Conflict prevention and management: Lessons from the Shona proverb

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This paper analyses selected Shona proverbs with the view to highlight their wisdom and relevance to issues of conflict prevention, management and resolution. This has been motivated by the conviction that the genesis of proverbs is careful and tested observation, experience and knowledge on how conflict was and should be amicably and effectively resolved at individual, community, national and international levels in all spheres of life. The paper posits the thesis that Shona proverbs are a carrier of age old crystallized capsules of wisdom that can and should inform present day conflict management at different levels in our societies.

Key words: Conflict, prevention, management, resolution, Shona proverbs.

INTRODUCTION

Finnegan (1970: 393) defines a proverb as “a saying in more or less fixed form, marked by shortness and distinguished by popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it”. The Shona proverb fits well into this definition. In Shona society these terse expressions have a twofold function, that is juridical and educational, as they “verbalize customary law and enunciate rules of conduct in life” (Hamutyinei and Plangger, 1987: 20), hence their being regarded as a rich repository of practical as well as ethical advice (Nyembezi 1990). Proverbs also express the sum total of people’s experiences, since they are borne out of long observations of specific practical experiences (Chimhundu and Chabata, 2008; Moyo and Ncube, 2010), hence the saying ‘a proverb is a child of experience’ (unknown).

Hamutyinei and Plangger (1987: 13) observe that the images and comparisons (used in proverbs) are mostly drawn from observation of human behavior, of animals and of objects in both the natural and cultural environment, hence most Shona proverbs are comments on human affairs such as love, courtship, oppression, greed, selfishness, laziness, role relationships and other virtues and vices in society. Nyembezi (1990: 12) shares the sentiments above when she observes that:

Proverbs are useful means of studying people as they show how observant they are. Habits of birds, animals and behavior of nature in general do not go unobserved. Proverbs reveal what it is the people adore, what they respect and despise. They reveal what the people’s outlook on life is and will provide the student of human nature with a peep into the character of a people.

Simply put, what it means is that if one understands the proverbs of a people, there is basically very little about their culture that he/she cannot understand, since proverbs are basically a collection of the experiences of a people (part of their culture), some of which are learnt the hard way, expressed in a special manner) and from generation to generation they are passed on ever fresh, ever true (Nyembezi 1990). Proverbs thus shed light on a people’s thinking and hence we can understand them better as their passions, frustrations, hopes, sorrows, beliefs etc are reflected in the proverbs they use. A people's philosophy can also be revealed through proverbs, as “the whole range of human experience can be commented on and analyzed; generalizations and
principles expressed in graphic and concise form and the wider implications of specific situations brought to mind,” (Finnegan, 1970: 416). Thus one can safely say, the Shona, like any other people, can also be better understood through studying their proverbs, from which their philosophy and lessons on various issues can be learnt.

Through proverbs, the varied shades of experience recognized in human behavior are covered. People always recognize various things in life and do not lose sight of them as they capture them in proverbs. People recognize that there are good and bad people, the crafty and cunning, the truthful and honest, the vengeful and the peaceful, the rich and the poor, the brave and the cowardly, the prudent and imprudent, the cautious and the indiscreet, the wise and the foolish among others (Hamutynei and Plangger, 1987; Nyembezi, 1990). All these, are observed over a long period of time and then words that aptly describe the situations are carefully picked to craft a proverb. When people then use the expression, they feel that no better words could have been chosen to describe the situation. The Shona Proverb thus originates so and covers the broad spectrum of situations the Shona people have experienced.

Having observed and recognized the above situations, one cannot help but notice that, the Shona people also observed that conflict is part and parcel of life, as the following proverbs show. ‘Ndumudzani hadzidyi mundiro imwe’ (Children who follow each other by birth do not eat from the same plate). This shows that from birth conflict is anticipated. Another example is ‘Chakaenzanwa ivhudzi, upfumini hauna kuenzanwa (What is shared by everybody is hair riches are not shared equally). Implied here is the fact that as human beings, we share the same nature but greatly differ in talents and outlook, in which case conflict becomes inevitable. Reference to inequitable distribution shows that in every community there are haves and have-nots, which is another source of conflict. This is the Marxist/Conflict view of society Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, (2008). However, the proverb uses the accommodation option of conflict management, where the Shona are saying the differences are a fact of life and people must accept this. The intention here is to accommodate both the haves and have-nots, so as to prevent conflict or try to find solutions to it.

In their proverbial repertoire, the Shona do have various proverbs that have to do with conflict, prevention, management and resolution from which lessons can be drawn and applied to present day conflict situations as the following analysis will show. Areas of conflict to be focused on in this analysis include: courtship and marriage, the family (both nuclear and extended) and the community at large.

CONFLICT, CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION DEFINED

Robbins and Coulter (2005: 380-381) define conflict as “perceived incompatible differences resulting in some form of interference or opposition”. The same authors point out that over the years three different views have evolved regarding conflict: the traditional view of conflict is that all conflict is bad and should be avoided, the human relations view of conflict is that it is a natural and inevitable outcome in any group and need not be negatively viewed but rather has potential to be a positive force in contributing to group performance and finally, the interactionist view which argues that not only can conflict be a positive force in a group, but that some conflict is absolutely necessary for a group to perform effectively (Robbins and Coulter, 2005). The view though does not suggest that all conflicts are good. There are some conflicts that are seen as supporting the goals of the work group and improving its performance (functional conflicts of a constructive nature) while other conflicts are destructive and prevent a group from achieving its goals (dysfunctional conflicts). All the three views, though they differ on thrust, acknowledge that conflict is present in life, hence the need for strategies to prevent, manage or find solutions to it.

Conflict management is the practice of identifying and handling conflict in a sensible, fair and efficient manner (http://www.cedanet.com/meta/conflict-management, Accessed on 01-02-2012). The essence of this definition is that conflict is neither bad nor good. The key is how we understand and respond to it, which is what we call conflict management. The ultimate purpose of conflict management according to Dr Holmes, is to reduce the incidence of dysfunctional conflict, (conflict that hinders group performance) and to increase the likelihood that any conflicts that take place in future will be resolved efficiently and effectively (http://www.doctorholmes.net/conflict_management.htm Accessed on 01-02-2012). This the Shona proverb does capture quite well as the following Shona proverbs reflect: “Dziva rine ngwena idiva kamwe, ukadzokera unowanwa ngwena dzasvinura” (Dive into a crocodile infested pool once, the second time around you will find them awake), implying they will attack you. “Potsi haarwirwi, anowerira ndipiri” (A first time offence should not be fought over, but a second time one). Here lenience is called for in the case of first time offenders, but if one makes it a habit then a stiffer penalty is called for.

Conflict resolution on the other hand involves the methods and process of negotiation and arbitration and institution building which promote the peaceful ending of social conflict. Dr Holmes gives three steps to effective resolution thus: (i) understanding the cause of the
conflict. (ii) understanding the intensity of conflict and (iii) selecting a strategy for resolving the conflict (http://www.doctorholmes.net/conflict_management, Accessed on 01-02-2012). The Shona proverb, as illustrated above tended to cater for as the Shona people took their time to look into issues thoroughly before rushing to make a decision. They also had effective communication channels and structures which prevented direct confrontation of those involved in the conflict situation.

Thomas in Robbins and Coulter (2005) posits that there are various types of conflict and gives three examples, task oriented, relationship oriented and process oriented conflicts. When levels of conflict are high he points out that selection can be made for resolution or management from various conflict-resolution options such as avoidance, accommodation, force, compromise or collaboration. The approach to use depends on whether one desires to be more or less cooperative or more or less assertive.

Informed by the above options to conflict resolution, an analysis of the Shona proverbs follows premised on the view that the Shona are a peace loving people, Chigidi (1988) who do not like fuelling conflict or being confrontational in order to maintain that peace.

ANALYSIS OF SELECTED SHONA PROVERBS

Courtship and marriage

Present day society is bedeviled with domestic violence (in some cases leading to gruesome murders) divorce and public violence in general. In as far as domestic violence and divorce are concerned, one wonders what would have gone wrong between two people who might have pledged “till death do us part”, and parted with hundreds if not thousands of their hard earned cash and other resources on lavish weddings. Is it not that people meet anywhere, anyhow, with whoever and then rush to the altar? A few lessons from Shona proverbs on courtship and marriage might help us see that though inevitable, conflict in marriage could easily be managed or even prevented well before through a number of precautionary measures that could be taken, as reflected through some Shona proverbs.

Apart from the long courtship period taken, (that was a sign of courage, commitment and patience) (Gombe, 1998), the two involved were encouraged to study, understand and learn as much about each other as possible before commitment for marriage. The Shona traditionally believed that one does not show his/her true colors during the courtship period hence the proverb “Rinonyenga rinohwarara rinozosimudza musoro rawana” (One who is courting / being courted does not show one’s true colors during the courtship period, but will only do so after marriage). What they simply intend to make clear through this proverb is similar to what Shakespeare says through Duncan in Macbeth that “There’s no art to find the mind’s construction in the face” (Act I Scene IV Lines 11-12). This people know, that during courtship, there could be a lot of deception hence the need to marry those whose background one knows as the proverb “Rooranai vematongo” (Marriage should be between people who know each other’s background), presupposes, that at least someone whose background one knows is a better candidate for marriage than a total stranger.

Conflict in marriage then, could at least be reduced, managed or contained if need be, as knowing each other’s background, family history etc would imply that in times of conflict the relatives would come in (as they knew each other well before the union any way). In some cases, conflict would be quickly resolved or contained by dealing with problems early rather than later, when they might be too many or even complicated. To support this view, a number of proverbs were aptly coined, for example “Nyoka inorwiswa ndeiri musango, yapinda mumba chibatabata” (A snake in the bush is easy to fight, but one already in the house becomes a problem). Simply put, it also implies that it is wiser to take precautions to prevent conflict, than get in it. Precautions before marriage, would be useful rather than getting into the thick of conflict while already in marriage, hence the proverbs “Kudzivirira kwakakunda kurwa” (Prevention is better than fighting) and ‘Moto wesora tiza uchiiri kure’ (To escape a veld fire, flee when it is still far). The conflict management strategy being applied here is avoidance.

The current scenario though, does not augur well for conflict management in marriage. If people can meet anywhere, anyhow, engage, marry at times without even informing their parents, what can stop us from getting shocking news of brutal murders as part and parcel of domestic violence? It all boils down to dysfunctional conflict resulting from failure to take precautionary measures that these Shona proverbs clearly spell out.

Cases of extra-marital affairs amongst the married folk also abound and are another cause of conflict in marriage. Quarrels, fights and murders occur when the cheated party discovers it. People have been maimed, burnt with hot water or cooking oil or even shot to death due to conflicts arising from the above mentioned misdemeanor, yet a look through the Shona proverb shows how this could be prevented, “Mukadzi womumwe ndiambuya” (Another man’s wife is a mother-in-law). In Shona culture, the relationship between a son-in-law and mother-in-law is a restrained one. It is characterized by highly formal language, a high degree of respect and in some Shona communities they are not even allowed to
shake hands. The register for their speech “is Chinyarikani” a high formal code required in such a relationship in order to maintain distance and show respect (Hodza, 1978). Thus, the proverb strongly puts forward the view that if all married men and women, interacted in the manner a mother-in-law and son-in-law do, that is kept their distance, showed a high degree of respect, conflict arising from issues such as extra-marital affairs would be prevented.

Accommodation is another option the Shona encourage through the proverb on such issues. Having realized that such issues are inevitable, in society, they rise to the occasion and posit “Gomba harina mwana” (A boyfriend has no child in an extra-marital affair. Thus while they do not condone the behavior of having affairs with other men’s wives, they go down to pacify the wronged part, that in the event that a child has resulted from the affair, he stands to benefit by having another child while the boyfriend loses for he cannot claim the child by another man’s wife. This hinges on the Shona’s traditional form of justice designed to mend relationships rather than perpetuate conflict.

Conflict management in the family

The proverb “Ndumudzani hadzidyiri mundiro imwe chete” (Children who follow each other by birth do not eat from the same plate), indicates that even in the family, which is supposed to be a close knit unit, conflict does exist. However, in the event that the conflict is seen to be getting to the point of being dysfunctional, family members are always reminded that “Akama haugezwi setsvina” (Blood relations cannot be washed off like dirt), hence they should always make an effort to manage the conflict positively so that in the end blood remains thicker than water as the proverb above emphasizes. Even outsiders are reminded that, it is unwise to poke one’s nose into a family quarrel or conflict, since in most cases relatives will quickly get reconciled and they combine against the outsider who in the end will be accused of being responsible for fanning the flames of discord amongst those of blood relations.

Thus, conflicts within families are managed and resolved within the family structure and no outside interference is required in the first instance, hinged on the fact that even if those related by blood may disagree, in the end “Makudo ndimamwe, kuona mhani anobvutidzana”. (Even if baboons fight over a scorpion, they remain members of the same troop). Outside help is only sought for when there is a stalemate for fear that the family might end up in disequilibrium. The head of the family, the aunts, uncles and elders like grandmothers and grandfathers, are all consulted in times of conflict so that an amicable resolution can be reached, hence the proverb “Muonerapamwe chuma chomuzukuru”. (It is a family affair to fix a grandchild’s beads). Thought the process the spirit of familhood is maintained. This has implications for the wider community where in times of conflict, communities or countries should aim at finding home grown solutions to their problems first before appealing to the international community for assistance.

Within the family set up, conflict management also thrives on respect. The proverb “Hakuna Musha unoita machongwe maviri”. (There is no home with two cocks), calls upon those of one’s kin to respect each other’s positions or territories of authority, in order to maintain peace with one’s relatives. The proverb “Musha mukadzi” (A woman/wife makes a home) also helps in conflict situations in the family as women are accorded the respect they deserve. Children are also expected fairly as a way of preventing conflict, hence “Manhanga change ose hapana risina mhodzi”. (Tender all pumpkins the same, since all have seeds). It is this thread of respect that strings the family together, in the end minimizing conflict or helping keep it under control, since it cannot completely be ruled out in any situation where people interact. Thus, if there is peace in the family (considered the nucleus of any society), there is bound to be peace in the community at large, something the Shona encouraged through proverbs relating to conflict management in the family as discussed above.

Conflict management at community level

The Shona people are very tactful when dealing with conflict situations outside the family circle. Rebut outside family circles is never administered directly for fear of creating unnecessary clashes that may lead to dysfunctional conflict that might throw the society into disequilibrium. Proverbs then come in handy as they are generalizations that do not point a finger at a particular person, but will always drive the point home that an amicable resolution can be reached, hence the proverb “Muonerapamwe chuma chomuzukuru”. (It is a family affair to fix a grandchild’s beads). Thought the process the spirit of familhood is maintained. This has implications for the wider community where in times of conflict, communities or countries should aim at finding home grown solutions to their problems first before appealing to the international community for assistance.

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Take the example of the traditional Shona court (dare) proverbs are skillfully introduced into speeches at crucial moments and may influence the actual decisions reached (in most cases positively). The wronged part may present his/her case through a proverb “Kambudzi kubarira pavanhu kuti nditandirwe imbwa”. (When a goat gives birth where there are people, the intention is to have them chase the dogs away), lest the dogs kill the newly born kid. If the plaintiff becomes difficult later on, the chief
may remind him/her of the intention of bringing the case
to court, the need for assistance in dealing with the issue
so he/she has to abide by the court’s decision, the
conflict management option here is subtle force.

If, the chief and his counselors notice that the culprit
has pleaded guilty and apologized but the plaintiff temper
has become “too hot” and he/she has gone into an
uncompromising stance or has gone into unforgiving
mood, they might throw in proverbs like.” Yapinda kamwe
halteyiwi” “Potsi haarwirwe anorwirwa ndipiri” (There is
no need to fight over a first time offence). The proverbs
appeal for lenience on the part of the offended part but
also warn the offender to avoid such behavior in future,
for the chances of escaping danger or punishment the
second time around are very slim. Other proverbs used to
warn the offender include “Tsudo haiponi murutsva
dzakura” (A hare does not escape a veld fire twice) and
“Dziva rine ngwena idiva kamwe, ukadzokera unowana
ngwena dzasvinura” (Swim once in a crocodile infested
pool, the second time around you might find the
crocodiles awake), implying one will not escape scot free.
Thus warning the offender, they are at the same time
appealing to the wronged part to compromise, be
accommodative and forgive.

Another lesson that can be drawn from the Shona
proverb is the importance of self-restraint in order to
avoid unnecessary conflicts. This is believed to be crucial
for peace to prevail in the community. The following
proverbs are indicative of the above argument, “Kugara
hunzwanana” (Only harmony with neighbors will make for
a settled life). The implication here is that good
neighborliness is crucial for peace and harmony to
prevail. People do not want to cooperate with aggressive
characters or where there is bickering, they cooperate
where there is peace and harmony, hence the need for
communities to nip conflict in the bud, “Moto wesora tiza
uchiri kure” (To escape a veld fire flee when it is still far).
The conflict resolution options here are accommodation,
compromise and avoidance so that peace prevails.
These options are not only relevant at community level,
but nationally and internationally as well, for there have
been cases of sanctions leveled at some countries viewed
as being difficult to cooperate with. No wonder
why the proverb Kugarahunzwanana has been turned
into a pet (dog) name in some Shona communities in
which case Mukusha and Masaka (2011: 160) argue
 sends a message that, “In order for peace, harmony and
solidarity to transpire in the family and neighborhood,
there is need to avoid squabbles…”.

There are times when subtle force is also applied to
prevent conflict, “Nharo dzinoparira muviri maronda”
(Quarrels cause physical injury). In this case, fear is
instilled in those who are fond of quarrelling and
provoking others to fighting as they may eventually get
injured themselves. Simply put, the lesson that fighting or
quarrelling does not solve problems is being put forward
here. Indirectly, accommodating each other is
encouraged for peace to prevail in society.

There is evidence from the Shona proverb that taking
the law into one’s hands is not encouraged in conflict
situations. The proverb “Kudzorera mumwe kuisa musoro
mumakwati” (Hitting back is putting one in a worse
situation), points to the fact that no matter how much a
person has been insulted and wronged, he/she should
resist fighting it out him/herself. It is far better to exercise
restraint and take the matter to court and have it judged
properly. This proverb is quoted to cool down the temper
of a person who wants to take the law into his/her own
hands; the desire to fight back when attacked, yet the
mark of a gentleman/woman is the ability to turn one’s
back on a situation that calls for one to retaliate.

Another source of conflict in life is abuse and misuse of
other people’s property. This the Shona note and warn
against in advance, so as to prevent conflict reflected
through the proverb “ Perekwa chavamwe chisina venda”
(Return other people’s property undamaged). Thus if one
borrows someone’s property, they are bound to handle it
with care and return it in one piece so as not to
disappoint or anger the owner hence, maintain good
relations in the community.

CONCLUSION

The analysis has clearly shown that the Shona proverb is
a rich source of conflict management strategies among
them accommodation, avoidance, subtle force,
compromise and collaboration. The paper has clearly
shown that Shona proverbs are a carrier of age old
crystallized capsules of knowledge and wisdom that can
be useful in conflict management at different levels of our
societies if applied. This has been concluded because a
number of proverbs analyzed in this paper appear to be
quite relevant to issues of conflict, since proverbs are not
a once off occurrence, but are generated from carefully
tested observation, experience and knowledge which is
then expressed in graphic and concise form. Thus
proverbs remain relevant from generation.

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