

Strategies for Expressing Social Conflict within Communal African Societies in Southern Africa

N.S. Turner

Introduction

In the realm of collective existence, minor divergences serve to confirm and consolidate the underlying cohesion of the group, as a society obviously relies on a certain common consent. In researching oral strategies in certain sanctioned oral forms of communication among Southern African communities as a means of conflict articulation, one must view these social conflicts as contextualised events in their specific social setting. This entails taking into account not only the cultural setting, but also the social discourse, the context and a review of events leading up to and surrounding the conflict situation. In some instances this involves more than just the disputing party, it involves the entire social network in which the conflict is situated. This way of viewing conflict as events in the comprehensive continuum of social life, is common in Africa and in this study particularly amongst the African people in Southern Africa. This is because of the community-based style of living prevalent amongst Africans. Social life in communal societies is the area in which values and norms function, and is the environment in which cultural traditions are formed and handed down in a predominantly oral fashion, from one generation to another. In societies such as this, where the oral mode of transmission is favoured, inter-personal communication on a daily basis characterises social discourse and interaction. It is in this environment of constant human communication and

interaction that the energy comes which may not only fuel but also defuse conflict.

This is in stark contrast to many contemporary literate urban societies in which values, norms and cultural traditions may be communicated rather through the media or through books, in memos, letters, notices and emails. This mode of communication tends to alleviate and even prevent conversation and extended oral communication. Literate societies tend to focus on individualism and an individualistic style of life, whereas in societies which are 'orally-based' and communal in lifestyle, the important element functioning throughout all social life is the network of extended human relations. Family ties and community networking are constantly respected, maintained and strengthened. Whenever kinship or social relationships are disturbed by a dispute, priority is given to restoring the balance. Jannie Malan (1997:24) makes the point about African communities that

The social context can make an important difference if the purpose of the conflict resolution process is formulated in social, relational language. Relationships that have been broken or damaged should be repaired. Wrongs should be rectified and justice restored. The whole procedure of resolving the conflict will also be regarded to be what it actually is: an event in the continuum of social life.

Communal Society and the Oral Mode of Expression

When researching the topic of conflict in society, what becomes glaringly apparent is the dearth of information based on African history and tradition. There is a large amount of information that is rooted in Occidental experience, however African modes of perception, imagination and thought are a relatively new field of research. Bozeman (1976:65) writes that Africa's cultural consciousness is an undisputed fact today, but the difficulty of comprehending it compared to other civilisations arises for several reasons. The first is that African society is traditionally a non scribally-literate world in which the unity of African culture projects the sum total of values, beliefs and institutions that have been shared by countless generations. This represents a 'socially complex mosaic' of heterogeneous elements in a huge continent, where present lines of political organisation

are fluid, and where neither anthropologists nor political scientists have as yet been able to agree upon generally applicable categories of classificatory schemes. Bozerman suggests that any inquiry into the role of conflict in African politics or society requires a shift of focus to the small folk community, the form of group life that Africans themselves have regarded as enduringly meaningful throughout the centuries. It is in these small communities in which neighbours and kinsmen are in close contact that interpersonal conflicts are likely to be cast in terms of witchcraft and sorcery to account for inexplicable events such as death, illness and misfortunes. It is here, in the context of relations between people who know one another well, that frictions, jealousies and hatreds are most pronounced.

In societies that favour the oral mode of expression over writing, an individual is perceived primarily as an extension or representation of the group to which he belongs, either as a member of a family, clan, lineage, village or other grouping. The Occidental idea of the autonomous person, endowed with individual rights and responsibilities is a very different conception from that of the 'communal' African person. This then explains the affirmative African approach to conflict as a socially and psychically vital function. There is a shared perception of conflict as a structuring or constitutive force in communal affairs, where well-regulated adversary confrontations provide fitting circumstances for the blunting of socially threatening tensions. In view of the fragility of social ties between members of an African community, actual or potential conflict situations have consistently challenged the traditional genius for maintaining the closely-knit community life. Each African speech community has its own code of customs for abating antagonisms, conciliating disputants and ultimately re-establishing communal accord. There is quite obviously not one single homogeneous African approach to conflict. Nevertheless, when these are surveyed in the perspective of shared cultural patterns, certain common features readily emerge and these are as different from Western (literate) approaches as the situations that provoked them. This is because African systems of conflict control emanate from established social practice and are therefore virtually synonymous with the entirety of social life. Furthermore they depend primarily upon the medium of the spoken word.

In the realm of collective existence, minor divergences serve to confirm and consolidate the underlying cohesion of the group, as a society

obviously relies on a certain common consent. According to Coser (1956:75), communal conflict that is based on a common acceptance of basic ends, is a positive force. People in the community settle their differences on the basis of unity. Durkheim's prior research, *The Division of Labour in Society* (1934:129), echoes this sentiment when he makes the point that just as the individual depends upon society because he depends upon the parts of which it is composed, so groups, due to their interdependence, help to maintain the social system in which they function. Thus social conflict may have a positive and integrative function to play in maintaining the balance in society. In the words of Coser (1956:80):

Conflict may serve to remove dissociating elements in a relationship and to re-establish unity. Insofar as conflict is the resolution of tension between antagonists it has stabilizing functions and becomes an integrating component of the relationship. However, not all conflicts are positively functional, only those which concern goals, values or interests that do not contradict the basic assumptions upon which the social relations are founded.

Coser maintains that the absence of conflict cannot be taken necessarily as an index of stability and strength in close social relationships. These may more likely be characterised by frequent conflicts where the members feel that provided the conflicts do not threaten basic community consensus, they are free to express hostile and ambivalent feelings in specific social ways.

There exist three possible kinds of relevant expressions of feelings of hostility in behaviour. The first is direct expression of hostility against the person or group which is the actual source of frustration. The second is displacement of such hostile behaviour onto substitute objects, and the third is tension-release activity which provides satisfaction in itself without need for object or object substitution. Hostility and feelings of dissatisfaction about an individual or even a group's behaviour, is not only expressed directly, but is often expressed indirectly.

Witchcraft is a practice where hostile feelings are allowed socially sanctioned expression against the adversary. In accusing particular members of the community of practising witchcraft, the accuser often singles out the perpetrator as a means for the release of hostility which could not be

expressed safely against that person in any other sanctioned way. Reference to witchcraft in various forms of Zulu oral expression is common. Clyde Kluckhohn, who has made a study of witchcraft amongst the Navajo Indians, (in Coser 1956:43) makes the point that:

Witchcraft beliefs and practices allow the expression of direct and displaced antagonism ... and channels the displacement of aggression, facilitating emotional adjustment with a minimum of disturbance of social relationships.

Wit is another vehicle of indirect expression commonly used. Freud comments that wit permits one to make one's adversary ridiculous in a way which direct speech could not because of social hindrances. Wit may not necessarily bring about a change in the relations between one person and another, particularly if the intended target of the witticism is unaware of the source and intention of the witticism. It may, however, afford an outlet of expression to the person voicing the source of the conflict, without necessarily changing the terms of the relationship. The expression in these terms, then, merely functions as a form of tension release. This practice, which is common amongst the Nguni people in southern Africa, is commonly employed in *izihasho* (oral compositions equivalent to an oral ID document recounting one's life history and anecdotal incidents), song form, oral games as well as in naming and nicknaming practices. The humour provides the composer/reciter with a platform to pass messages which would in normal discourse be regarded as unacceptable. Mulkay (in Dowling 1996:136) refers to this function of humour as one which operates as a defence against risk and danger, claiming that,

the humorous mode can provide a protective shield against some of the dangers lurking in the realm of serious discourse.

Oral forms of combative speech in the form of insult, ridicule and witty and derisive commentary are recognised in African societies and many other parts of the world, and particularly in Southern Africa amongst the Nguni, as effective forms of social sanction. In a non-literate culture in which the word is the equivalent of the act, talking invites artistry and verbal virtuosity in the

form of repetition, and circumlocution is meant to extend rather than to contract the discourse and therewith also, the pleasure of actual and vicarious participation amongst those present. Lambert (2000:44) compares classical and African cultures in the light of 'shame' cultures in contrast to the 'guilt' cultures of the modern West. The essential difference between the two different types of cultures is that shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behaviour, whereas guilt cultures rely on an internalised conviction of sin. He goes on to say that shame is a reaction to other people's criticism, and a man/woman is shamed either by being openly ridiculed and rejected or by fantasizing to himself that he has been made ridiculous. Thus shame cultures are highly receptive to the disapproval of others. As Taylor (1985:54) points out,

the distinguishing mark of a shame culture, and that which makes it different from a so-called guilt-culture, is that here public esteem is the greatest good, and to be ill spoken of the greatest evil.

The Process of Socialisation and Control

Social conformity and order in any society obviously depends upon some understanding existing between the individuals that make up that society or community. This understanding pertains to how the activities of everyday life should be arranged and also as to what the acceptable and unacceptable forms of conduct are in a given context. How much of this behaviour is predictable and expected, and how much falls out of the understood norms, depends largely on the size and the closeness of the community or society concerned. Whatever the values and norms of a society are, they are passed on to its members from generation to generation as they mature. This maturation process, which takes place in all societal groups, is a matter of learning how to adjust one's behaviour and expectations in relation to other members of one's group. To a certain degree, this involves observing the patterns of behaviour of those around you, what is done and not done, what evokes pleasure or displeasure. In part, it involves expressly being taught what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' in terms of values for that particular community.

This process of socialisation does not cease at maturation but continues through every stage of life. In identifying various ways in which this continual process is sustained, anthropologists have repeatedly emphasised the importance of ritual and ceremonial procedures, the rites of passage such as initiation, birth, marriage and death rituals, as reinforcing and reaffirming established values. The elaborate and ceremonial feasting which attends and identifies such events may be seen to be smoothing the path through these difficult transitions as well as cementing together the unity of the group, thereby perpetuating a necessary sense of continuity. By and large, compliance with the accepted values of a society or community are unconscious and without question. However, sometimes immediate personal advantages conflict with socially approved rules, or maybe even with the perceived interests of some other person. The immediate advantage sometimes outweighs what other people think, or their disapproval, particularly those whom the person is in close contact with and may have to rely on in the future. The disapproval may vary from mere ridicule, loss of prestige, or mockery, to physical retaliation, appeal to third parties for intervention, resort to sorcery, the withdrawal of valued co-operation, or even total ostracism

The Nature and Form of Dispute

In terms of the nature of dispute, dissatisfaction and criticism depend largely upon the beliefs that are held and the values subscribed to in a particular social setting. Conflict, however, remains an endemic feature of social life. We define ourselves in relation to the 'other', therefore we must constantly affirm what those differences are in an ongoing series of conflictual interactions, which amongst the southern African Nguni take the form of proverbs, riddles, *izibongo*, *izihasho*, songs, oral witticisms and games etc. This is reflected in many other societies all over the world as evidenced in information documented by Jousse (1990:79) on the *hain teny merinas* in Madagascar, as well as in numerous articles on verbal duelling such as that amongst the Swahili and Tsongas.

The sociological meaning of such conflict, therefore, is exposed in an approach that analyses it in the context of extended social processes. The dispute or source of conflict needs thorough examination in terms of its

social context in totality, its origin, and efforts to resolve it and the history of the involved parties and their particular relationships, all held in memory. Essentially, conflict or dispute in society occurs when norms of behaviour are transgressed or interpreted in a manner which renders the behaviour unacceptable to a person or persons in a particular community. The meaning attached to the term 'norms' is that they are an accepted rule or form of behaviour, which is regarded as widely practised and relevant to the regulation of social conduct.

The origins of norms of social behaviour are extremely diverse, some evolving from long established observed patterns of behaviour, some from decisions of prominent members of the society in handling disputes. What is clear is the fact that changes and additions to the normative repertoire may take place simply due to transformations in social patterns, as these become expressed in the context of a dispute. Roberts (1981:4) in his study on the Tswana people makes a point about the dispute process. He says that:

The dispute process, then, represents the main forum in which Tswana converse daily among themselves about the organization of their society, the nature and content of their normative repertoire, and the attributes of their culture.

Roberts uses the term 'Processual paradigm' to explain a theory that is traceable to Malinowski's work in 1926, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, which sought to explain how order was maintained in a society which lacked courts and the executive members of courts like policemen. The term 'processual paradigm' explains the parallel shift of emphasis in political anthropology from structure and institutions to processes and interaction. Perhaps the most significant of the insights gained from Malinowski's work, according to Roberts (1981:12) is

that behaviour is constrained primarily by the intrinsic properties of social relations - obligations, expectations, and reciprocities - and by the exigencies of interaction. It is therefore in social processes, not institutions, that the analysis of order is ultimately to be grounded.

Roberts (1981:14) goes on to say:

If the form and content of dispute-settlement processes are to be explained, attention must be given to the disputants' ostensible motives in pursuing a quarrel, how they recruit support, their strategic efforts to influence the procedural course of events, and so on.

In the light of the processual paradigm then, the dispute-settlement process must be situated within the logic of a socio-cultural order where value and meaning are negotiated and this negotiation depends on a shared ideology.

Conclusion

Conflict amongst communal African people in Southern Africa is treated as an essential part of social life and this conflict can only be understood within a context of extended social processes dependent largely upon the beliefs that are held and the values subscribed to within a given community.

Coser (1956) supports this view in his analysis of the functions of social conflict. He quotes the central thesis of the work of Simmel revolving around conflict being a form of socialisation. He maintains that conflict is an essential element in group formation and the persistence of group life. Conflict is thus seen as performing group-maintaining functions insofar as it regulates systems of relationships, i.e. it 'clears the air' and helps to create a situation where hostile feelings are allowed free behavioural expression. Simmel's view constitutes what Coser terms a 'safety-valve theory', where the conflict serves as an outlet for the release of hostilities which, if no other outlet were provided, would adversely affect the relationship between the antagonists. Coser notes that conflict is not, therefore, always dysfunctional. Without channels for venting hostility and expressing dissent, members of a social group might feel completely crushed and may react by withdrawal.

The practice of using specific oral strategies in conflict expression is not unique in southern Africa, but is common in much of the rest of Africa and elsewhere as has been extensively documented by Okpewho and Finnegan among others.

Finnegan (1970:470) summarises the concept of 'naming' in Africa when she states that:

Names often play an indispensable part in oral literature in Africa ... they have ... many different interpretations ... from the psychological functions of names in providing assurance or 'working out' tension, to their connection with the structure of society, their social function in minimizing friction, or their usefulness either in expressing the self-image of their owner or in providing a means of indirect comment when a direct one is not feasible.

By allowing the expression of pent-up feelings of hostility, frustration and dissatisfaction, the articulation of conflict serves to maintain inter-individual and group relationships. Those who compose and express the various forms of oral texts, do so by employing familiar techniques which are commonly recognized in the oral genres throughout southern Africa.

School of Literature and Languages
University of Kwazulu-Natal

References

- Bozeman, AB 1976. *Conflict in Africa: Concepts and Realities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Coser, LA 1956. *The Functions of Social Conflict*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Dowling, T 1996. *The Forms, Functions & Techniques of Xhosa Humour*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.
- Durkheim, E 1947. *The Division of Labour in Society*. Glencoe: The Free Press.
- Finnegan, R 1970. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jousse, M [1925]1990. *The Oral Style*. Sienaert, E & R Whitaker (trans). USA: Garland.
- Lambert, M 2000. *Classical Athenian and Traditional African Ethics: The Hermeneutics of Shame and Guilt*. SA Journal of Folklore Studies 11,1.

... *Social Conflict within Communal African Societies* ...

- Malan, J 1997. *Conflict Resolution: Wisdom From Africa*. Durban: Accord.
- Malinowski, B 1926. *Myth in the Primitive Psychology*. London: Kegan Paul.
- Okpewho, I 1992. *African Oral Literature*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Roberts, S 1981. *Rules & Processes: The Cultural Logic of Dispute in an African Context*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.