



Derivative Codes for Conflict Management in African Cultural Communalism With Reference to Acts 6:1-7 and James 4:1-3

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Abstract. Conflict is a social reality in human existence and Inter-Relationship. Conflict remains a possible phenomenon in a pluralistic society that is characterized by self-righteousness, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement and self-promotion. This pyrrhic triumph of the self is always with a corresponding distaste for self-denial proper for union with God and man. In what Rudolf Bultman refers to as the sphere of men's thinking, planning, and desiring in their cares and wishes, their pleasures and pursuits, their pride and arrogance, conflict rears its ugly head in virtually all spheres of human endeavours in Africa as observed in socio-economic, political and religious interactions. This paper considered the concept of communalism, using biblical hermeneutic tools, for an egalitarian society where conflict would not only be drastically reduced, but would always be well managed whenever it resurfaces. Since there is no community that can develop in the absence of peace, communalism as an art must be made to reflect the realities of a typical African cultural methods of interactions as well as biblical modes of managing human differences exacerbated by desires. While some New Testament passages will be studied by related words, characters such as Jesus, Paul and Peter shall be cited in their conflict resolution approaches as examples for Africans in different positions of authorities who are daily faced with developmental challenges through series of conflicts and violence, either in politics, religious and educational sectors.

Keywords: Conflict, Conflict Management, African Culture, Communalism

1. Introduction

Conflict is inevitable in any form of active relationship. The possibility of contentious issues

cannot be glossed over whenever and wherever human differences collide. As human wants are insatiable, no human needs are usually the same, and where they are, the methods of achieving them are usually diametrically opposed to one another. In relation to colour, while some are colour sensitive, others, may be colour blind, and yet, no one seems to be better off than the other. This is a natural phenomenon. As we are not created the same, so are we not the same in terms of taste, colour, race, tribe, country, continent and even religion.

The fact of these differences notwithstanding, human beings are social animals who must relate with others. And like marital union, this is a mystery. Though conflicts do occur as a result of collision of individual differences, yet conflicts do not only occur in between people, there are also intra conflicts within individuals. This situation is something of an inward struggle exacerbated by the urge to be somebody, or make something in the world, of which maxim is "survival of the fittest." While this is equally a natural phenomenon, what kind of relationship do we envisage when the pressures of external and internal conflicts are made to reside together?

Conflict, however is not as important as how it is managed. As a matter of fact, conflict, as Adeyemo (2006:551) observes, has a way of keeping us alert, so that we do not slip into complacency¹. According to him: "Conflict also spotlights problems that require attention. It may force clarification of issues and challenge leaders to question the status quo and search for better solutions. Good handling of the conflict between the Hellenized Jews and the Hebrew Jews in Jerusalem resulted in the exponential growth of the early Church" (Taylor, 1963: 99).

Conflict has the potential of starting off from a minor disagreement. When not properly handled, it could escalate into a fight and even prolonged armed struggle. The end result is usually division, destruction, demoralization of the people and damage to existing relationship.

African continent is in a terrible state of conflicts. Hardly do you see any of her countries without one form of conflict or the other. This conflict ranges from political turmoil, coup d'état, religious fanaticism, internal insurrection, and other forms of civil unrest. Ironically, African natural culture is group being, poles apart from Western anthropocentrism with its focus on individualism. This natural culture is known as communalism. To the credit of African communalism, Taylor (1963: 99) says:

Man is a family. This living chain of humanity, in which the tides of world-energy ebb and flow most strongly, stands at the heart of the great totality of being... The underlying conviction remains that an individual who is cut off from the communal organism is nothing... As the glow of a coal depends upon its remaining in the fire, so the vitality, the psychic security, the very humanity of man, depends on his integration into the family... There are many who feel that the spiritual sickness of the West, which reveal itself in the divorce of the sacred from the secular... and in the loneliness and homelessness of individualism, may be healed through a recovery of the wisdom which Africa has not yet thrown away.

John Taylor's recommendation of African communalism for the West is very curious for obvious reasons. If Africa that owns the concept is in a sorry state of conflict, perhaps worse than the 1963 situation, it then means the concept is lost and there is the need for its recovery for an overall development. The assumption here is that no meaningful development can take place where conflict is allowed to elongate.

It is the recovery of this African system of communalism that prides itself in communal fellowship, communal chairing, communal management of personal and group conflicts and the likes that this paper is focused. It uses the exposition of Acts 6:1-7 and James 4:1-3 to ascertain the root causes of human conflicts and the best ways to manage them for the type of progress that is befitting for an egalitarian society in dare need of an all- round development.

2. Causes of Conflict with Respect to Heart Desires

Conflict is not an academic exercise. It is a reality of life. For its accommodation in our world however, it requires an effective management. Unfortunately, management which is an art and a skill that could be learnt has been wrongly placed in the realm of science. This is a great de-service to the field of academics.

As an art, effective conflict management requires a pragmatic approach and this must begin with a thorough understanding of its most potent causes. With the mindset that only God is an uncaused cause, conflict like any other concept requires a pragmatic post mortem which scientific observatory hypothesis may not reveal or at best waste a lot of time on. By then, the conflict may have moved beyond abstract to a steering reality. Using this approach, conflict management must also move beyond blame game syndrome if the reason behind it must be revealed and tackled. Blame is an instrument for self-righteousness and the only winner of such game is confusion and violence.

One of the best managers of conflicts in the New Testament is Apostle James. According to his letter, particularly, 4:1-3, it would be clear, how the Apostle revealed and dealt with the remote cause of conflict in his immediate community. It would be recalled that the theme of the entire book of James is the problem of dissensions among his members. The dissensions appear as external unrest. James however looked inward to discover that individual desire is the first problems to be tackled, if the dissensions were to be nib in the bud.

Desire in the word of James is a translation of the Greek word "*hedonon*." This is where the English coinage "hedonism" is derived. It is to crave for sensual pleasures and gratification. The craving is frustratingly done that the word "*epithumeite*," which means desperate thirst, is added to prove that the sought pleasure, has turned to lust and evil desires. Instead of turning to God, the desperados have adopted the method of first, "*polemos*," meaning strife or battle. As the battles rage uncontrollably, the *polemos* became "*maxe*" – a violence struggle.

The interrogative adverb "*pothen*" that James added to "*maxe*" forms an interesting angle. *Pothen* means from where and how, and it is James own way of saying the battles that are being fought must have an allotted field to operate. The field according to James

is “*melesin*” – within, but literarily means human bodies.

Human body is always a battlefield of wants and desires. This desire is strong and difficult to control and only few people are able to overcome its grip. While few may be able to control desires before it degenerates to vengeance and murder, many falls drunkenly into the temptation of gratifying their desires through the influence of power, position, money, affluence, opulence and even women. To buttress this point, William Barclay (1953: 115-117), while quoting Philo, observes thus:

Philo points out that the Ten Commandments culminate in the forbidding of covetousness which is desire, for desire is the worst of all the passions of the soul. Is it not because of this passion that relations are broken, and this natural goodwill changed into desperate enmity? that great and populous countries are desolated by domestic dissensions? and land and sea filled with ever new disasters by naval battles and land campaigns? For the wars famous in tragedy... have all flowed from one source—desire either for money, or glory or pleasure. Over these things the human race goes mad.

Although, some desires may be accommodated, if done in conventional way, the insatiable thirsts of a natural man make desire to be the cause of the “mother” of all conflicts.

3. Concept of Communalism

Communalism refers to a group of people with common bond. It is translated from the Greek word “*koinonia*,” from the root of “*koina*,” to have things in common. *Koinonia* as a fellowship can also refer to an expression of an existing common bond in communion, partnership, contribution, sharing, and conflict management in a corporate existence, where everybody is expected to be somebody. In this type of common life, there is constant communication, with absolute sense of care for one another, and in a reciprocal sense of love and responsibility.

It is a taboo to be selfish or self-centered in a communal society. That is why the community of believers in the book of Acts, particularly from chapters two to five, were always together, had all things in common, sold their properties, and share with as many as are in need. This was very strange. In the first instance, the community was a combination of believing Jews and believing Gentiles. These were strangers from different background and culture. Secondly, the typical Jews

had neglected the needy, even though the law taught them to care for them, while the natural Gentiles were not always concerned about the less fortunate.

Some people have cited this communal system to accuse those believers of practicing communism. While they describe them as “Men desiring to set up Utopian Societies.” (Roper, 1995: 49). John Eidsmoe (1984:95-96) debunks such an insinuation with commendable illustrations. First, the community neither set up a new economic order, nor did they establish a new government or a new society. They rather devised a way of life for themselves where their needs would be met, and where they would be able to live and work peacefully in the city of Jerusalem (Keener, 1993: 330). Secondly, rather than being seen as a communist economic order, their devises could be likened to a voluntary co-operative society in order to survive together in an emergency situation exacerbated by poverty and injustices.

In his own comment, Burton Coffman (1976:63) opines that “...the so called communism of Acts... bears exactly the same relation to world communism of today that a collection plate bears to a gun in the hands of a robber.” This was not a system where some small units hold other peoples’ properties with wide political powers to do and undo. The communal community in question understood that nothing they owned really belonged to them, but rather that all belonged to God (Ps. 50:10-12), and that, they were merely stewards of God’s possessions (I Cor. 4:2). Since they had a common life with their brothers and sisters, it would be natural to think that they also had their possessions in common.

The apparent peace that reigns within them only became truncated after the community were scattered from Jerusalem and everybody goes on his or her own individual ways. Thus, according to Keener (1993:338), it (the conflict) was a result of the introduction and the final overwhelming values of the pagans in the believing community.

4. Communal Conflict Management in Acts 6:1-7

In this paper, the assumption is that, interested readers would have scanned through the passage in question. This being so, we go straight into its summary, the cause of the conflict, the reactions of the leaders and the end results.

As the population of the community increased, a complaint arose from some Hellenistic Jews, against the native Hebrews, on account of the fact that their

widows were being neglected in the daily serving of food. Until this time, the community had been of one heart and one mind (Acts 2:46; 4:32; 5:12). It was however a volatile mix because they have lost their “group spirit” having stayed apart for some periods, though they still wanted the loving cares of every member to continue. This goes to buttress an adage that out of sight is out of mind,

Hellenistic Jews were Jews who had scattered to other nations, whose first language was Greek and who had picked up the customs of their host countries. While native Hebrews were Jews whose primary language was Aramaic, (a variation of Hebrew), and who prided themselves on retaining the customs of their fathers. Majority of them lived in Palestine and often looked down on the Hellenistic Jews who had, in their view, taken up Gentile ways. Apparently, the discussion was between Jews and Jews, and if these were unable to live together on account of personal interest, there would be no hope for Jews and typical Gentiles to ever get along. What is happening between Israel and Palestine in the contemporary period is a case study. As indicated in Acts 6:9, the Hellenistic Jews already had their separate synagogues in Jerusalem. Apparently, the two types of Jews had kept their distance from each other within the same city. This shows the spirit of individualism and separatism rearing its ugly head.

The problem started with complaints, but this complaint is very curious to be ignored. According to Analytical Greek Lexicon (1971:81), the Greek word “*goggusmos*,” translated as complaint means a discourse..., the expression of secret and sullen discontent, murmuring” In our understanding today, it would mean “backbiting.” This word has never been used in the positive sense in the New Testament (cf. Phil. 2:14). It refers to mumbling, and grumbling among members of a given community. It includes talking to others instead of the ones who caused an offence. It is part of an under-current of unhappiness that can flow through the membership. It is a wave of dissatisfaction that can grow in strength until it tears a society to pieces.

The problem appears an intentional oversight. The apostles got the native Jews to do the distribution of daily food, and the apostles themselves, were native Jews, who, most probably, would have been prejudiced against the Hellenistic Jews. The interpretation would therefore have been, “since the apostles got the people they knew to help with the distribution, those men might also have come with the mindset of prejudice.” There is however no evidence to believe that the choice and the slight

were intentional. Even where there are best intentions, people can still fall apart. In all probability, the apostles were only responding to the Jewish culture of caring for the widows who had no support in the absence of their families. The gathering of widows at this time may have been a result of the Jews in diaspora who considered it virtuous to be buried in the land of Israel and had to return home to spend their last days in their native land, then died, and leave widows behind.

5. Apostles’ Reaction

While Keener (1993:338) describes the apostles’ reaction as affirmative action,¹³ Ernest Trenchard (1986: 1279), opines that it is a general lesson of corporate living and service. It is not clear how the apostles got to know of the raging feuds, but wherever rumour flies, the concerned parties would sooner than later be made to know. They, however, reserved the right to take the criticism as personal, as it might be in our contemporary period, since the blame on their appointees was also their own blame. Rather, they became sensitive and disallowed procrastination. They acknowledged that a legitimate problem existed and suggested solutions rather than trade blames. They immediately summoned the congregation, suggested the need for more and new leaders, involved the whole community in deciding who they wanted, advised them on the qualities required for better services, and delegated their authorities in a manner of division of labour. The people were to choose by, and for themselves, specific men to take care of specific tasks but with prerequisite qualifications.

The first qualification is “Men with servant hearts”. The Greek word used is *diakonos*, translated servant. Danny McCain (1996: 157-158) says that the word could mean a waiter at a meal (Jn. 2, 5, 9), or a servant of a master (Matt. 22:13). Part of the tasks of a ‘*diakonos*’ is to serve his fellows (Mark 9:35; 10:43; Math. 20:26 and 23:11), but only in a manner that he or she cannot lord anything over them. What must be uppermost in the mind of this servant is service devoid of profits. Secondly, they are to be men of good reputation. This means they are to be respected people among all segments of the community based purely on their antecedents. No one should be given a high profile responsibility in a community, if his or her life, is not worth following. Thirdly, they are to be full of the spirit. In this context it neither refers to miraculous ability nor preaching or teaching ability. They are to be godly men whose conducts would always be backed by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (cf. Gal. 5:22-23). And lastly, they are to be men of wisdom. Those who would care for the needs of hundreds, thousands and perhaps millions of people require superb sense of equity and judgment. People, who could withstand pressures, open to criticism, and ready to make amend when found wanting.

The result of these actions are interesting and worth noting. First, the number of the people continued to grow “greatly” in Jerusalem. As earlier noted, the chapter begins with the subject of increase that was becoming problematic to manage. Now the adverbial clause continued to grow greatly is indeed the direct result of good management of crisis that would have destroyed the entire community. Secondly, even the unthinkable happens. “And a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith (vs. 76). Thus, managerial skill becomes so attractive that the collective enemies of the believing community were being drawn to their camp. This is a remarkable achievement. David Roper (1995: 49) notes that Acts 3:12 announces that, at this time, there were estimated eighteen thousand priests and Levites, who served in the temple, two weeks out of every year, and who had vested interest in errors. This indeed is a tribute to the power of acceptable conflict management.

6. Derivative Codes for Conflict Management in Africa

There are seven derivative codes for conflict management that are of interest in this paper. These are leadership, communication, negotiation, trust, satisfaction, external intervention, and divine intervention.

6.1 Transformational Leadership

Harris Lee (1989: 27) defines leadership as that which moves persons and organization toward the fulfillment of their goals. And on the type of leadership that matches Harris Lee definition, James MacGregor (1978: 4), recommends a transformational one, that is capable of inspiring, motivating and communicating ideas to people, with a shared vision of the future. This type of servant leadership raises people to a higher level of commitment and morality as a change agent.

One of the greatest reasons for conflict in Africa is inequality. This could be linked directly to a breach of social contract from failed leadership. To avoid conflict, leaders must move beyond prioritizing capital development which is in the realm of human

welfare to the detriment of human development which is in the realm of human well-being. Only well-educated and well-fed people would remember state of arts cars that would ride on some ego trip fly overs. African leaders engage in gigantic projects for the purpose of siphoning money that could provide jobs for citizens. An idle hand is always the devil’s workshop. Leaders in the book of Acts have the divine mandate of word ministry. They however did not forget the food ministry which could enhance the success of word ministry. A hungry man is an angry man. This type of food ministry is constant and realistic, devoid of any ulterior motives as in the stomach infrastructure being practiced in some states in Nigeria for cheap popularity, egocentrism and hoodwinking the electorates.

6.2 Communication

Knowledge is power. And to be well informed is to be well prepared. Leaders that will not gloss over the possibility for quarrels between one another, and between the led and their leaders, must come down from ivory towers and run an effective open door policy. It takes a sensitive leader to disallow rumour mongering from operating. A former president of Nigeria announced openly that he was caged for sixteen years. To be caged is to be in inaccessible, particularly to the teeming masses, who voted him into power. The few elites who have free access would probably not tell him the real situation on ground for obvious reasons. The revelation of monumental fraud under his watch is an attestation of his confession. Not even the draconic regime of General Sani Abacha, witnessed so much hatred from the poverty stricken masses like Dr. Goodluck Jonathan’s democratic regime. African leaders must learn from president Barrack Obama of America who devotes some hours weekly for telephone conversation with the American people in order to hear directly from them, the state of the nation.

6.3 Negotiation

One of the best ways to manage conflict is to have a round table negotiation in a give and take manner. In this arrangement, neither party to the conflict could insist on being wright. This also connotes that people are encouraged to get involved not only in the choice of their leaders, but even in the day-to-day running of such administration. Capper (1995: 353) gives a hint that the primary cause of conflict in Acts 6:1-7 is not actually on the neglect of widows in food distribution but in their agitation for being part of the system. According to him:

The solution to the dispute over the care for the Hellenists' widows was the appointment of the seven officers (6:5). All seven have Greek names and appear to be drawn from the Hellenist community alone. This implies that the solution to the dispute was not the integration of the 'Hellenist' widows into the 'daily distribution' of the 'Hebrew' congregation but rather the establishment of offices to organize care within Hellenist community itself, which clearly had no arrangement of any kind for the care of the poor.

The disastrous consequences of Rehoboam's unwillingness to negotiate in I Kings 12 is a practical case study for leadership and conflict situation in Africa.

6.4 Trust

Building confidence on the integrity, veracity and judgement of a principal partner in an active relationship is a solid pillar of success. Watching one another's action for the purpose of finding fault is a sure bet for conflicts. People should trust their leaders as well as put trust in one another to be able to live in peace.

6.5 Satisfaction

A clear and unambiguous theme in the Bible is contentment (Lk. 3:14, Heb. 13:15; I Tim. 6:6). This contentment asks for human efforts with the awareness that those efforts might end up in few or plenty, but definitely not in nothing. It therefore asks those who have more to take what they need and share with the less privileged. Everybody should then be satisfied with what he or she has and hope in God for increase when necessary.

6.6 External Intervention

When the posture of the parties concerned in a conflict is hard lining, so much that amicable compromise becomes difficult to reach, external assistance may be sought. Paul's instruction to the Corinthians is to seek the assistance of a wise man to intervene when dispute arises (I Cor. 6:5). A sharp dispute between Paul and Barnabas took the intervention of the Jerusalem council (equivalent of the United Nations today). Though, the bible forbids court cases particularly between Christians, some disputes may require the intervention of courts of competent jurisdiction instead of taking laws into the hands by parties concerned. Seeking for external intervention must however not be aimed at self-adulation, self-promotion or self-pity but for an

enduring peace in a manner of give and take. A stitch in time is likely to save nine.

6.7 Divine Intervention

Above all, divine intervention would be appropriate in conflict resolution. This should not be surprising to African people as a continent deeply religious. It is always necessary to seek God's assistance through prayers. The council at Jerusalem Jettisoned human wisdom in favour of God's intervention in a crisis that would have permanently divided the Church into Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15:23-29). The 2015 general elections in Nigeria witnessed the unthinkable, the defeat and the acceptance of defeat by the incumbent president. This may not be unconnected with the prayers of Nigerians. At least, a former head of state, General Yakubu Gowon embarked on prayers throughout Nigeria in what was called "Nigeria Prays." Despite predictions of disintegration and civil wars, the nation remains intact and peaceful. In any dispute, the efficacy of prayers cannot be underestimated.

7. Conclusion

African continent has had more than enough share of conflicts in recent past. This may not be unconnected with her abandonment of her traditional system of life which not only prides itself in group being where the affairs of one were the concern for all, but even in group spirit of give and take whenever conflicts arose. She had equally taken to different types of economic and political ideologies with deep sense of individualism, separation and private accumulation of wealth. This has in effect resulted in a wide gap between the rich and the poor. In fact, in today's Africa, the idea of Middle Class has been wiped off leaving in its place a frustratingly poverty-stricken masses.

With a thorough exposition of Acts 6:1-7, alongside James 4:1-3, a number of lessons have been drawn from conflicts, its potent cause and its management. The derivative codes suggested for conflict management may lead to a new African of peace and prosperity where everybody would be proud to belong. This can only be done however with a sincere communal spirit with its demand for a high sense of responsibility and accountability towards our fellow beings. That was the culture of Africa and it is hereby recommended for the world at large for peaceful co-existence.

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