



CONSENSUS AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN POSTCOLO- NIAL ZIMBABWE: PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON AN INDIGENOUS METHOD OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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Abstract

The role that the indigenous systems of governance in Africa play towards solving some of the social, political and economic problems cannot be overlooked. Contrary to the popular opinion suggesting that African indigenous approaches to conflict resolution are archaic and outmoded, this essay emphasizes the need to rethink the relevance of consensus as a *sine qua non* basis for conflict resolution in Zimbabwe. Here, consensus is described as a long-established form of compromise that contributed to the achievement of conflict resolution in most traditional¹ African societies. Hence, a leaf could be taken from how indigenous African societies solved conflicts. Consequently, this essay argues that unless a consensus is reached as a basis for justice and conflict resolution in Zimbabwe and Africa at large, all attempts towards peace-building will be useless.

Keywords: conflict, conflict resolution, consensus, zimbabwe

Introduction

The existence of conflict in most African nations is quite evident. Adebayo Adedeji observes that, “on the turn of the new millennium, of the forty eight African countries [then], eighteen countries were facing armed rebellion, eleven were facing political crisis” (1990, 5). Of these countries that have been experiencing various conflicts in their post-independence, Zimbabwe is no exception, having experienced a decade of social, political and economic turmoil from the turn of the new millennium up to the formation of the Government of National Unity in 2009. Against this background, this essay discusses conflict in the context of the Zimbabwean post-independent experiences. It assesses the extent to which Western ideological notions of conflict resolution could have succeeded or failed. In turn, it presents a traditional method of conflict resolution through consensus as a valuable method of conflict resolution that promotes social cohesion. This

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method of governance is one that has been popularized by Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, who observes that “where consensus characterizes political decision making in Africa, it is a manifestation of an immanent approach to social interaction” (1997, 303). In light of Wiredu’s observation, I find just as reasonable, the deduction that “democracy, good governance, peace and development if ever they are to be achieved in Zimbabwe, [we]...need to re-examine the social order of traditional societies” (Chemhuru 2012, 189).

Concerning how conflict has been resolved in Zimbabwe after the war of liberation, Ibbo Mandaza notes that “the class basis of reconciliation is illustrated in the political deal between the emergent African *petit bourgeoisie* that inherited state power in 1980 on the one hand, and, on the other, the enduring economic power of the white settler factor buttressed and guaranteed by the external forces who brokered the Lancaster House Agreement² in Zimbabwe” (2002, 513). In view of Mandaza’s assertion, one of the ultimate attempts of this essay is to envisage an Afro-centric ideology of conflict resolution despite Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze’s caution about returning to traditional methods of governance (1997, 313-14). This attempt reaffirms Mogobe B. Ramose’s philosophical insight that “the indigenous conquered people of Africa must construct an epistemological paradigm on their own as a means of expressing their authenticity and to attain true liberation” (2009, 413). Such a paradigm can be realized if indigenous civilizations of Africa advanced their own practices of conflict resolution. Ultimately, while this essay promotes an African model of consensus, as a valuable option for conflict resolution, it will not simply legitimize any indigenous paradigm that are no longer relevant.

The intention to focus on Zimbabwe, in particular, aims to avoid the fallacy of ‘unanimism’ which, according to Paulin Hountondji, is “the illusion that all men and women in [African societies] speak with one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental issues” (1996, xviii). This focus is also necessary because in Zimbabwe different individuals, groups, societies, organizations and even parties, support varied sociopolitical ideologies on fundamental issues, causing conflict to be inevitable. Thus, a multi-pronged but endogenous conflict resolution approach and ideology that is broad enough to take on these diverse constituencies remains central to not only Zimbabwean sociopolitical landscape, but the whole of Africa. Consensus challenges individuals to realize that despite their diverse interests and opinions, at least their interests in life are the same. As Wiredu suggests consensus is based “on the belief that ultimately the interests of all members of society are the same” (1996, 185).

The period following political independence, along with the experience under the umbrella of Western liberal democracy, has not been easy for Zimbabwe. If the country is to escape its continued history of social and political conflict that runs through its post-independence period, there is need to revisit traditional Zimbabwean and African systems of conflict resolution, in particular, systems based on consensus for achieving justice. Also, there is need to critically consider whether or not faith in these traditional systems will plunge people into the past, while present sociopolitical realities are in a state of *flux*. However, I argue that shunning traditional systems of conflict-resolution at the expense of modern, non-indigenous forms of conflict resolution is not the best way forward. These non-indigenous approaches might not advocate the best route forward for Zimbabwe’s postcolonial era that has always been marred by conflict.

Bénézet Bujo observes that one of the reasons why the postcolonial African state has failed with regard to conflict resolution is that “the Euro-American models which emerged in their own

specific cultural and historical space were imposed on African nations" (2009, 391). We take seriously Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba's argument that as Africans, we must move away from traditional society and internalizing the colonial state (1992: 32). While appreciating the strength of this argument and its insistence to avoid subscribing to paradigms that are no longer relevant, my quest for consensus addresses these concerns by being conducted in a spirit of critical consciousness.

Contextualising Conflict in Zimbabwe

Generally, the history of Zimbabwe following colonialism has been one of conflict, struggles, and wars. While considering political violence, one of the worst-case scenarios of conflict, Lloyd Sachikonye traces the history of Zimbabwe's conflict throughout the existence of the country. He sees it as a century-long phenomenon extending from the period before colonialism (2011, 1-2). But for the purposes of this discussion, I focus on the period after independence from 1980. While Sachikonye's work shows that conflict has always been at the core of Zimbabwe's sociopolitical and economic sphere, this essay focuses narrowly on how it is embedded in the social and political sphere.

Anderson. B. Shankanga contends that "conflict describes an imbalance or an existence of the difference between the needs and interests of two sides" (2007, 7). A philosophical discussion of the steps that could be taken to understand and manage conflict would be useful here. Wiredu invites us to closely examine how, for instance, a crocodile with one stomach and two heads manages the inevitable conflict for food within itself. He argues that "if they could but see that the food was, in any case, destined for the same stomach, the irrationality of the conflict would be manifest to them" (1996, 185). Apparent in Wiredu's analogy is that resolve, peace-building and ultimately forwardness, is almost always part of conflict resolution. The only problem is that the varied forms of conflict resolution could potentially result in hate, exclusion, insecurity, abuse of fundamental rights and freedoms, and violence. This has been the case in Zimbabwe from the early eighties to 1987 and from 2000 to the formation of the Government of National Unity between Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formations. The problem here is that 'conflict' has different meanings to different people. It is a word that has transformed over time and moved towards different directions. Besides, there are several different types of conflict in the world, making a working definition³ that takes into account the Zimbabwean condition a must. In lieu of the ambiguousness of the word, I borrow Wiredu's use of the term that refers to difference, misunderstanding, and struggle among individuals, social groups, political ideologies and parties, to discuss the social, political and ideological conflicts of the post-independence era.

While both Wiredu (1996, 185) and Shankanga support the possibility of resolution since "it is possible to resolve people's differences positively, by recognizing the problem and recognizing one's own needs and interests, and by acknowledging the needs of the opposing sides" (Shankanga, 2), this has not been the case with Zimbabwe's post-independence experiences. For Shankanga, "it is increasingly common to hear people say that the many conflicts that countries in Africa face today are the results of the absence of sustainable peace efforts and crisis in gov-

ernance and leadership” (Ibid.). While the end of colonial rule in Zimbabwe on April 18, 1980 promised a society free of conflicts regarding racism, social domination, subjugation, hate, and violence, this has not been the case. Erasmus Masitera rather describes Zimbabwe’s postcolonial era as characteristic of a culture of impunity (2011: 99). It would be interesting to consider Mazrui’s question of whether the end of colonial rule is synonymous with real independence (2002, 528), or whether, as the Zimbabwean social, political, economic and ideological context displays, conflict is the order of the day in a nation-state purporting to be independent.

Conflict is inherently destructive to the welfare of people. More often than not, if not carefully handled, conflict can degenerate into violence. As Nana Adu-Pipim Boaduo notes, “conflicts lead to violence, [and] violent conflicts have killed and displaced more people in Africa than in any other continent in recent decades” (2010:169). This has been the case in Zimbabwe considering the loss of lives during the social and political conflicts of the early eighties. According to James Muzondidya, “the major challenge confronting the post-independent government of ZANU-PF in 1980 was nation-building in a society deeply divided along the lines of race, class, ethnicity, gender and geography” (2009, 167). Zimbabwe experienced an era of social and political conflicts between 1980 and 1987. As Brian Raftopoulos notes, “the broad impact of [failure to resolve conflict] on Zimbabwean politics was to produce a culture of fear and intolerance [until the unity accord of 1987] which stopped the violence” (2004, 7). This demonstrates how the purported *Zimbabwean social contract* formed at independence in 1980 failed to resolve internal strife until some form of consensus was reached between the two rival parties, the ZANU-PF and Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU). Until people realize the potential of consensus for conflict resolution, Zimbabwean and other postcolonial African nation states will continue to experience, in one way or another, the Hobbesian state of nature that became the case for Zimbabwe from independence to 1987.

The story and politicization of the land reform program was also a major cause for concern given the history and development of social and political conflict in Zimbabwe. While conflicts regarding land in Zimbabwe date back to the precolonial era, the year 2000 marked a watershed in the history of land-reform program that has been closely intertwined with conflict. This was one year in which various conflicts cascaded into the political sphere, economic sector, the academia and into the consciousness of the average person in the street, due to the way in which the 2000 land reform program—known as *Hondo Yeminda*⁴ aka *Jambanja*⁵—was handled. According to Sachikonye, while it was the biggest property transfer in the history of Zimbabwe, the 2000 land reform program led to chaotic land inversions, extensive food shortages, political power contestations and diplomatic rifts (2011, 69).

According to the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference, the formation of strong political opposition parties has become a source of political conflicts and violence in Zimbabwe (2009, 3). The hate, fights and deaths resulting from conflicts between individuals subscribing to different political persuasions and political parties is plain to see. Following the formation of the MDC party in 1999, one of the major areas of conflict in the post-independent Zimbabwean era is also the failure to tolerate individuals, groups, organizations and political parties subscribing to different and diverse political persuasions. The situation worsened after the violent 2008 harmonized elections. According to a press statement of 30 April 2008, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) reported on “country-wide reports of systematic violence in the form of as-

saults, murders, abductions, intimidation and wanton destruction of property against innocent civilians whose alleged crime is to have voted *wrongly*." These, and other sources of conflicts characterizing the postcolonial Zimbabwean experience, can be traced to the various problems of ethnicity, race, propaganda, and politics, among other possible explanations. As a result, the mass exodus of academics and non-academics from Zimbabwe to other countries is a sign that conflict continues to take its toll on individual citizens in postcolonial Zimbabwe. The *fruits*⁶ of social and political conflicts in Zimbabwe have been poverty, exclusion, hate, undermined growth and development, and deprivation of certain unalienable rights notably rights to life, liberty, and security as declared in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and other International Human Rights instruments to which Zimbabwe is a signatory.

Consensus as the Basis for Conflict Resolution: A Case from Zimbabwe's Government of National Unity

Without necessarily being anachronistic and subscribing to beliefs, ideas and political systems that can no longer solve current social and political problems, I find it reasonable that indigenous systems of governance are being revisited and critically utilized for solving contemporary problems. The former United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, in his report on *The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-conflict Societies*, admitted that "due regard must be given to indigenous and informal traditions for administering justice or settling disputes, to help them to continue their often vital role and to do so in conformity with both international standards and local tradition" (2004: 12). Even the current constitution of Zimbabwe takes into account the position of traditional systems of leadership, governance and conflict resolution through a council of elders or chiefs and the council of chiefs. As provided for by the Constitution of Zimbabwe, "there shall be chiefs to preside over the people in Zimbabwe who shall, subject to the provisions of subsection (2) be appointed by the President in accordance with an act of parliament" (Chapter 12: Section 111).⁷ However, in Zimbabwe's postcolonial era, while the institution of traditional leadership has always been somewhat recognized, the chief problem that has hindered social and political progress, peace, and amicable conflict resolution, has been the continued politicization of these social institutions.⁸ In most cases, traditional leaders like chiefs and headmen have been seen supporting the partisan political ideologies of certain political parties, and actions that are outside their jurisdiction.

Perhaps the problem that needs to be seriously addressed is the issue of how these indigenous systems of governance are compatible with systems that Zimbabwe and other independent African states have adopted following colonialism. As Desmond Tutu sees it, "western style justice does not fit with traditional African jurisprudence, [since] the African view of justice is aimed at the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships. This kind of justice seeks to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator" (2008, 13). Some reservations for consensus exist on the grounds that it is very difficult to reconcile the interests of, for example, the oppressed, with those of the oppressor (2009,7). On the contrary, non-indigenous African ways of conflict resolution are capable of being inimical to the development of traditional

legal norms and have the potential of disrupting the social equilibrium. This fuels the need for reliance on consensus as a traditional form of achieving conflict resolution in Zimbabwe. Accordingly, Mandaza has compared indigenous ways of conflict resolution with non-indigenous ways adopted in the post-independent era of most African nation states. He states that “for Southern Africans in general, there is still hope for those – and there are many who feel cheated by the kind of reconciliation exercises that accompanied the formal end of white settler colonialism and apartheid in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa” (2002, 508-9). Perhaps this is the reason why Zimbabwe, in particular, has continued to witness conflict on a large sociopolitical scale through the ethnic conflicts that characterized Zimbabwe from 1980 to 1987. Meanwhile, in its neighboring post-apartheid South Africa, there has been recent xenophobic attacks on foreign nationalities.

According to Moscovici Serge and Willem Doise, consensus is “when people seek to associate together, act in consent and make decisions” (1994, 1). This definition implies that consensus is primarily formed on the bases of individuals, groups, and parties mutually adopting decisions regarding certain ideas on fundamental issues regardless of their diverse opinions. Consensus is an important aspect that has been lacking in Zimbabwe’s post-independent sociopolitical sphere. But, in a strictly African perspective, conflict resolution that based on agreement, acceptance of wrongdoing, reconciliation and morality is quite normal. This is because consensus explores various conflicting viewpoints and possibilities, focusing them towards an end that all parties acknowledge. As Wiredu noted, consensus is a form of agreement and compromise, and compromise is a streamline of individuals’ interests in order that something common and important may be done instead (1996, 182).

Reconciliation remains part of an important aspect of conflict resolution that ought to be embraced in the Zimbabwean sociopolitical landscape. Although it is possible that disputes can be settled without reconciliation, Wiredu observes that “reconciliation is in fact, a form of consensus. It is a restoration of goodwill through a reappraisal of the significance of the initial bones of contention” (1997, 304). Therefore, when viewed in this sense, consensus need not be seen as merely a demand for conformity. There is more to consensus than simply conformity. Nation-building, sovereignty, the common good, development, and statesmanship could be included as part of the basis for consensus. While ZANU-PF and the two MDC formations could be perceived as some of the major political parties in Zimbabwe that emerged given their different ideological persuasions, at least some of the virtues associated with compromise in a nation that has been heavily polarized can be identified now. Thus, consensus as a traditional system of governance remains one of the contributors to conflict resolution in Zimbabwe and Africa, as it enhances social interaction.

Wiredu further argues that “where consensus characterizes political decision-making in Africa, it is a manifestation of an approach to social interaction” (1996, 182). However, notwithstanding these merits of consensus as a basis for conflict resolution, Ademola Kazeem Fayemi argues that, “if indeed the kind of consensus that Wiredu is venerating in African culture (which is what I have in mind) exists, we would not have cases of intra-ethnic wars, civil uprisings and migration of certain segments of society” (2009, 117). Still, in spite of this challenge, I maintain that the problems identified by Fayemi are rather outcomes of lack of consensus in conflict resolution.

Although the traditional systems of kinship that provided the mainstay for consensus no longer exist, consensus is still very important for modern African societies, especially Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe has been in a crucial need of consensus throughout the period 2000 to 2009, where it was torn apart as a result of failure to resolve social, political and ideological conflicts. This resulted in, for example, recurrent political conflicts and hate between individual citizens subscribing to the ideologies of ZANU-PF and MDC and other political parties. At least consensus can contribute to solving the problem created by majoritarian democracy which is easy to achieve, but “is not in itself a good enough basis for decision making, for it deprives the minority of the right to have their will reflected in the given decision” (1997, 307). Within the Zimbabwean context, the quest for majority democracy appears to be the root of the conflicts within the post-independence era, considering the lack of consensus on the acceptance of the outcome of election results from the year 2000 up to 2008. Although consensus may appear to be no longer viable, at least the aspect of dialogue may go a long way towards reconciling divergent political views from people of different political divides. This seems to have been the case with the eventual formation of Zimbabwe's Government of National Unity.

In principle, consensus as a conflict resolution mechanism seems to be the only way out of the Zimbabwean postcolonial paradox. It guarantees the participation of every individual in almost all political decisions, since it is discussion-oriented. As Bingu wa Mutharika sees it, “an important aspect of political accountability which the African traditional society has handed down from generation to generation is the sanctity of dialogue” (1995, 9). For example, recently in Zimbabwe, some of the gains of consensual decision-making are the inter-party talks leading to the formation national unity between the three historically-conflicting political parties; that being the MDC, the Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirayi (MDC-T) and ZANU-PF. Granted, this does not imply that the current unity government is not immune to conflict. What is most important, however, is that through agreement to work together, the three political parties have committed themselves towards solving social, political and economic conflicts characterizing Zimbabwe in the post 2000 era.

Conclusion

Looking at the Zimbabwean postcolonial history, one could question why Zimbabwe has failed to do better in terms of addressing certain complex social, political and economic problems that are results of conflicts inherent in independent Zimbabwean sociopolitical spheres. Also, the other question that needs to be addressed is why the interpersonal relationships between individuals subscribing to different social, political and economic ideologies within Zimbabwe are so fragile and often destructive to the development of the people of Zimbabwe. At the same time, imagining how the current government of national unity in Zimbabwe between the two formations of the MDC and ZANU-PF have been formed despite political rivalry, tension and conflict is almost mind-boggling. Additionally, if one considers the different political ideologies of one nationalist ideological and conservative ZANU-PF and, on the other hand, two MDC formations that seek to champion a liberalist political order for Zimbabwe, one might question what makes this government move forward. Perhaps it is helpful to rethink indigenous forms of governance and conflict resolution. In considering the possibility of traditional systems of governance. Fayemi argues that, “the question of the possibility of an African theory of democracy has been greeted with apathy in African philosophical discourse [hence] a number of scholars have in recent times seen the need

for the utilization of Africa's democratic heritage and values rooted in her traditional past in resolving her peculiar problems" (2009, 102-3). This is the spirit with which I argue that consensus is a reliable tool for conflict resolution in Zimbabwe.

The thesis developed here asserts that a revisit to traditional indigenous systems of governance could be a sound basis for solving some of the conflicts that have characterized the post-independent Zimbabwean era. Although consensus has often been inaccurately linked to pre-colonial African political structures (Fayemi 2009, 110), it is argued that conflict resolution based on the consensual agreement regarding potentially conflict areas could be the mainstay for a systematic method of conflict resolution in Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, while forwarding this argument, one must be careful not to plunge the thesis of the essay into the fallacy of anachronism; specifically, the fallacy of unshakably supporting ideas that are no longer relevant in terms of solving current problems.

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Notes

- ¹ The word 'traditional' seems to be vague if not clearly clarified the meaning that it is intended to carry within a specific context. So, in this work, in order to avoid the nebulous use to which it has been subjected to by most writers on African philosophy, I will use it to refer to conventional and indigenous African societies prior to the invent of the colonial era in Africa
- ² The Lancaster House Agreement is the accord that culminated into the Zimbabwean Constitution from a marathon of meetings held between the the Zimbabwean liberation movements and the white-minor-

ity settler British government ruling the country from 1890, and thus resulting in the independence for Zimbabwe in 1980.

³ While the word 'conflict' has, in most cases, been used to describe harsh circumstances such as armed rebellions, I adopt an operational definition that captures a Zimbabwean context. I use the word exclusively to denote Zimbabwe's social, political, economic and ideological dimensions that eventually led to afflictions such as hate, tribalism, social and political violence and impunity among others.

⁴ *Hondo Yeminda* is a phrase used in the Shona language of Zimbabwe. It is a phrase that literally means 'A struggle or war for land'. The reason why most indigenous people of Zimbabwe use the term to refer to the fast-track land reform program in Zimbabwe is that it sends the message that the struggle to attain total independence from colonialism and to repossess land remains unfinished business. At the same time, it demonstrates the failure of Zimbabwe's government to address the question of land between 1980 and 2000, hence the resolve to direct its attention to the war for land. This war that I discuss, is described as one of the major causes of social, political and economic conflict in post-independent Zimbabwe, particularly after the year 2000.

⁵ *Jambanja* is a derogatory word derived from the Shona discourse denoting conflict and chaos. It is used to refer to the chaotic nature in which the 2000 land reform exercise and its consequential conflicts were handled.

⁶ The irony in the use of the word is meant to juxtapose the ideal gains of independence of any nation that aims to be independent; for example, concepts such as freedom (in its various forms of expression, through speech, movement, association, etc.), justice, and human rights observance. Thus, the paradox of Zimbabwe's postcolonial independent period becomes interesting.

⁷ Chapter 12 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe in this context needs clarification because there are now many factors at play that can distort the reference made in this work. Here, the constitution cited is the Lancaster House Constitution that has added several amendments since 1979 to date. I use the Constitution as amended on 14 September 2005 (that is, up to and including the amendment Number: 17 of 2005). So, it is exclusive to the current constitution that has amendment number 18, implemented on 30 October 2007. This has culminated into the formation of the current Global political Agreement (G.P.A) between the two formations of the Movement for Democratic Change and ZANU PF. Both have committed themselves to resolving the post-2008 conflict and also, to writing a new constitution for Zimbabwe.

⁸ The author finds interesting the irony in the title that comes with the Chapter to the said constitution on provision for the powers of the chiefs and the council of chiefs. The title is presented as; Chapter XIII: Miscellaneous Provisions, implying the way in which the government of Zimbabwe belittles and downplays the role performed by traditional leaders. This is implied by use of the term "miscellaneous" which normally means some after-thought that is somehow sundry and insignificant on its own.