

RELIGIOUS APPROACHES AS REMEDY TO VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

By

Kefa Obondi Nyandoro; PhD

Mount Kenya University, School of Social Sciences

kefaobondi@yahoo.com

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Bernard Gechiko Nyabwari; PhD

Kenyatta University, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

nyabwako@yahoo.com

&

Michael T. Katola; PhD

Kenyatta University, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

mtkatola@yahoo.com

Abstract

Violence is one of the causes of underdevelopment in Africa. Specifically, politically instigated violence in Africa has undermined social, economic, political and spiritual developments. This paper explains the route causes and consequences of violence in Africa. It investigates historical and present approaches to mitigate violence. The study singles out divisive, bigoted and myopic politics as principal causes of violence. The paper further suggests strategies African countries can use to end violence in order to have a united, peaceful and an integrated continent. Findings suggest that visionary, humane and selfless leadership well explained in the African Ubuntu Philosophy which recognizes the rule of law is paramount to realization of Africa's hope and dream. The church which is a moral conscious voice of the society in this paper is portrayed as the key player in advocating peace, love and unity in collaboration with peacekeeping organizations within and without Africa. Data for this study were collected purposively through oral interviews with African scholars, leaders, sociologists, clergy and politicians from selected countries. Analyzed data discussed in this paper deduces that there is hope to restore the lost glory of Africa.

KEY WORDS: Violence, Peace, Development, Leadership, Africa's hope

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The creation and institutionalization of the Organization of African Union (OAU) in 1963 was influenced by the effects of violence in African states most of which were politically instigated. In the words of Nyankuri (1995), violence is anything that harms physically, mentally, morally or injures human beings and affects their physical, mental and emotional health. Violence is caused by negative ethnicity, racism and class differences among other factors. During and after violence the affected people experience scarcity of resources, political acrimonies, poverty, deaths, outbreak of diseases and political marginalization. Most African countries have experienced different forms of violence which have made some scholars like Kinoti (2001) to assert that the continent is synonymous with violence. To ameliorate the problem, peace keeping organizations from within and outside Africa have played key roles in sensitizing people on the effects of violence on development.

Zartman (1985) notes that, conflicts of ideas, beliefs and practices lead to violence in Africa. Conflicts usually occur primarily as a result of clash of interests in the relationship between parties, groups or states in pursuit common or opposing goals. This may explain why Amutabi (1995) opines that conflict is an inevitable outcome of human diversity and a world without conflict is impossible, because it would mean a world without people with diverse thinking, fears, feelings or aspirations. By implication, there should be conflict preparedness through conflict resolution mechanisms wherever human beings live.

Throughout the 1990s, Africa recorded the highest number of conflicts and most studies predict a further increase. A tragic factor in this increase is that the civilian populations bear the brunt of the casualties in such conflicts.

1.2 POLITICALLY INSTIGATED VIOLENCE

Politics is a term derived from the Greek *politica* meaning the people's representation. It is the art or science of government concerned with guiding or influencing governmental policies which affect the populace. It is also a science or art concerned with winning and holding control over a government, political opinions or practices. Owen (1995) observes that, politics is usually characterized by competition between two or more contending groups or individuals for power and leadership. Through politics, people elect leaders to represent them in government or institutions which serve interests of the electorate. Those interested in elective politics, enter into a competition to win majority votes from the people. In the event of seeking for more votes, politicians through propaganda, innuendo, setting unrealistic goals and political witch-hunt cause division among the electorate. This is the major route cause of violence in Africa as discussed in this paper.

Political violence as Chazan (1992) states is the major cause of internally displaced persons and refugees in Africa. Of the estimated seventeen million refugees in the world, six million are Africans. Anderson (1983) observes that the number is set to increase because of the culture of disputed elections due to multiple irregularities and deliberate failure to uphold democratic electoral regulations. Electoral frauds lead to incredible results causing dissatisfaction among the people often leading to violence. Consequently, such occurrences basically affect all forms of development since governments and peace-keeping organizations spend huge amounts or resources to restore the lost property and affected institutions.

Kobia (1993) argues that elections are the central institution of democratic representative governments. Through democracy the authority of the government derives solely from the consent of the electorate. The only way people can exercise their democracy is to hold free and fair elections. In Africa, most conflicts emerge before or after general elections due to conflicting ideas on political agenda. Leo (2005) observes that politicians bribe the citizens in order to win elections.

Conflicts in Africa increased throughout the 1990s. An investigation of the levels and scale of conflicts and crimes in Africa revealed that in January 2000, over half of African countries were affected. Owen (1995) opines that, violence in Africa is caused by inequality, economic decline, state collapse and history. Since World War I and II ended, conflicts in Africa are predominantly regional perpetrated by either Africans themselves against each other or influence from the Western Countries. African scholars such as Ojie (2006) and Mazrui (1977) accuse the Western countries for influencing violence in African states in order to impose leadership which benefits them indirectly. Western countries have a tendency of funding their preferred candidates so that when they win elections by whichever means they use them to expand their export market. These selfish desires deny Africans the opportunity to get leaders with the right qualities.

Violence in Africa has increasingly affected the economic growth of many African states. Countries experiencing conflicts face, stagnated economic growth, reduction of food production and losses of infrastructure. Such phenomena make Africa to continue wallowing in poverty giving the West a chance to refer Africa as stagnant and an ever borrowing continent.

In order to ameliorate the problem of violence in Africa religious approaches should be tried as they can yield very good results. In this paper only two religious approaches are discussed. They include the African religious Ubuntu philosophy and the Christian approach.

1.3 THE AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS *UBUNTU* PHILOSOPHY AS A REMEDY TO VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

African traditional religious culture has numerous beliefs and practices which if well applied in the contemporary can be alleviate the problem in Africa.. In traditional African society, people valued each other despite their social, economic, cultural and religious diversities. In fact, Africans referred each other as brothers or sisters even when they had no blood relationships. It was the responsibility of every member to keep peace within and without their communities. Community groups respected each other because people believed that each community contributed to the physical, political spiritual and economic wellbeing of others. Any violence as Kenyatta (1979) puts it affected the African traditional batter trade and other social-religious activities through which communities exchanged their goods and services.

To uphold inter-community respect and value for each other's dignity, adults played key roles in inculcating norms and values to the young people. The norms and values were presented through instructions, work, rituals, taboos, myths and stories whose contents were drawn from realities of life. Every situation, activity or time presented avenues for learning. Teaching of norms and values was primarily meant to ensure that community members respected each other. The emergence of unfortunate inter-community conflicts which at times brought ethnic clashes forced the elders from the affected communities to seek for lasting solutions. This explains the seriousness with which peace was highly cherished among traditional Africans.

The African lifestyle which highly regarded peace and tranquility can well be explained by the African *Ubutntu* Philosophy (Senyonjo, 2004). Among the countries of East, Central and Southern Africa *ubuntu* is a world view that tries to articulate what it means to be human. A person who possesses *ubuntu* is a person who is considered to be generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. The idea behind this world view is that a person is a person through the other

people. As such the guiding principle of *ubuntu* is what Mbiti (1969) is known for, “I am because we are and since we are therefore I am”. Applied to mitigation of violence in Africa, the *ubuntu* philosophy implies that maintaining peace in the continent is everyone’s responsibility.

The African *ubuntu* model of peace keeping was conventional philosophy used by local people to develop unity and concord. Further, it was a body of knowledge built up by a group of people through a generation of living in close contact with ancestors, God and nature. Such knowledge evolved in the local environment so that it specifically adapted to the requirements of the local people and conditions. It was creative and experimental, constantly incorporating outside influences and inside innovations to meet new religious, social, political, economic and environmental conditions.

The traditional Africa’s people were organized into small villages and clans who added up to communities with shared values, beliefs, practices and cultural mannerisms. Each community had leaders who played various roles depending on their ranks. The council of elders and religious leaders were guardians of implementation of the *Ubuntu* Philosophy. Whenever intercommunity conflicts arose the elders gave orders to investigate the causes of as well as issuing quick solutions to end violence. Their guidelines were not to be contradicted by their subjects because in most cases they were fair, balanced, and full of wisdom. The elders were selfless, wise and peace- loving guided by the *ubutu* philosophy which advocated for humane treatment of all persons whether kinsman, tribesman or outsider.

The coming of the colonial government with the western system of governance affected the social fabric of the Africans; they introduced a new way of electing leaders at local levels. The White man’s style of appointing leaders to replace the traditional ones was based on academic qualifications and one’s submission to the colonial master. The general social, moral and religious

fiber of leaders highly regarded in the African *ubuntu* socialism became a thing of the past. In place of community boundaries which bound people together lessening conflicts, sub-lactations, locations and Districts were created manned by sub-chiefs, chiefs and District officers respectfully. The community elders who had a system of solving conflicts were rendered powerless and were least involved in peace-keeping. The clan elders who were the main proponents of the *ubuntu* philosophy which cemented together the Africans were no more authoritative in keeping on check the social, religious and moral fabric of the people. All forms of conflicts emerging among people started being solved according to the rule of law which adopted the Western style of governance. The moral voice of the elderly was undermined giving room for uncontrolled rimes, banditry, negative ethnicity, violence and rivalry among communities. This has contributed to endless social, economic and political conflicts in Africa.

War, terrorism, tribal clashes, post election violence and political witch-hunt witnessed in African today is because of failure for Africans to embrace the African *ubuntu* model of leadership which agitates for love and tranquility. Given a chance in Africa, the *ubuntu* model of leadership will enable the people to respect one another, value each other and promote inter-boundary peace and concord. It will promote faithfulness, resilience and will make everyone to be ‘another person’s keeper’ therefore promoting love and brotherliness among the Africans.

The African *ubuntu* model of leadership can be applied in various ways to restore the lost glory and peace of Africa. First, the African leaders to use the African community/ethnic elders to teach people the contents of the African *ubuntu* philosophy. Second, the African leaders should be chosen on basis of their ability to lead through identification of humane, wise and gifted leaders. This will stop election of egotistical, selfish and arrogant leaders who use money and force to win elections. Third, the *ubuntu* philosophy should be taught in churches, institutions of learning and local *baraza*

(meetings in villages). This will enhance continuity of the philosophy throughout the generations. Fourth, governments in case of conflicts should use traditional methods of resolving conflicts other than legal systems such as courts. The legal systems should be used after exhausting local mechanisms. Finally, the African Traditional Religion should take prominence in Africa because her teachings are guided by the anthropocentric *ubuntu* philosophy which champions for peace, love and unity.

1.4 THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN MITIGATION OF VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

The church is the communion of people who by means of their encounter with the Word of God, stand in a relationship with Him. She is a gift from God to humanity. Through the church human beings get reconciled with God. Ellen White (1969) states that, the church exists to serve the reconciliation of humankind. She further notes that the church is called to heal and reconcile broken relationships. More importantly the church is a sign, instrument and sacrament of God's intention and plan for the world in peace-building. It is therefore a great privilege to be a member of the church and for a Nation to subscribe to church doctrines. In Africa, more than 60% of the total population are Christians which by implication should make the continent more peaceful than the rest of the world.

The definition of the word church as MacBrien (2007) states is derived from the Greek *kuriakon*, meaning "the Lord's House" used for worship. The New Testament translation of the Greek *kuriakon* is *ekklessia* referring to an assembly of people who have been called by God to testify His character to the unbelievers. God's character is both intrinsic and extrinsic in nature. His intrinsic character is that which cannot be shared with human beings such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, immanence and transcendence. His extrinsic attributes is the sharable nature of God such as goodness, kindness, peacekeeping, generosity, loving, compassion and mercifulness among

others. Scholars like Opongo (2006) are convinced that the church in Africa needs to teach her members to emulate God's extrinsic attributes in order to create a peaceful and integrated continent.

The church is the society's conscious voice and an agent of peace and serenity. Parks (1980) asserts that the church is defined as a community of those who are called to acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ and to collaborate in His historic mission for the coming of the kingdom or reign of God. The church advocates the reign of God as a kingdom of peace and those to inherit it must be peacemakers and co-workers with Him. Jesus in the New Testament declared, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). These peacemaking words of Jesus forms basis for the church's aggressiveness in spearheading messages of peace in Africa. This also attracts other peace making organizations within and without Africa to partner with the church in promoting peace.

Peace, love and unity are popular themes in the New Testament with Jesus as the focal proponent in the Gospels as earlier noted. St. Paul, discusses adequately the value of peacekeeping in his epistles to the churches in and out of Asia. He implored Christians to maintain peace amongst themselves and those outside the church regardless of their socio-cultural milieu. He further condemned violence of all forms because emergence of it disturbed spiritual, social and economic developments of the Christians and society in general. Paul in the same way warns the Roman and Jewish government leaders to live in concord with one another. Servants, masters, men, women and children received various teachings from Paul on the centrality of peace in development. The love, peace and unity messages of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament to the Christians are still relevant in the contemporary Africa. Application of the messages will mitigate politically instigated violence which has adversely affected social and economic development in Africa.

The book of Revelation concludes the New Testament and indeed the Bible with the coming of the kingdom of peace, which will assemble the human race from the entire world;. The book teaches Christians that the social, religious and cultural backgrounds are momentary and should not cause division amongst themselves. It also teaches them that their common enemy is Satan who is to be fought not with physical weapons but with spiritual ones. This discourages conflicts and any form of violence against fellow human beings, thus challenging Christians to maintain peace in Africa.

The church in Africa has taken a central role in peace-keeping in conflicting regions. In times of war and crisis, the church owned premises such as schools, church buildings, hospitals and colleges have served as places of asylum for victims of violence. The church through members contributes the basic needs to the victims to assist the government and other NGOs. This role played by the church has strengthened the local and international recognition, credibility and trust of the church as praiseworthy partner in peace-keeping.

The church in Africa has played an intermediary role in peace-keeping through promotion of dialogue between conflicting parties. Church leaders such as Desmond Tutu and Archbishop Monsengwo for instance were used in peace mediation in Kenya and Rwanda respectively when these countries experienced post-election violence. Pope Francis of the Catholic Church from Vatican visited Kenya, Uganda and South Africa in November 2015. His visit was purposely to remind Christians of their role in peace-keeping, mediation and reconciliation. His speeches mainly addressed issues of conflict resolutions, inter-faith tolerance and human brotherhood. The Pope sought to unite religious leaders and politicians as well as letting them know their roles to play in mitigation of politically instigated violence. At a general level, through the structures of peace and justice commissions, the church in Africa has engaged communities in prejudices reduction

encounters. The church has also opened up more cooperation between communities and countries living side by side.

1.5 CONCLUSION

Politically instigated violence in Africa is the major cause of grenade attacks, destruction of property, cattle rustling, banditry, assassinations, killings, human evictions, formation of militia and hatred between communities and groups. It has also caused political and economic instability making Africa a poor continent in spite of the affluence of her natural and human resources. Mitigation of a politically instigated violence in Africa is the dream of the African Union. Politically instigated violence caused by divisive politics and failed electoral processes have been major contributors to poverty, negative ethnicity, war, conflicts, underdevelopment and scarcity of resources in Africa. As a reaction, conflicts and acts of violence emerge causing deaths and evictions of innocent Africans.

Africans are bound together by a common ancestry and philosophy of life. The coming of Christianity to Africa with social, moral and economic teachings in the Bible supplements the African traditional methods of teaching, upholding and maintaining peace and tranquility. Christians who constitute the largest percentage of Africans play a mediatory role in peace-keeping among conflicting parties. Religious leaders use church meetings and the biblical doctrines of love peace and unity to preach for peace in Africa.

The African *ubuntu* philosophy which advocates for love, peace and unity resonates well with the Bible whose teachings endorse peace and tranquility. The African traditional methods of peace-keeping involve all members. Violence causes death, evictions, loss of property, and intercommunity animosities. These affect social, economic and political developments hence the

elders ensure any inter-community conflicts are quickly addressed before leading to violence. Emergency of the Western capitalistic lifestyle and rule of law affected the African traditional *ubuntu* model of peace-keeping t. It remains a solemn duty to Africans to advocate for peace, love and unity and to create a peaceful and integrated Africa.

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