings. The human *Agĩkũyũ* conflict management may be transgressed like any other human law. In such case, the *Agĩkũyũ* had several methods of conflict resolution. This included local courts, peace-making processes of conflict resolution generally included negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and systems of punishing offenders. However, the culture had in place very humane system of conflict management that allowed dialogue, reason and protected the weak. Conflict was not an avenue for the strong to ruthlessly devastate and humiliate the weak in conflict. While conflict was inevitable, ruthlessness, savagery and massacres were tabooed.

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