# The Role of Political and Cultural aspects, in shaping the course of Conflict & Negotiation in Africa

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## Abstract

The Bible says that, a man's wisdom gives him patience, it's to his glory to overlook an offence (Proverbs: 19:11). Conflicts are a common phenomenon in every society and knowing the best negotiation skills to employ is an advantage to everyone. The African continent has not been spared on issues of conflicts especially those that are politically instigated. Poor levels of education and issues of greed could be some of the contributions to the politically originated conflict issues. This paper seeks to critically analyze the role of cultural aspects in shaping the course of conflict & Negotiation in Africa. This paper has also looked at various approaches to conflict resolution through mediation and negotiation. The issues affecting effective conflict resolution have also been addressed. The conclusion brings about various ways to manage conflicts and to handle negotiations.

**Keywords:** *Conflict, political, culture, negotiation.*

## Introduction

Conflict in Africa has been quite common and though a lot of tactics and strategies have been employed to resolve conflict, in most cases, the result has been a win-lose situation. Those who are presumed to be strong due to either their political status or financial muscles have almost always carried the day while the weak majority have been left desperate.

Conflict occurs everywhere where there're human beings. The issue is how these conflicts are resolved. Conflicts are caused by tension arising from mutually exclusive or differing actions, thoughts, perceptions or feelings. It arises when individuals or groups assess situations or pass judgments from different viewpoints that are contributed by incompatible differences in their education, culture, personalities, or level of understanding of the issues in contest. Further, conflicts occur when persons involved perceive a threat to their interests, positions or political status. It may also occur due to misinformation, stereotypes, prejudices, social cultural believes and personal values. There are many dimensions to conflict that include racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, economic and political (Bekelcha, 2019, Coleman et al, 2013, Mullins, 2010).

According to Coser (1967) as cited in the International Journal of Academic Research in Economics and Management Sciences (2014), conflict in Africa is a struggle over values and claims to scarce resources, status and power in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize,

injure or eliminate the rivals. However, there are situations where constructive negotiation has been used and yielded great results. Ivancevich, Konopaske & Matteson (2013) posit that, conflicts can be caused by perceptual differences that include status incongruence, inaccurate perceptions, and different perspectives. Ivancevich et al have further noted that not all conflict is negative. Some conflicts have resulted in great ideas and development.

Conflict has been part of African setup such that it's become a part of life. It has even been seen as the norm with some of the African countries learning to live with it. Resources have been unfairly distributed in some African states thus aggravating the already existing tribal and cultural differences. Resources like water and land have been a source of conflict in Kenya and other parts of the African continent. Power and greed have positioned some people as the guaranteed winners in every conflict especially political conflicts.

As observed by Ivancevich, Konopaske & Matteson (2013), there are two types of conflicts which are functional and dysfunctional conflicts. A functional conflict as posited by Ivancevich et al is a confrontation between two individuals or parties that has the potential to give rise to a better situation. According to Ivancevich et al, different functions may disagree on the most appropriate and effective way to carry out a specific task, but even in such a disagreement, they have an opportunity to come up with the best option. On the other hand, a dysfunctional conflict as noted by Ivancevich et al is the conflict among people that results in harm to the people involved and affects the overall peace.

**Conflict Resolution**

Coleman, Deutsch and Marcus (2014) have noted two approaches to conflict resolution which are cooperation and competition. According to Coleman et al, cooperation thrives under values like respect for the people involved, value for relationships and consideration of the interests of the other party. Cooperation seeks for a win – win situation and empowers the other party by listening and understanding their point of view and enlightening them on the issues at hand.

Competition on the other hand as noted by Coleman et al (2014), has a selfish approach where the focus is on self and no respect for the interest of the other party. This approach ends in a win-lose situation and the parties are not interested in restoring the relationship. Though this approach may be appropriate in certain situations, it does not guarantee restored relationship among the conflicting parties. Raines (2013) posits that, in conflict resolution it's important to consider the feelings of the other person. People have emotions and it's important to manage these emotions. People are more important than issues and therefore, seeking for the solution at the same time considering the future relationship is important. According to Raines, maintaining professionalism during a conflict situation is important. Lewicki, Barry and Saunders (2015) advise conflicting parties to maintain soberness even when either of the party loses their temper. Focusing and remaining on the issue of conflict would hasten the conflict resolution process. Raines further noted that, every conflict situation reveals the nature of a person and the behavior portrayed clearly demonstrates the maturity of a person. The Bible in (Proverbs 26:20) states that without firewood, a fire is extinguished. This means that, if we deal with issues that escalate a conflict, resolution becomes a reality.

The ability to admit our limitations and accept our contribution in a conflict would be a better starting point in conflict resolution. Being humble enough to admit a mistake is strength in disguise. Sometimes, a conflict is accelerated by pride and arrogance. The Bible admonishes us to

seek peace and pursue it (1 Peter 3:11). Peace is more desirable than turmoil and therefore it's important to seek for every means to recover and sustain it.

## Culture

Culture is an undeniable force that exists with people. Since conflicts arise where there are people, then it means that culture and conflicts go hand in hand. For effective conflict resolution, cultural aspects need to be considered and understood. Coleman, Deutsch and Marcus (2014) define culture as the foundation of social reality that affects all the members of a particular social, ethnic or age group. They are man-made ideas that define what is real and important to those who share them. Culture according to Coleman et al (2014) is dynamic and is learnt. Every one of us is a product of the culture in which we were brought up. Culture according to Armstrong (2014) affects our perception, motives, interests and preferences that may contribute to conflicts in our daily to daily interactions.

These different cultural aspects also affect negotiation processes. Some of these aspects as noted by Mullins (2010) include religion, communication, values and accepted social norms. Mullins further noted that culture is learnt and no one is born with it. People are socialized into a certain culture and that's the reason that culture can also be relearnt. Culture in the African continent has been exalted and people are made to fill that one can't go against their culture.

## Culture and Negotiations

According to Lewicki, Barry and Saunders (2015), negotiations are affected by culture in that, people from different cultures interpret issues differently and also interpret basic negotiation processes differently. Some approach negotiation deductively (move from general to specific) while others are more inductive in that they move from specific to general (Lewicki et al, 2015). The understanding of these cultural dynamics would make the conflict resolution process more effective and efficient. It's important for a negotiator to take time to understand the cultural diversities reflecting in the disputant parties he/she is dealing with.

Lewicki et al (2015) further noted that in some cultures, relationships play a big role in conflict management while in others, task and solutions take the center stage. Some people may feel that restoring a relationship or focusing on the future of a relationship is a waste of time. They would prefer to focus on the issues and ignore the relationship. In such a case, the method of conflict resolution may not matter very much, what matters is a win whatever the means. Those whose cultural values place relationships above issues tend to look beyond the problem. They focus on the feelings of the other person and as noted by Lewicki et al (2015), they prefer a win –win situation where both parties are comfortable with the decision.

## Levels of conflict

Lewicki, Barry and Saunders (2015) posit that conflict resolution mechanisms vary across different cultures. Lewicki et al further noted that the level of conflict and the type of interdependence between the parties to a cross – cultural negotiation affects the negotiation process and the outcome. This means that high conflict situations that are based on ethnicity, identity of geographical perspectives are more complicated to resolve. However, Lewicki et al (2015) noted that there is some evidence in that civil wars solved through a comprehensive, institutionalized agreement that does not allow the use of coercive force and promotes fair distribution of resources and political power lead to more stable settlements. Fisher, Ury and Patton (2014) posited how

cultural differences affected the level of conflict and conflict resolution since the different parties had different ways of understanding the conflicting issues.

## Conceptualizing Culture and Negotiation

There are many different meanings of the concept of culture but as noted by Lewicki, Barry and Saunders (2015), all definitions share two important aspects. First, culture is a group-level phenomenon. This means that, a specific group of people share beliefs, values and perceptions. The second aspect of culture is that cultural beliefs, values and perceptions are learnt and passed on from one person to another. Lewicki et al (2015) further clarifies that though culture produces a group of people with similar characteristics, some members of that particular culture may not share in those characteristics. It's therefore difficult to predict an individual's behavior on the basis of their cultural setup. Even if knowledge of the other person's culture is important in providing important clues, Lewicki et al posit that, it's important for the negotiators to be open minded so as to adjust as soon as new information emerge.

## Approaches to understanding the effects of culture on negotiation

## Culture as Learned Behavior

Negotiators need to seek to understand other people's culture and why people behave in a particular way before judging their behavior. Understanding the culture of the disputant parties enables a negotiator to choose the most effective method of conflict resolution. In some cultures, compromise is not a big deal while in others, accommodation is generally practiced. In order to arrive at the right method that would be comfortable with each party and still give effective results, understanding the different cultural aspects of the people involved is very important. As noted by Lewicki, Barry and Saunders (2015), there are cultures that have no respect for other people's rights and are more confrontational to issues. Having an understanding of such situations would guide in creating the right atmosphere for conflict resolution.

## Culture as shared values

In every culture, there are central values that have a greater influence on the negotiation process. Lewicki et al (2015) suggest that it's important to compare cultures and understand the different values and norms that would have an influence on the negotiation process. In conflict management and resolution, it's important to ensure that no further wounds are inflicted during the negotiation process but every party leaves the negotiation table pleased with the outcome. The negotiator should therefore have an understanding of the cultural values that are shared by both parties before starting the negotiation process. If for example both parties profess peace as a cultural value, then this becomes a strong factor in the negotiation process.

## Political aspects in conflict and negotiation

Politics involve power which Buchanan and Badham (2008) have defined as the ability of individuals to force their will on others. In politics, conflict is mostly contributed by the struggle for access to, control and management of political power. It's about determining who gets what and by what means. In politics, conflicts may occur due to a leader's unethical behavior. To manage conflict, leaders need to accept responsibility for their behavior and also treat the followers with respect. According to Chaleff (2003), courageous leaders accept full responsibility for their own behavior. The leader – follower relationship is defined by follower's support of their leader's success, constructive challenge of behavior and the moral stand against unethical behavior.

Political skills are however encouraged in dealing with conflicts. Moss and Barbuto, (2010) posit that interpersonal political skills are important leadership skills that can be useful in dealing with complicated issues. However, Moss and Barbuto agree that altruism, the ability to put others first is what balances political skills and effectiveness in conflict management. In every human being, there's a tendency to fight for our rights and the desire to feel powerful which would lead to a biased approach to conflict management. Acknowledging one's political position and deciding not to use the same to avert justice is a great sign of inner maturity. It demonstrates a sense of security and confidence on the part of the leader.

## Approaches to conflict resolution

### Negotiation

According to Lewicki, Barry and Saunders (2015), negotiation refers to a situation where two or more parties discuss with one another, with an aim to make decisions that would resolve their opposing interests. Lewicki et al have further noted that, it's important to understand every conflict situation so as to know which negotiation strategy to employ. Understanding the culture of the parties involved would increase the probability of having a successful negotiated outcome. The characteristics of a great negotiator according to Lewicki et al (2015) include honesty & integrity, Maturity, system orientation and superior listening skills. Honesty and integrity which are reflected by a sincere desire to solve the problem, creates trust in the parties involved. Maturity is the ability one has to stand up for his/her issues while at the same time considering other people's issues and values. Effective communication involves interpreting other body expressions other than verbal and also the ability to avoid listening only from one's frame of reference.

### Distributive strategy

Some situations require distributive strategy and tactics which tend to lean more on competitiveness. This according to Lewicki et al (2015) works in situations where resources are limited and no likelihood of future relationship. It's more focused on the problem and the outcome of the situation. The African culture is more oriented to this type of style probably due to the colonial style of leadership or just due to a result of power focus. In the areas where different tribes have been conflicting over scarce resources like land and water, distributive strategy seems to be used. This means that one party gains at the expense of the other. It's also a negotiation strategy that most African political leaders use to remain in power and ensure that their opponents are defeated.

### Integrative strategy

Integrative negotiation strategy according to Lewicki, Barry and Saunders (2015), focuses on reconciliation and the interest of both parties. Integrative strategy is more cooperative and more concerned with the future relationship with the other party. This strategy according to Lewicki et al (2015) produces a solution that is favorable to every party. It takes into perspective the feelings, emotions and the interests of the other person. According to Raines (2013), our negotiation approach should reflect fairness, respect and justice. Raines further noted that, even the most stressful conflict provides us with an opportunity to showcase our conflict management skills and display the importance we place on relationships. This means that the manner in which we handle conflicts indicates our level of maturity and a clear demonstration of self-leadership.

According to Fisher, Ury and Patton (2011) there are various types of conflicts that include interpersonal and intergroup conflicts. Fisher et al further noted various approaches to conflict

resolution that include Collaboration, competition, subordination and avoidance. According to Fisher et al, it's important to recognize which approach to use in whatever situation and that there are situations that would require more than one approach.

Fisher, Ury and Patton (2011) posit that for a win-win situation, negotiation would apply both collaboration and compromise. This approach is usually applied when both the relationship and the task or outcome are important. Parties in this situation share ideas, motives and goals freely as they seek for a mutually acceptable agreement that will promote both the relationship and the outcome. Fisher et al have further suggested that this kind of approach is the most appropriate among teams or in an organization set up where teams are interdependent because the aftermath does not leave a bad taste in any party's mouth.

Competition according to Fisher, Ury and Patton (2011) is a negotiation approach that focuses more on the task and outcome than the long-term relationship. This is mostly used in an interpersonal conflict between a leader and a junior where the leader imposes his/her own solution. Sometimes this approach would be the best choice in a case of discipline where the employee has to comply with the management decision. In this situation, the one who has the upper hand or the aggressor presents their own offers and demands first, without even considering the opinion of the other person. In fact, the opinion or the feelings of the other person do not yield much since the outcome has already been decided. According to Dana (2001), we should seek to understand the structure of a conflict in order to decide which negotiation approach to take. Competition would work well where the interdependency of the parties is low.

Subordination or accommodation as noted by Lewicki, Barry and Saunders (2015), considers relationships more than the outcome. In this situation, one suppresses their own interests for the sake of the other party. This is common in families where one party allows the other party to have their way for the sake of the relationship. In the Africa continent, leaders can use it to create goodwill and reduce hostility. It's usually a loss – win approach.

Avoidance is used as a negotiation approach where one of the parties is not very much concerned with the results. According to Fisher, Ury and Patton (2011), in avoidance, there is no desire to win or to lose. People avoid negotiating when they don't see the benefit that the outcome will give them. It's usually a lose – lose approach since no one benefits with the stalemate. Fisher et al suggest that one should choose a negotiation approach that will achieve the relationship and task outcomes that they desire. However, considering other people's feelings and interests is essential in conflict management.

According to Dana (2001), for effective management of conflicts, there is need to first of all understand the structure of the conflict in order to decide how to resolve it. Dana further suggested several parts of conflict structure that need to be noted in conflict management as follows: First is the interdependency which looks at the extent to which the parties need each other to meet their goals. If the interdependency is high, then as noted by Dana, the cost of not resolving it is also likely to be high. If interdependency is low, then "watchful waiting" may be an appropriate conflict-management strategy. If there were absolutely no interdependency, then conflict wouldn't exist at all. Therefore, as posited by Dana, conflict occurs only between parties who need each other and who cannot simply leave the relationship with no negative consequences.

Another thing to note is the number of interested parties in the conflict. How many distinct parties, individuals or groups have an interest in how the conflict is resolved. According to Dana (2001), the fewer the parties involved, the easier and quicker it is to resolve the conflict. As the number

and size of parties increase, there are more people to please and thus the difficulty of resolving the conflict increases. Negotiator authority is another aspect of the conflict to note. As stated by Dana, if negotiator authority is high, then resolution is easier but if negotiator authority is low, then the process of resolving the conflict will take longer and will be more difficult.

## Mediation

Mediation according to Coleman, Deutsch and Marcus (2014) is a process whereby a neutral third party, acceptable to all disputants, facilitates communication that enables parties to reach a negotiated deal. The mediator as noted by Coleman et al (2014) facilitates communication for the disputing parties. The advantage of mediation is that, since it's a non-formal way of conflict resolution, the parties determine the timelines and even the outcome. The process may be less costly than other approaches and may produce better results. In mediation, the parties agree to meet and discuss the issues of the conflict. Since the parties involved are in charge of the process, tension is minimized or eliminated. In Africa, mediation has been practiced to solve political conflicts in many countries.

To ensure success in mediation, Coleman et al (2014) states that collaboration is important. Both parties need to work together for a suitable solution. The mediator in the mediation process may not get to the details of decision making. His/her role is to bring the parties together and ensure effective communication is taking place. Where the parties divert from the main issues and start to attack one another's personality, the mediator's role is to bring them back to the issues of conflict. This approach may reduce confrontations and may be non-violent since as noted by Coleman et al, the mediator usually has both conflict resolution and communication skills.

## Conclusion

To manage conflict in any kind of set up, we need to look beyond the problem and see the future of the relationship. The following are some of the aspects that as human beings we need to consider in our relationships and conflict management.

First, cultivating peaceful coexistence takes humility. The Bible admonishes believers to clothe themselves in humility, kindness, gentleness and patience, to consider not only their own interests but also the interests of others (Colossians 3:12, Philippians 2:4). Self-importance, haughtiness, pride and arrogance are some of the issues that affect conflict resolution than anything else. Pride creates walls and prejudices among people, but humility considers the value of others and seeks to promote peace.

Secondly, empathizing with other people's situations and feelings, enables conflicting parties to seek for the best outcome for all the parties involved. This demonstrates emotional intelligence which according to Goleman (2013) is the ability to understand and manage one's emotions and those of others. As Raines (2013) puts it, demonstrating respect and listening effectively changes the atmosphere of a conflict. Getting the facts right and considering the point of view of each person may lead to a win - win situation in conflict resolution.

Thirdly, focusing and addressing the issue and not the person shows professionalism in conflict management. According to Fisher, Ury and Patton (2011), a basic fact when applying negotiation in conflict management, is that we are dealing not with abstract objects but with human beings with emotions. Failing to deal with others sensitively as human beings prone to human reactions can lead to disastrous results. It's therefore very important to understand that people have emotions, deeply held values, different cultural backgrounds, different perceptions and they are

unpredictable. It's not easy to solve the problem when we are busy fixing the blame. The choice of words and intonations are critical meaning that, what we say and how we say it matters in negotiations. According to the Bible (Proverbs 15:1), a soft answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger, which means that it's better to be polite than to be sarcastic while handling conflicts.

Fourthly, emphasize on reconciliation and not resolution. Many African conflicts would have been solved faster and amicably if the parties involved focused on the relationships more than the problem. When we focus on reconciliation, the problem becomes less magnified. Unity does not mean uniformity and it's possible to be at peace even without agreeing to everything. Therefore, we need to give peace supremacy even as we seek for solutions.

Lastly, cooperation is better than conflict. Sometimes, it's important to adjust for the sake of peace. According to Raines (2013), conflict is neither positive nor negative, it's our reaction to conflict that determines the outcome whether it will be constructive or destructive. Raines suggests that it's very important to focus on the relationship in conflict resolution. One's attitude and reactions towards the other party during a conflict is highly predictive of their future relationships. It's not the conflict that hurts relationships, it's the way we approach it, manage it and communicate it (Raines, 2013). The Bible in (Mathew 5:9 MSG version) states that we are blessed when we can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when we discover who we really are, and our place in God's family.

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