

Lessons from Yorùbá Mythology

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ABSTRACT

Conflict management and resolution strategies often do not pay enough attention to traditional methods emanating from local cultural traditions. Many conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa are not responsive to contemporary approaches born in the West and implemented in conflict zones across the continent. In this article I specifically focus on the myths of the Yorùbá ethnic group in Nigeria as a way to demonstrate how myths from a given society can be helpful in crafting local solutions to local conflicts. After providing a brief overview of the relationship between myth and conflict, I will summarize and analyze five Yorùbá myths that provide cultural context to the Yorùbá experience, and then conclude with some lessons that can be applied to the conflict resolution process in general.

Keywords: conflict; mediation; resolution; third party intervention; Yorùbá mythology

Introduction

All too often, conflict management and resolution strategies do not pay enough attention to traditional methods emanating from local cultural traditions. Many conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa ‘remain impervious’ to contemporary approaches born in the West and implemented in conflict zones across the continent (Zartman, 2000). This article builds on Osaghae’s assertion that we cannot afford to ignore ‘the wisdom of traditional African conflict management practices’ since many of the contemporary methods used, based on western assumptions, are often ineffective (Osaghae, 2000). Clearly, there are some useful lessons to be learned from traditional wisdom (Zartman, 2000a; Faure, 2000). These lessons can inform the development of ‘an eclectic model of conflict management that draws from common values and perceptions of conflict and its management all over Africa, and that incorporates various relevant and time-tested strategies’ (Osaghae, 2000: 216).

In this article I will specifically focus on the myths of the Yorùbá ethnic group in Nigeria as a way to demonstrate how myths from a given society can be helpful in crafting indigenous solutions to local conflicts. Myths provide ‘ways of seeing, thinking and feeling about the world which in essence define

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normality for us-the ways things are and the way things ought to be' (Avruch and Black, 1993: 133).

After providing a brief overview of the relationship between myth and conflict, I will summarize and analyze five Yorùbá myths that provide cultural context to the Yorùbá experience, and then conclude with some lessons that can be applied to the conflict resolution process in general.

Conceptualizations of conflict and myths

Conflict is endemic to social institutions and it is the result of human relationships in any organic community (see Sandole, 1993; Fred-Mensah, 2000; Osaghae, 2000). Druckman (1993) asserts that conflict is based on one or more of the following sources: conflicts of interest over tangible resources, divergent understandings of the ways to achieve a shared goal, and 'contrasting ideological orientations' (pp. 26–28).

Ethnocentrically viewed, myth is a primitive phenomenon, which is said to recess into 'the childhood of the world', in '*ille tempore*' (Afigbo, 2000: 80). Based on this assumption, scholars such as Caudwell (1977) have contended that myth 'ossifies', and contains 'contradictions' that are inimical to contributing to understanding and resolving societal woes.

Notwithstanding this parochial view, this article is premised on the key assumption that myth is the storehouse of African beliefs, traditions, and values. It covers a gamut of human and non-human endeavors that traverse the physical and spiritual worlds:

Myth addresses the actions of men, of other animate and inanimate objects, of the natural and the supernatural, of the physical and metaphysical of the real and the fictional, at times in a context beyond time and space. (Afigbo, 2000: 79–80)

In short, myth captures the intangibles of ordinary life, illuminating the culturally embedded assumptions of daily activities from the mundane to the profound.

Myth is also 'essentially an oral phenomenon, a product of story teller's art that was transmitted by word of mouth from generation to generation' (Harris and Platzer, 1985: 8). According to Faure (2000), 'myth draws its strength from the fact that it has no author but only tellers' (p. 15). Storytellers have distinct styles, and they have the power to add or delete elements from these traditional tales, legends, or heroic stories. This form of oral communication is susceptible 'to spontaneous change at every retelling', thus resulting in different, 'contradictory versions' (p. 15) of same tale, legend or story retold by different individuals at different periods. Despite this limitation, 'myth as a traditional story . . . can express individual and collective apprehensions and . . . can communicate social values' (Reader, 1995: 7).

Myths also 'offer reasons and causes of certain phenomena in the

universe' (Adeleke, 1998: 186) by manipulating 'events of the past for purposes of explaining and understanding not only the past, but also the present which they can do a great deal to legitimize, make bearable or even admirable and enjoyable' (Afigbo, 2000: 79).

This point is reinforced by Ajayi, who contends that myths 'influence the present as well as the times to come' since they can provide 'a continuous process with circles of interaction between the past, the present and the future' (Ajayi, 1998: 128).

The relevance of myths to conflict resolution

Myth offers insights into understanding the roots of conflict, and strategies for their resolution, since they 'function as windows framing and mediating our view of the world around us' (Saper, 1997: 6). The purpose of this article is to analyze a set of Yorùbá myths 'in a particular meaningful way' (Saper, 1997: 1) relevant to the conflict resolution process. For myths to serve this function, they should embody 'a structuring function' that can effectively bring about positioning 'the global approach in a specific context that would be difficult to put into question by rational means' (p. 1). To do this, we carefully need to 'revitalize old myths . . . find new myths more apt for contemporary cultural problems and contradictions' (p. 1). This article represents a modest attempt to 'revitalize' Yorùbá myths in a way that is relevant to current conflicts.

Yorùbá myths

The following five myths provide valuable insights into some of the cultural assumptions of the Yorùbá people. Whereas these particular assumptions cannot be generalized across other groups, an analysis of these myths demonstrates their utility in understanding motivations and actions during times of harmony and conflict.

Tale one

Ìjàpà fi Ogbón èwé gba oko Òkéré (see Babalola, 1973b: 169–72 for the full Yoruba version)

Ìjàpà (the Tortoise) Cunningly Dispossesses Òkéré (the Squirrel) from his Farm
(my translation and summary of the story)

Ìjàpà owned a small farm near his homestead, and Òkéré owned two farms – one near his homestead and another one in the dense forest. The farm in the forest was hidden from people in the area, and it did not have the traditional boundaries of ownership – mythical trees planted by the owner. Everybody knew about the farmland near the homestead, but only Òkéré knew about his other farm in the forest.

There was a time when the people in this area suffered from a famine. As a result, everyone lost weight and did not look very well. However, much to the surprise of his neighbors, *Òkéré* appeared to be well-nourished and robust even though the rest of his immediate family continued to suffer from the famine. Fellow-farmer *Ìjàpà* eventually learned about *Òkéré's* distant farm in the forest but he remained quiet and patiently waited for the proper time to do something. This opportunity arose when *Òkéré* had to travel out of town. After *Òkéré* left, *Ìjàpà* commissioned the townspeople to help him construct a wide path to 'his farm' in the thick of the forest. Everybody willingly assisted, including the members of *Òkéré* family. *Ìjàpà* fed them all and generously gave them farm produce to take home. He decided to build a hut and stay on the farm, selling produce to willing consumers and engaging the townspeople (members of *Òkéré* household inclusive) as laborers. When *Òkéré* returned, he challenged *Ìjàpà's* ownership of this remote farm and called him a thief. *Ìjàpà* responded that it was *Òkéré* who was the thief. The case was taken to the *Oba* (king). To prove ownership, *Ìjàpà* had to call all of the people who assisted him in clearing of the pathway as witnesses, including *Òkéré's* wife. Since *Òkéré* had no witnesses to prove ownership, *Ìjàpà* was thus declared as the rightful owner of the farm by the king.

Analysis

The problem in this tale centers on land dispossession. The rightful owner of the land, due to self-centeredness and secrecy, lost his land to a usurper in a traditional court, which had the power of traditional adjudication (Fadipe, 1970). It is no surprise, therefore, to see *Ìjàpà* taking *Òkéré* to the *Oba* for traditional adjudication on the land matter. A public proceeding was held where witnesses were called to testify. Masina (2000: 170) aptly notes:

Managing or resolving conflict in African communities becomes an open process, in the sense that it includes the nuclear and extended families, even the elders of the village, chiefs, and headmen as well.

Even *Òkéré's* wife testified against her husband. Due to *Òkéré's* secretiveness and since he did not mark out the boundary lines of the farm with mythical trees, he lost his farm to *Ìjàpà*. In Yorùbá society, individual land boundaries were (and continue to be) marked by *pèrègún* (*dracaena fragrans*), *igi-ìyeyè* (*spondia monbin naciaceae*), *igi làpàlàpà* or *bòtujúè* (*Jatropha curcas*), *igi òpè* (palm tree), or *igi obì* (kolanut tree).¹ If *Òkéré* had used any of these mythical trees to demarcate his farm and let others know of his ownership, he would not have been dispossessed of his land.

Tale two

Ìjàpà, Asín ati Òkéré (see Babalola, 1973a: 122–24 for the full Yorùbá version)

The Tortoise, Smelly-Rat, and the Squirrel (my translation and summary of the story)

Ìjàpà, Asín, and Òkéré were all earthenware dealers who sold their products at a local market. Ìjàpà and Òkéré were very close friends. Asín and Òkéré shared the same boundary in the market, while Ìjàpà's shed was a bit far off from the other two earthenware dealers. One day Asín and Òkéré engaged in a fight. Ìjàpà, who was not far away, came with a big cane. With this cane, he severely beat Asín, while milder strokes were given to Òkéré to give the impression of impartiality. The market people blamed Ìjàpà for taking sides in the conflict. Rather than relent, Ìjàpà beat Asín even more. This infuriated Asín, who then decided to stop fighting Òkéré, his original opponent, and focus on Ìjàpà. He proceeded to bite off Ìjàpà's nose, despite pleas from market people watching the fight.

Analysis

The role of Ìjàpà as a third party mediator in the conflict between Asín and Òkéré was both ineffective and counterproductive. According to the Yorùbá saying, 'Òn làjà ní forí gbògbó' (the mediator receives club on its head). In the end, the third party mediator was drawn into the conflict and ultimately sustained the worst injury of all (see King-Irani, 2000). However, there are other impartial mediators who can legitimately intervene wherever there is a cause for redress on the part of the aggrieved disputant involved in a conflict. In the case of this tale, the market people attempted to intervene to stop the conflict between the three earthenware dealers. Despite their lack of success in stopping the fight, they were impartial to the conflict and they tried to prevent violence and injury to the combatants.

Tale three

Oba Alàrán-án àti Eye Kinkin

King Alaran-an and the Tiny Bird (my translation and summary of the story)

Oba Alàrán-án, the paramount ruler, commissioned all of his subjects to communally clear some forest area for a proposed market place, with the exception of Eye Kinkin. Eye Kinkin was angry that he was not asked by the ruler to help the others clear the land and he devised a plan to respond to this affront. On an agreed upon day, the townspeople worked from dawn to dusk to complete the required task of clearing the land. After they left, Eye Kinkin emerged from hiding and sang the following song:

Lead: *Oba Alàrán-án bèwè* (King Alàrán-án commissioned a task)

Refrain: *Kinkin* (Kinkin)

Lead: *O be kéré eye* (He commissioned all the birds)

Refrain: *Kinkin* (Kinkin)

Lead: *O be kéré eye* (He commissioned all the birds)

Refrain: *Kinkin* (Kinkin)

Lead: *O d'emi Kinkin si* (He left me Kinkin out)

Refrain: *Kinkin* (Kinkin)

Lead: *Koríko dide* (Grass, sprout)

Refrain: *Kinkin* (Kinkin)

Lead: *Èrùwà dide* (Savannah grass sprout)

Refrain: *Kinkin* (Kinkin)

After singing this song, all of the cut grass grew tall and fallen trees rose again, returning the area to the original state of nature that existed before the townspeople cleared the land. The following day, the king and his chiefs came to the area to see the work of the townspeople and they were puzzled to see the field full of tall grass and trees. The *Ifá* priest (or *babalawo*) was then consulted after several futile clearings. The oracle revealed that a tiny bird – the *Kinkin* – was responsible for this problem. *Kinkin* then informed the *Oba*-in-council that he was responsible for reversing the work of the townspeople since he was unfairly marginalized by the ruler, who called on everyone to clear the field but him. Ultimately, the king was obligated to apologize to *Eye Kinkin* based on the advice of the *Ifá* priest.

Analysis

This tale shows that crisis occurs when people are unfairly marginalized. The marginalization process is especially challenging to the maintenance of peace and harmony when leaders specifically target particular individuals/groups, who often respond in a way that precipitates conflict situations.

The tale also reinforces the importance of spiritual consultation. The *Ifá* priest was (and is still) the most important of all the deities in the Yorùbá cosmos, and the advice of this important spiritual figure could not be overlooked and disregarded. Spirituality is a powerful force in the lives of many in Africa and beyond. The role of world religions such as Christianity and Islam, along with traditional, pre-colonial spiritual traditions, in the lives of those in conflict needs to be properly understood and included in the development of conflict resolution strategies.

Tale four

Òrúnmìlà àti Om rè, Olówò (Abimbola 1969: 34–40)

Orumila and his son Olowo (my translation and summary of the story)

Òrúnmìlà had eight children: *Alára*, *Ajerò*, *Olóyémoyin*, *Alákági*, *Òn-tagi Òlélé*, *Eléjèlumòpé*, *Owàràngún-àga*, and *Olówò*, the youngest of them all. At one of the annual feasts organized by Òrúnmìlà, all of his children paid him homage except for *Olówò*, who believed that since he and his father were the titular heads of neighboring towns, they were equals and he was not obliged to attend. Hence, the youngest son said that it would not be proper for him to give homage to Òrúnmìlà, despite the father/son relationship that existed. Òrúnmìlà disagreed with his son, but his son responded with '*wón ní, Enìkan kù fòrí adé balè fénìkan*' (it is a norm; crowned person must not pay homage to anyone).

When *Olówò*'s elderly brothers did not intervene, Òrúnmìlà had to vacate his stool and ascend to the ethereal world. After his departure, everything turned upside down. There was a drought that led to a famine that affected everyone in the area. The Òrúnmìlà children, including *Olówò*, consulted the oracle, and they were instructed to appease Òrúnmìlà with sacrificial items—two rats, two fish, and two cows. The children followed the advice of the oracle, chanting their father's *Oríkì* (praise name) and offering the sacrificial items. In response, Òrúnmìlà finally reconciled with his children.

Analysis

This tale demonstrates that a challenge to the *status quo* can create serious conflict. A young son undermined an assumed respect for elders by contending that since he held a political position similar to his father's, he deserved equal treatment. Ultimately, many suffered when the father was not properly respected. The *Ifá* informed *Olówò* and his brothers of the proprietary measures to be taken in order to obtain Òrúnmìlà's forgiveness. In Yorùbá community, the issue of eldership was (and is still) held in high esteem. Yorùbá have different aphorisms and idioms to institutionalize the gerontocratic order. Two examples of such include: *À-Ì-f àgbà fénìkan ni kò jáyè gún* (it is the inability to give due respect to the elder, that has caused chaos on earth); and *Kò màgbà légbòn-ón* (he/she does not recognize elder as the superior).

Olówò might have felt that the *status quo* must change. But considering the problems that everyone faced after the exit of Òrúnmìlà, and the atonement made thereafter, it is obvious that the respect for elders is an important part of Yorùbá tradition:

Àgbà kò sí nílúú (The elder passes away in the town)

Ìlú bàjé (The town is in chaos)

Baálé ilé kú (The family head dies)

Ilé dahoro (The household becomes desolate).

This tale also provides additional insight into the complexities of third party mediation. The active influence of third party intervention was not felt until the problems precipitated by the conflict between Òrúnmìlà and *Olówò* spread

from the micro- to macro-levels. The strategy employed to resolve the problem was 'atonement' (Zartman, 2000b). As noted by Faure (2000), 'the sacrifice of an animal such as a goat or sheep' or 'spilling animal's blood is a means of appeasing the anger of the group and ancestors' (p. 160). All of these steps are taken in order 'to re-create the unity of the group, gods, and ancestors, and to rebuild the bonds between members of the same community in a kind of communion' (see King-Irani, 2000: 130).

When *Orúnmilà's* children were offering the sacrifice, they also utilized a particular verbal code or persuasion to appease him. His *Oríkì* (praise name) was chanted to persuade and implore him to accept the sacrifice. This demonstrates the importance of dialogue and the careful selection of words and ideas in negotiating the resolution of conflict situations.

Tale five

The primordial war

According Yorùbá mythology, the first war was a primordial one, with the *Irúnmlè* (earth-spirits) against the *Orí* (Head) (Adeniji, 1987). The following account of this fight can be found in the *Odú Ògúndá Méjì* (Adeniji 1987: 13):

E má bá a jà, e ò lè bá a jà (Do not engage him in a fight, you cannot withstand his force)

E e leè dá a e ò sì leè yí i padàv (You cannot defeat him, you cannot displace him either)

Orí ní i dání (It is Orí that repositions one)

Enìkan kì í dá orí (No one can reposition Orí)

Òrìsà nì í panì-in dà (It is the Deity that repositions one)

Enìkan kì í p'Òrìsà á dà (No one can reposition the Deity)

A díá fún Òkànlémú Irúnmolè Olùkòtún (They divined for the two hundred and one Deities on the right side)

A bú fún igbaa Mlè Olùkòsì (They divined for the two hundred Deities on the left side)

Níjọ tí wón _ lo, rée b'Orí jìjà-kadì àgbà (On the very day they went to wrestle with Orí on leadership issue)

Ní Ìta Olófín, Àjàláyá (At the palace of Earthly-King)

Orí nìkàn ló dá gbogbo o won lóní kaàka (It was only Orí who repositioned them all in different regions).

Orí defeated all of the earth spirits and he was made the leader of all deities. We must not overlook the role that *Èlà*, the high priest in heaven (*Olúwo Òrun*), played in this war. *Èlà* was asked by God to settle the feud between *Orí* and the other deities. While *Èlà* acted as the mediator, *Láadi* the blacksmith manufactured weapons and supplied them to the deities to fight *Orí*.

Analysis

Èlà served as the third party mediator in this conflict, while *Láadi* exacerbated the situation by manufacturing and supplying firearms. While some individuals attempt to resolve conflicts, others contribute to the continuation and escalation of conflict, often on a self-serving quest for power and economic gain. External actors to a conflict can, and often do, work against each other, with some attempting to resolve the impasse, while others intensify the conflict with moral and/or material support.

Lessons learned

The Yorùbá myths analyzed in this article demonstrate how contemporary conflict situations can be informed by local culture and tradition. Mediators in search of conflict resolution strategies need to appraise the nature and sources of the conflicts in question. Often, cultural assumptions can be exposed and understood through the analysis of myths. Mediators and participants of a given conflict can use myths as a way 'to elicit specific grievances and wounds of the groups or nations in conflict which have not been acknowledged' (Montville, 1993: 115). The Yorùbá believe *A-jèbi má mò, ní kógun jàlú* (he who knows he is guilty, and does not care, precipitates war in the town). Once the guilty party takes responsibility, the aggrieved party will then be prepared to participate in the conflict resolution process.

The five tales analyzed in the previous section lead us to recognize that the resolution of conflicts among the Yorùbá, or between the Yorùbá and other groups, can be informed by some cultural assumptions illuminated by the traditional tales. In all but one of the tales (tales two, three, four and five), the role of 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 Yorùbá disputants: recognizing the importance of spiritual tradition and utilizing verbal codes appropriate for specific situations. While these lessons are specifically relevant to the Yorùbá experience, they elucidate how myths and other modes of cultural expression can inform conflict resolution processes, and offer some lessons that can be generalized across the continent. Lessons related to third party mediation and the problems associated with group/individual marginalization will be examined in greater detail in this section.

Third party mediation

People involved in conflict should be wary of third party influences – including supposed allies, mediators, and suppliers of firearms. Often third party mediators have ulterior motives when offering their assistance. In addition to economic gains, allies that are at peace are often eager to offer military assistance to other warring parties in pursuit of self-interests that are not consonant with conflict resolution. Osaghae (2000) argues, ‘external interferences and interventions have historically constituted ‘the fire behind the smoke’ in ethnic and other political conflicts in Africa, and accordingly deserve to be emphasized in the analysis of aggravated conflicts’ (p. 207).

It is, therefore, naïve to underestimate the negative role that external actors can play in certain instances. Clearly, third party intervention has the potential to aggravate the conflicts, which can then spread from the micro to macro-levels (Osaghae, 2000; see also Montville, 1993). According to one Yorùbá proverb, *Ó tó enìkéta, ní dákún ìjà* (it is the third person intervention that fuels the conflict).

The tales examined in this article demonstrate that there are other intervening variables in conflicts, such as the nature of relationships, the nature of the dispute, the persons involved, and the role and situational variables (Druckman, 1993; Uwazie, 2000). When it becomes imperative for third party intervention, neighbors to the conflict need to be engaged in the process. Nonchalance may have negative implications for third party interventions. For instance, the third party may have to contend with the influx of refugees from either of the warring neighbors if the conflict continues. At its roots, African society is communally organized and neighbors to a conflict cannot remain aloof. Here lies the paradox of the third party interventions. A Yorùbá philosophical saying affirms this assertion:

Bára ilé eni bá [?] je kòkòrò kí kòkòrò; (If one’s kindred is eating forbidden insects)

Tá ò bá wí fún un (And we refuse to check him)

Hùrù here rè, kò ní jé á sùn lóru (The aftermath effect would not allow us a night’s rest).

The caveat for the third party is that such interventions must be based on impartiality and devoid of vested interests. It then becomes imperative for the third party and the combatants to critically appraise and determine the motive/motives for interventions.

Marginalization

The marginalization of minority groups in heterogenous societies can result in conflict and ultimately require both tangible and intangible forms of restitution

to achieve conflict resolution. As demonstrated in the myth about *Kínkin* (tale three), the recognition of all individuals/groups in a given society is crucial to development and peaceful coexistence. This is especially relevant to identity-based conflicts that can be local, national, or regional in scope.

Concluding comments

There is a need for African societies to revisit their repertoire of myths and refer to the relevant stories, and the lessons therein, to resolve conflict. The peaceful resolution of conflict will require both an analysis and an understanding of the cultural assumptions that are often embedded in myths. These provide a window into the symbiotic relationships between the past and the present. Mitchell (1977) notes that myths are ‘timeless and perpetual’ and, as such, they ‘provide a bridge between our realities and hopes and wishes and fears of our dreams. They provide man with comfort and support’ (p. 207). The Yorùbá myths examined in the article demonstrate the relevance of oral traditions to understanding the conflicts on the continent regardless scope, content, or phase.

NOTE

1. For Yorùbá–English translations, I rely on R.C. Abraham, *Dictionary of Modern Yorùbá* (1959).

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