

ENHANCING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN PEACE
BUILDING AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN
AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES

Miruka Babu Dennis*

Dr. Martin J. Babu**

Gladys Mogoi Mauti***

ABSTRACT:

This research paper explores how the role of Women in conflict transformation can be enhanced and promoted in the African context. The conceptual underpinning of conflict transformation are first considered. It is argued that the Women has an important and unique role to play in conflict management and transformation because of the healing that it promoted in deeply divided tribal ethnic societies. The role of Women in promoting truth, just and reconciliation is emphasized in the context of her role as a track two conflict manager. Specifically the article analyses how the Women can assist in personal, relational, structural and cultural transformation to manage deep-rooted peace in African communities. It blends to discuss how the women can be of greater service in Reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa. In traditional African culture Women contributed a lot to promote peace among conflicting communities because they could easily persuade Men to avoid war and concentrate on promoting developing their society.

Background

* Lecturer In School of Law Kampala International University College, Dar es salaam, Tanzania

** Lecturer in Faculty of Business and Management Kampala International university college, Dar es salaam, Tanzania

*** Final Year Student at the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities Nairobi University, Kenya

Research and writings on the place of womanhood in African traditional societies figure prominently in African literary and social science literature. Blazing the trail and dominating the field in this direction, are African female novelists such as Nwapa (1966, 1970, 1980, 1981), Ba (1981), Emechata (1972, 1974, 1976, 1979, 1982), Head (1968), Njau (1975), Ogot (1980), Waciuma (1969), all of whom, write from the African feminist perspective.

Emecheta's (1974, 1976, 1979, 982) writings, for example, focus purely on the oppression of patriarchy in traditional African societies and therefore on the discourse of protest against the cultural injustice on the girl child in traditional societies. Her writings, in other words, draw serious attention to the brutalities, subordination and other oppressive realities and manifestations of the trammels of tradition on women in Africa. And her aim is to use the avenue of fiction to counsel modern African men towards putting a halt to the negative experience of patriarchal exploitation of women in Africa.

To validate this, her female creations are, in general, industrious, businesslike and economically independent, pursuing with seriousness of purpose and determination whatever they have set their minds upon. Her principal point of view is that modern African society must change its attitude towards the woman, marriage and motherhood, which, desirable as it is, constitutes only an option for *womanbeing* in contemporary Africa. And that women, when given the chance, can tower over men in mental and material achievements. Nwapa's works also constitute a testimony of the indispensability of the woman in the social and economic fabric of African community. They demonstrate the confidence she has in the ability of African women to lead a life of fulfillment within or outside marriage unfettered by men, provided they are economically independent.

The positive results of such writings as the above in Africa are, among others, the current sensitization of the conscience of the men folk towards redressing the inattention to the girl child's education and welfare in African societies. Through their discourse of protest, and their other works which show that whatever a man can do, a woman can do it even better, they call attention to the plights of women in Africa, to the injustices of patriarchal orientation of the traditional culture against the girl child, and to the need for African parents to take interest in giving adequate start in life to the girl child. The sequel is the development, presently, of a new vision for a balanced education of the modern girl child in contemporary Africa.

Of course, notwithstanding the immense positive contributions of such writings as have just been highlighted, feminist studies in Africa have a number of limitations. One is their one-sided emphasis on the theme of woman subordination in Africa. By their omission to give account of the positive aspects of *woman being* in traditional Africa their writings overshadow and fail to draw out the immense contributions and the agentic role of women in peace building and conflict resolutions in traditional African societies. Such omission creates the unnecessary impression of African women as victims rather than givers and builders of culture within the society. And the result is the prevailing opposition that now exists between women and men in contemporary Africa. Were the positive contributions of women in traditional African societies to be seriously reviewed and noted, both groups would have seen the indispensability of the other in the arduous task of nation building and harmonious living in contemporary African societies.

It is against the background just presented that one can then see the great importance of the present colloquium coming at the instance of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID) aimed at providing an unrivalled opportunity for giving a proper space and account of the positive contributions of women in peace building and conflict resolutions in traditional African societies. By thinking out and sponsoring such a meeting the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue has done a valuable job of helping to give voice to the often unsung role of women in promoting the culture of peace in Africa.

Studies on Women and Peace in traditional Africa

There is, to the best of my knowledge, one principal published text focusing on women and peace in traditional Africa. It is that one text that is reviewed below. It is composed of a number of case studies, which were carried out between the mid-1990s and the year 2001. These studies were aimed at evaluating the role of women and peace in six African countries: Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Namibia, Somali, and Tanzania. The six studies were undertaken within the framework of the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Women and Culture of Peace Programme. The results clearly demonstrate an interesting collage of traditional conflict resolution and peace-building practices in Africa south of the Sahara. Consequently a thorough review of the six studies will be vital, as so doing would draw attention to important insights into the relevance of traditional African women agency in peace-building and conflict resolution practices that are worthy of our

attention in our current search for solutions for the peace problems bedeviling the life and opportunities of people in contemporary Africa.

The first of these studies is the one undertaken by Heike Becker. It was entitled *The Role of Namibian Women in Peace-building and Conflict Resolution*. It investigated, in particular, the role played by women in the practice of peace restoration rituals in the aftermath of war.

The second study is that by Josephine Ntahobari and Basilissa Ndayiziga, entitled: *The Role of Burundian Women in the Peaceful Settlement of Conflicts*. The specific objectives of the study were: (1) to highlight the part played by women in conflict prevention and the peaceful settlement of conflicts in traditional Burundian society; (2) to examine the role Burundian women can have today in the search for a peaceful solution to the current crises; (3) to put forward recommendations enabling Burundian women to make a contribution to the peaceful settlement of conflicts.

A. Lihamba carried out the third study. It was entitled: *The Study of Women's Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Skills among Morogoro region of Tanzania*. Lihamba's study explored how women from Morogoro region in Central Tanzania have coped with violent conflict and more specifically at how they have contended with the task of building peace.

The fourth study explored the role played by women of the Central African Republic in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. The researchers include M. J. Mathey, Therese Dejean, Maurice Deballe, Romain Sapiro, Abel Koulaninga and Joseph Moga. The main objective of the study was to seek in the people's collective memory certain traditional values which, once rehabilitated, could enable the Central African woman of today to carry out the mission of peace which had always been hers in traditional society. The analysis was based on some 60 respondents, living in the eight boroughs of Bangui and aged between 35 and 80, who expressed their opinions and concerns about the evolution of society and peace.

The fifth study undertaken by Mohamed Abdi Mohamed was entitled: *The Role of Somali Women in the Search for Peace*. It highlighted the factors that contribute to conflict and war among the people of Somali.

Valerie Ngongo-Mbede carried out the sixth study. It explored the place and role of women in the mediation of conflicts in the traditional society of Cameroon. It also examined the concept of peace in traditional Cameroonian society.

Findings

The six studies taken together generated two kinds of findings. The first was on women's contributions to peace building. The second was on women's contributions to conflict resolutions in traditional Africa. These findings are presented below.

1. The meaning of peace in traditional Africa

One of the most important results from the Cameroonian study is its finding on the African traditional notion of peace. According to the traditional Cameroonian people peace is not seen as an absence of war. The investigator in the Cameroonian study rather observes that:

In almost all the cultures of Cameroon, peace was equated with 'freshness', health, well being, harmony, calm and tranquility. The absence of such qualities was seen as the sign of conflicts, which could be either latent or overt. It was that harmony and freshness which provided farmers with good crops, fishermen with abundant catches and hunters with game. When there was enough food for everyone, peace would reign in homes and families, clans and tribes. As nobody had any reason to be envious of anybody else, neighboring communities could live in peace, visit one another during the off-seasons and attend weddings and funerals.

It is interesting to note that respondents from both the Somali and the Burundi surveys also confirmed the above notion.

2. Women and peace building through positive childcare

An important finding from all the six studies reviewed is that African traditional societies assigned to women the role of educator. Such education is the type that starts from the cradle and was affected by means of a variety of activities in which the children participated. Thus the most general implication in all the six studies is the understanding that peace is not born but made and that the culture of peace in traditional African societies was implanted in a child through responsible upbringing and socialization undertaken and supervised by mothers. Indeed the central message in these studies is that peace building was taken seriously in traditional African societies and that it is established, little by little, in young minds and moulded in the behaviour and personality of the young through the agency of the mother.

In particular, these studies reported that girls were specifically trained in their duties and responsibilities as women and that the elderly women were responsible for this training. It was

suggested that from early childhood, each child was exposed to a variety of songs, stories, proverbs and sayings directed by the mother or the aunt and conveyed at the fireplace or after the evening meals, which aim at reducing conflict. The songs, stories, proverbs and sayings contain simple but clear messages and moral teachings. Indeed some of the studies went ahead to suggest that African mothers in such stories and songs tried to project to the children what they expect of them as sons and daughters in family and community relationships. They showed that in sum, the themes of such stories and songs expect the children to demonstrate: (1) responsibility through reciprocity; (2) honesty and loyalty through mutuality and deference; and (3) faith and compassion through inner strength and self-control. They also focus on the importance in human living and mutuality, of consideration for others. According to some of the reports there are many stories that talk of greed and individual interests as major sources of conflict and the young men and women are warned against them. Certain myths given to children in those days were meant to emphasize the fact that to avoid war can sometimes be an act of good leadership. Some stories also underscore the negative aspects of conflict and hostilities such that these become a deterrent.

Speaking particularly of the people of Burundi in this issue of women and mothers as peace educators in traditional Africa, Ntahobari and Ndayiziga (2003:18) observe that:

It was primarily the mother that had responsibility for the upbringing of the children. Children, especially when very young, remained with their mother, who would look after both boys and girls until they reached a given age (for boys, until the time when their father took over the responsibility). There were strict rules to be complied with on how to dress, speak, eat and even walk and sit (especially for girls).

Supporting the above, one respondent from the Burundian study notes that in traditional Africa: Children live in the home of their birth, observing what is done, watching their parents and elders and following their example. This period of extended observation is supervised by the mother, who has her young children constantly at her side, giving them punishments scaled to their years, so that from an early age, children come to acquire an appetite for those human qualities, immensely valuable to the society, that denote a good upbringing. The education of a daughter who had reached the age of puberty was a matter of ongoing concern for her mother, who had to

prepare her properly for marriage, so that, once a wife herself, she too would become a factor for stability and peace in her husband's family.

In addition, in all these studies reviewed, the indication was that disciplinary measures existed, even for the very young, to set them on the right road at an early stage. It also shown, according to some of the reports, that girls' education was based on practical and moral training. Their mothers were expected to be particularly careful about it, and that it was a source of special pride to a mother when a daughter was prized for her qualities. When, on the other hand, one's daughter was denigrated, the mother usually feels the disappointment keenly, as it was her training that was being criticized.

Commenting on the same theme, Ntahokaja (1978:26) recalls that in traditional Burundian society "a woman might be repudiated for her bad manners, if she were dirty, impolite or greedy". Consequently, according to her, among the Burundi "a mother's advice to her daughter was calculated to reinforce and strengthen those values that would help her make a success of her married life."

The Tanzanian study (Lihamba, 2003:115) particular revealed that "Tanzanian women have always played a critical part in maintaining equilibrium in their society by bringing up their children as responsible members of the community. Women taught their daughters and sons, proper behaviour and the ethos of society, and impressed on them the importance of such values as honesty, uprightness and the necessity to compromise. As such, women have always been active promoters of harmony in the community, which can be referred to as a culture of peace". In her view, this natural role of women is not unique to any particular ethnic group in Tanzania, but rather is generalized throughout the country.

A similar trend of emphasis on the role of 'mother as peace builder' is also noted in the study among the people of Somali where women were shown to prepare and train the young boys who are one day going to be adult men of the society. They teach the boys the rules of the game, particularly norms relating to the wild animals that can be hunted and those that cannot and should not be touched. Among the animals that cannot be hunted are the ones that are pregnant and those with calves.

The same report also made it clear that "the mother is the first and most valuable school in life." In confirmation of this there is a saying among the Somali, which states that 'Mother is a

school'. According to the report "mothers always strive to bring up their children with positive norms and ethos, with a view to building a family equipped to contribute to the foundation of a decent society. They make every effort to lay the foundation for a healthy, confident society that can take charge of its destiny." This same view is echoed in the words of the famous Somali poet, Arays Isse Karshe who in celebrating the contributions of Somali mother in peace building points out that:

The language with which we speak
The fundamentals, of our behaviour and conduct
She taught us with great skill
Mother is indispensable for being and learning.

When a family is built, women are the foundation and the fundamentals of learning and values ultimately lead to decency. Somalis say: 'The values with which children are brought up precede their actual birth'. Indeed, before becoming adults, we attend a basic school, and that school is mother (cf. Mohammed, 2003:102).

The same appreciation of 'the mother as school' is found in the report from the Cameroonian study which underscored the idea that among the traditional communities in Cameroon, the mothers taught their children, particularly the girls, how to share and to show solidarity. They showed them how to protect the weaker children and the handicapped.

These observations and trends clearly demonstrate that an essential contribution of women in traditional African societies is their role as school for the young. Through their important mothering role, the culture of peace is entrenched in children as a foundation for peaceful living in families, the community and the clan.

3. Women and Peace building through social capital transmission

Again, one principal revelation in the studies reviewed is the idea that in traditional African societies peace germinates and flourishes only on the manure provided by the presence of a number of key African cultural values. These values include: patience, tolerance, honesty, respect for elders, communality and mutuality, compassion, regard for due discretion, gentleness, modesty, self-control, moderation, flexibility, and open-mindedness.

In line with the above, the Mohamed Abdi Mohamed (2003) observed from his Somali study that:

In order to strengthen peace, Somali customary law encourages people to uphold the principles listed below, which constitute the basic pillars underpinning the culture of peace.

The principles in question include: tolerance, respect, consideration for neighbours and inviolability, respect for human rights and equality. To corroborate the importance given to the last two values, is the Somali saying that, ‘every one has a father.’

Now, in addition to the above values are the following three traditional Somali customary principles, which state that the under listed crowned heads cannot be killed: women and children. And, among the Somali, according to Mohamed there is a saying, “whoever commits this sin is considered to be a coward and is ostracized. Killing women and children breeds perpetual conflicts.” The next group of crowned heads is the refugees. The others are the elderly and the sick. It was revealed too that the culture of peace underlying Somali customary law also covers non-combatants and civilians.

The Burundian study showed that the education of children was the preserve of women and that it was they who played the greater part in transmitting important traditional Burundian values to future generations.

Thus an important conclusion to draw from the trend of results of the six studies in relation to the notion of values’ education and peace building in traditional African societies is that women play a dominant role in the transmission, propagation and consolidation of the critical values that generate peace and harmony in traditional African societies.

Little wonder then why respondents from the Burundian study had complained that most of traditional Burundian values have either collapsed or been abandoned. They spoke of the ‘deterioration and breakdown of positive values’ and of the growing lack of restraint, intolerance and violence in Burundian society. That being the case, they claimed, it has become a matter of urgency to rehabilitate the culture of Burundi and restore its prestige so that it contributes today, as it did in the past, to making a balanced and cohesive society. In their view, the first step toward this should be to redefine the role of the family and the mother in our contemporary society. In their view, the family and the mother must return to being what they used to, in traditional society, namely, the framework for perpetuating the society’s cultural identity and positive values, and the custodian of that identity and of social behaviour.

4. Women's contribution to conflict mediation in traditional Africa

The study by Mathey et al (2003: 41) revealed that a fundamental fact of traditional Central African societies was the sacred character of the respect given to the elderly in general, and to elderly women in particular. "The elderly woman," according to respondents from that study, "was respected by all, and played a key role in crisis management and conflict resolution. Thus, when a conflict degenerated into armed violence, an appeal would usually be made to a third party of mature years to calm the tension and reconcile the combatants. Such an appeal for mediation was usually made to a woman who enjoyed the consideration and respect of all who knew her."

The same study revealed that if war broke out among the Zande, "the oldest women of the clan would go to meet opposing clan, and to interpose themselves between the fighters in order to make them see reason. When words proved fruitless, the women would threaten to expose their nakedness or to go down on their knees. In either case, the gesture signified a curse for those who bore the responsibility for such grave acts. Because of the respect that the enemy soldiers had for the women, they would usually put down their weapons before the fateful acts were accomplished."

Continuing, the same report suggests that if there was no laying down of arms, the old women, naked and on their knees, would crawl towards the foolhardy combatants and say to them:

We are your mothers,
We do not want war,
We do not want bloodshed.
Do not fight with your brothers.
They have sent us to sue for peace.

And if the assailants still refused to see reason and marched on the village, they would suffer the ultimate punishment for having disobeyed and obliged their 'grandmothers' to expose their nakedness.

The same conflict mediation charisma is reported of women among the traditional Burundi people. According to the researchers, Ntahobari and Ndayiziga (2003: 16):

Although the traditional Burundi society was organized and structured in ways that encouraged cohesiveness and peaceful coexistence, from time to time, like any other human society, it experienced conflict. Conflicts arose between individuals, within a family, between different families or between the inhabitants of different territories. To manage such conflicts, traditional society had well-organized regulatory machinery in which women generally played a major part. Under this system a woman was recognized as having an advisory role, behind the scenes, mainly where her husband was concerned, and as playing an active part in strengthening solidarity and social harmony generally. Within this structure, women played the more unobtrusive yet leading substantial role, both in their families and within their own circle.

Indeed indications from all the six studies had been that at home, the traditional African wife exercised a considerable influence over her husband although it was reported that authority was forced to remain discreet, as it was a controversial issue in society, which could see it as weakness on the part of the husband. As a result, the wife was usually discreet in public, but became the most influential adviser of her husband in the intimacy of the bedroom.

Along this line, Mathey et al. (2003:39) reported in their study of the traditional people of the Central African Republic that:

Apart from the meals shared with the whole family, the traditional wife in the communities of the Central African Republic reserved a small dish called the 'bed dish', which she gave to her husband at the bedtime. It was during that intimate meal that confidential conversations took place between husband and wife. The wife called her husband by the name of her first son or first daughter, and gave him advice on the facts of life. That advice would greatly influence the decisions, which the husband later took. Sometimes, the husband faced with a problem would postpone his decision until the following night so that he could first seek his wife's opinion.

In a similar vein, Mohammed Abdi Mohammed (2003:100) reports from his Somali study that among the Somali some women poets use their art to search for peace in their country. Among these poets are Faduma Qasim Hilowle and Zeinab Hagi Ali. In one occasion according to the report, Faduma Qasim Hilwle spoke on behalf of Somali women singing about peace:

We the women

Have a complaint against men

In the name of marriage, love and friendship

We the women

Demand peace in the country

We demand security and prosperity

The boys that we bring up

We want them to grow up in peace.

Indeed, among the Tubur (Tupuri) of Cameroon, mediation by women was primarily a matter of age. The *Wog Clu*, or 'old mamas', were responsible for mediation and consulted on all problems, which disturbed the peace. Once consulted, a *Wog Clu* converted both those directly involved in the conflict and witnesses. She listened attentively to them, and then addressed the protagonists, naming the person or persons at fault and asking the offended party to forgive the offender or offenders. It could happen that the mediation of the *Wog Clu* failed to resolve the conflict, in which case she referred the adversaries to the head of the community. The Nare Bunsonre of Cameroon was responsible for the day-to-day management of the conflicts between co-wives, adults, humans and nature. They communicated to humans not only the wishes for peace of the ancestors with whom they were in contact, but also the requirements for maintaining harmony with nature with which they were in communion.

Now, not only did women in traditional African societies mediate conflicts between human beings, but they could also serve as intermediaries in conflicts between human beings and nature. Consequently in the land of Mungo of the Cameroon, for example, the report was given that any misfortune occurring in the community brought the latter to seek the mediation of the *Kalbia*, who were married women. In these communities, in general, misfortune and calamities were taken to imply the existence of conflicts between the people.

Not every married woman, however, was a *Kalbia*. Only those women recognized by the clanswomen as having supernatural powers (the gift of clairvoyance, for example) became a *Kalbia*. But once discovered, the *Kalbia* was associated with all meetings and consultations. She had a very wide range of action: she could determine the causes of the evil undermining society and hindering peace, and she could ward off fate and restore peace, because she intervened between disruptive forces and society.

Again these observations and others like them show that women in traditional African societies played strategic role not only in peace building but also in conflict *mediation* processes. They serve as bridge in peace restoration and conflict prevention when conflicts erupt in families, clans or communities in which they are bonded.

5. Women contribution to conflict resolution: Practices and Rituals

Under this theme the Somali study demonstrates that when clans fight and there is death, steps are taken to organize the collection and payment of blood money. A marriage or marriages involving the two parties immediately follow this. This kind of marriage occurs between a man who lost a brother or close relative and a girl from the opposing side. The main objective of the marriage is to heal the wounds and to cement the agreement/settlement reached by the two parties. In the support of the above practice, the Somalis say: ‘Where blood is shed, it must be soaked with birth fluids’. And the point is that the married woman will give birth to sons who will fill the void created by the men who perished in the battle. In addition, the marriage is designed to bond the two groups, and thus to minimize the possibility of another conflict erupting between them.

Continuing, the same report observed that in periods of conflict, there were times when a group of young, unmarried women from one of the warring clans paid visits to the opposing clan without the knowledge or consent of their families. They were locally known as *Heerin*. They told the people that they were unmarried women, and that they wanted to be married. Because this was a well known tradition, the young women were welcomed, and preparations were made to ensure that they were married. This immediately stabilized the situation, and sets in motion a peace process that eventually resolved the conflict.

Again, according to the Somali researcher, (Mohamed, 2003: 103), “In some parts of the country, women at times employed desperate measures to stop inter-and intra-clan wars. They formed a human chain, lined themselves up between the warring parties, and refused to leave until the two groups backed down. Their immediate objective was to see to it that the two armies did not shoot each other. A related objective was to bring in alternative conflict resolution methods based on dialogue and peace.” According to him, too, if in the thick of a battle, a woman stepped in front of a man about to be killed, that man’s life was spared. In this way, women played a key role in saving the lives of those considered to be of high standing in the

community. This act often created an environment that enabled the warring parties to settle their differences peacefully and to establish good relations.

Among the Bamileke of Cameroon, according to Ngongo-Mbede (2003), the *Magne*, or mothers of twins, were considered to be blessed by God. Their mission was, first of all, one of peace. The arrival of a *Magne* in a place of conflict had the immediate effect of stopping the hostile acts. Once in the midst of the confrontation, she assumed responsibility for reconciling the belligerents. She divided the 'tree of peace' into two and offered a piece to each of the protagonists as a token of reconciliation. Twins themselves were seen as tree of peace planted in the family. Her role consisted, therefore, in bringing everybody together, and considering everyone as her own child. In every situation, she had to endeavour to restore the peace required for the smooth functioning of the chiefdom. The *Mafo* also played the role of intermediary, in other words of mediator, between the chief and his subjects. But to gain trust and respect, the *Mafo* had herself to be just and to show integrity.

A much similar trend is noted among the traditional communities in Namibia. Becker's (2003) findings, for example, show among other things that women play strategic role in the spiritual healing of the wounds of war. The healing rituals they engage in are intended to purify and cleanse the war returnees of blood-guilt. The idea behind the ritual was that the blood of person killed had to be conciliated. The killer had to be purified with magic rites, otherwise his desire to kill would spread to other people, disturbing the communal peace. The killer was considered intoxicated with blood (*A kolwa ombinzi*). It was believed that the blood he had spilled made him unable to control himself, losing part of his body, heart and speech. This, it was believed, made him speak in a confused manner (Hiltunen 1993: 218-9).

According the researcher, Ngongo-Mbede (2003:31), "in the philosophy of these communities, such a succession of misfortune was not fortuitous. It was the sign that love and peace were absent from the community, and prompted the women to decide to organize a *Mbabi*. The latter was organized in a grove or on a crossroads, after consultation of the oracles. It was exclusively a meeting of women who had reached the age of the menopause. The ceremony was presided over by a woman of very advanced years whose moral integrity was usually universally acknowledged. Men could on occasion, be associated with the *Mbabi*. Even in such exceptional cases, however, it was the women who organized and presided over the ceremony of reconciling human beings with themselves, with relatives and with nature." The same study also revealed

that if the Mbabi was convened because of a long-lasting drought, which was leading to famine in the community, the women invoked the help of the ancestors, intercessors between God and the living, and prayed for rain. The drought, in that case, was seen as a sign of conflict between humans and their Creator whom the former had disobeyed. The Mbabi always ended with the drinking of mystic potions by each of the members present at the meeting.

The above trends show that although, for so many years, the strategic role of women in conflict resolution in contemporary Africa has continued to be ignored. The current review suggests this that attitude is ill-advised since we have seen that in traditional African societies women's positive contributions in such a venture had never been in doubt. From what the reviews suggest it was indeed the women who led the way in many instances of conflict resolution processes in Africa of yesteryear. So, despite their apparent self-effacement, women played a major role in restoring peace in traditional society.

6. Women's role in consolidating peace pacts in traditional Africa

Under this theme, the Burundian study revealed that in situations of armed conflict, women played both an active and a passive role in the restoration of peace in traditional Africa. This was what happened within the framework of pacts, for example. As reported in that study a pact usually operated in the resolution of a conflict caused by the murder of a clan member. When required, a female mediator was quickly sent to the family of the victim. If the mediation was effective, the two families met to 'break a string of bead'.

The same report shows that within the framework of passive peacemaking by women, a girl could also be offered to the family of the victim as a form of reparation. This 'blood pact' not only put an end to the conflict in question but also precluded any future conflict between the descendants of the two clans, with the two being thenceforth intimately linked for life. Achebe (1958) reported of a similar cultural practice among the Igbo of Nigeria.

Also it was mentioned that in certain situations of armed conflict between two clans, women used a strategem to bring the hostilities to an end. They held a meeting and chose the prettiest girl of marriageable age to give to the opposing clan as a token of peace. That blood pact put an immediate and final end to the conflict, as the girl married to one of the heroes of the enemy village now became the link between her parents and the parents of her husband. The marriage itself constituted an inviolable alliance between the villages involved in the conflict.

7. Women's role as peace envoy

The Somali study showed that in some regions, among the Somali, older women who could no longer conceive were used as peace envoys. Because women belong to both those considered to be inviolate and to the three whose heads are protected, they are shielded from war-related violations. In times of war women were the only one who could move across the zones of conflict freely and without much danger. It was women who studied the situation, assessed the prospects for peace, and facilitated contact and communication between the two warring parties. During periods of tension and in serious situations a peace delegation was sent. The Somalis are careful as to whom they would choose as a peace envoy. Those selected are required to possess a wide spectrum of qualities and competencies, including a sense of responsibility, patience, good personality, oratory abilities, decency, etc. They are well versed in customary law, and are required to know exactly what the problem is and what is at stake. They are select group individuals of rare qualities. This is depicted in the saying: Two deserve utmost decency – *Ergo* (peace envoy) and a young woman seeking marriage.

According to the same study, in many areas efforts aimed at resolving conflicts were not confined to the *ergo* tradition. There were also enlightened and visionary individuals in both camps. Those individuals shuttled between the two sides, carrying messages of peace and reconciliation. They include the leaders, religious leaders, poets and *women*. Responsibility for selection and deployment of peace envoy rested with crowned heads (mentioned earlier), prominent leaders, religious figures and women. According to the researcher, Mohammed Abdi Mohammed (2003), married women, capitalizing on their neutrality and the privileges bestowed on them by Somali culture, shuttled between the warring clans, theirs and that of their husbands. They carried messages of peace and reconciliation, and they mobilized and encouraged the forces of peace from both sides. When the real cause or causes of the war were figured out, the aggressors acknowledged their mistake, submitted themselves to mediation and accepted the verdict.

These revelations are again instructive. They draw attention to the great potentials for peace and reconciliation, which African women hold for the larger society. It is therefore an issue to be regretted that despite all the strategic roles which women were able to play in the old Africa, current political culture in most parts of Africa tend to marginalize the position of women in the search for peace in various corners of the continent.

Conclusions

With the discussions to this stage, a number of conclusions will now follow.

- The first is that for the traditional African, peace is equivalent to health, well being and freshness and an enemy of poverty, insecurity, unemployment and waywardness and various types of mysterious and man-made misfortunes.
- Secondly, African women's roles as mothers, wives, and aunts were put to effective use in peace building and conflict resolutions in the old Africa. They participated firmly in inculcating the culture of peace in the children and in the practice of conflict mediation among warring factions within the family and the community. They also commanded important positions in conflict resolution rituals and membership of peace envoys in traditional Africa. And it is argued that if given the chance they can do the same in our own context, to the greater glory of peace and tranquility in our modern society. Consequently African women pose as latent resources for peace building and conflict resolutions in Africa today.
- Thirdly, traditional African people were convinced that lasting peace does not grow in a vacuum. In their view healthy rather feeds and grows on enduring human values, implanted in children at tender ages, through story telling, songs, proverbs and myths. It is argued that meaningful peace cannot reign in our context if those important African cultural values highlighted in the body of this paper are overlooked or trampled upon.
- Fourthly, and finally, a related conclusion to the above is the need for rebuilding the key values of the African family. This is because the present review clearly demonstrates that the African family is the crucible or the laboratory within a healthy child is born and bred. To enhance its value in our own context, efforts need to be doubled towards the strengthening, improving, and rejuvenating of the African family. As a first step toward achieving this goal something must be done to correct the current negative attitude noted among the African youth, reflected in their tendency to underrate the importance of marriage and traditional family life in the modern world.

Recommendations

Based on the above, the following recommendations are preferred as a way forward in the current effort toward the promotion of the reign of peace and harmony in various modern African countries.

- In view of the innate qualities of women and thanks to the position they have occupied and the part they have played in the traditional society, African women can and must be actively involved in conflict prevention and resolution. In this regard, modern African countries can no longer afford to exclude women in important peace process. This must be done not only when working for peace within, but also between nations. Women had in the past played important roles in the membership of peace envoys. That role can no longer elude them in our time. They deserve to be made part of the delegation that is seeking for peace in any part of the continent.
- African women need to be made aware not only of the negative aspects of the trammels of African culture and tradition in their lives, but also of the crucial role that women had played in the past towards the promotion of the culture of peace and conflict resolution in traditional Africa.
- Some of the peace mediation methods that women have applied in the past as highlighted in the body of this paper need to be reassessed to see which of them can be modified for adoption for promoting peace among warring families, communities and nations in modern Africa.
- Some conflict resolutions rituals engineered by women as reviewed in the body contain important psychological/spiritual healing powers (Ranger, 1992). Such rituals should not be allowed to pass away. They must be re-interrogated and where they still seem viable, need to be popularized as Africa's contributions to peace building and conflict resolution models to be shared with the rest of the world.
- There is need for improved information and awareness about raising family unity through the promotion of positive traditional values and rehabilitation of the role played by women as mothers and aunties. One way to promote this is through the introduction of community medals awarded to good mothers and families with good children.
- Since peace in Africa is seen equivalent to health and well-being, there is need for the introduction of welfare measures in various local African governments to benefit large families: housing, health care, means of transport and communication, loans and early child education. In this way, there is need to assess the opportunities for practices which go beyond the restitution of 'negative peace', that is, the mere absence of war, to promote 'positive peace, i.e. conditions and practices of political and social non-violence.

- An enemy of peace restoration in modern Africa is the long delays in resolving conflicts in modern society. Adopting some of the traditional methods for resolving conflicts such as were reviewed in the body of this paper needs to be seriously contemplated. This means enabling African local communities to reclaim some of their lost mechanisms for conflict mediation and resolution. In the same vein, the behaviour and attitudes of administrative authorities in modern Africa, especially those from outside the community, need to be appraised so that they do not become sources of conflict themselves.
- Finally modern school education which purports to take over the role of responsible child upbringing originally the perverse of women in the old Africa must need to be re-examined to make sure that it become a place for successful transmission of peace values and principles as identified in this paper. In this effort at educating modern African children positive cultural values becomes essential to get the children back to track.

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