

NDEBELE KINSHIP STRUCTURES: A SOLID BASE FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT, PEACE AND SECURITY IN OUR COMMUNITIES.

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ABSTRACT

The concept of kinship ties among African societies, particular the Ndebele is a strong weapon for promoting peace, stability and conflict management in both the family and the entire community. The kinship structures put in place by the local people have in so many instances proved to be as effective in the maintenance of peace and security as well as respect for human rights .The titles of relationships in most African communities can be precisely referred to as titles of responsibilities, obligations and duties for instance the societal roles assumed by aunts, uncles, mothers, grandparents and senior members (the elderly) serve as societal positions of authority. Culturally, any form of relationship which connects family or community members together comes with a host of expectations. If properly and positively revisited, the concept of kinship ties can assist in finding solutions to the current political and social conflicts in Africa. This paper explores the power behind the kinship structures in issues of peace, conflict management and development for use in the contemporary socio-political scene.

Keywords: Kinship ties, Peace, Conflict management, Titles of relationships, Titles of responsibilities, Culture, Structures, Community.

Contribution/ Originality:

This work is my original effort and all the ideas are basically mine. Those ideas which are not originally mine have been acknowledged accordingly as in-text or in the references list that is provided at the end of the paper. This work will contribute so much to scholarly work as a source of reference especially for those in the social sciences and humanities who intend to carry out a deep study of the cultural behavior of the African indigenous communities and in this case with particular reference to the Ndebele people.

1. INTRODUCTION

This world has been affected greatly by wars and conflicts which come as a result of tribal, ethnic, social and even physical differences among its inhabitants. Some of these conflicts have been going on for a long time without possible solutions in the foreseeable future and if nothing

better is done, they will bring humanity to extinction. One may be quick to point out that there are so many conferences, conventions and summits that have been held in an attempt to secure peace in the various countries of the world but, alas, the more the summits, the more the conflicts. Currently, the Southern Africa Development Community's (Sadc) hands are full to the brim in trying to find solutions to the Zimbabwean, Madagascar and Malawian crises yet in the Northern part of the continent, the same applies where Libya, Tunisia and Sudan are in perpetual conflict. It would seem as though conflict has been, as it continues to be, part of life for most world societies as postulated by Ndlovu (1995) who confirms that conflict, and conflict resolution have been part of life since time immemorial in the Ndebele society:

*khona, ukuxabana kanye lokuphambaniselana yinto eyadabuka
ikhona ebantwini. Kodwa loba kunjalo ingxabano ezibakhona
zihambelana lendlela lesi sizwe esiphila ngayo. Ngakho ke umhlobo
wamacala lendlela alungiswa ngayo konke kugxile enhlakweni yaleso
sizwe*

(Doing wrong, conflict and offending each other originated with men.

However conflicts are related to a people's way of life. Therefore, the types of offences and their resolution is based on the way of life of particular people.)

While the writers do not suggest that conflict should be perpetuated, they are placing an emphasis on its prevalence as well as the need to always find a way of solving whatever differences we may encounter as human beings. This paper is then advocating for a solution that is initiated and enforced, for a change, from the grassroots, precisely from the way the people have done or managed it in the past. It is motivated by the realization that the African societies, and in particular, the Ndebele people, both of old and the current, had very strong kinship structures which were effective in matters of disputes and conflict management. A reflection of how the kinship structures which are prevalent in most African traditional communities and how they operate could unravel the secret to finding lasting solutions to the current crises that the world is experiencing.

1.1. Conceptual Framework

The subject, and especially the value, of the traditional Ndebele kinship system cannot be fully appreciated or better still, understood in the absence of a viable and relevant theoretical or conceptual ideology. As a matter of fact, the absence of such has led to the denigration of the whole essence of African culture to both the outside and the inside world. An appropriate theoretical framework enables us to take stock of ourselves from our own definition of key issues as well as our own personal experience with whatever surrounds us so much so that we can be able to adjust and change as our situation demands. One such relevant theory is the theory of

ubuntu/hunhuism which is not only African but also Zimbabwean. The concept of *ubuntu* is rooted in the spirit of Africanism whose main thrust is the indigenesness of the African people and especially in the sense brought out by Miller (2009) who views it as “an ethic or humanist philosophy focusing on people’s relations with each other summed up in the statement “*I am who I am because of who we all are*”.

In this case, the theory subscribes so much to the idea of unity of purpose and not that of individualism where each one does his/her own thing. This implies that the spirit of individualism is not welcome among the African people and everyone lives to please and be pleased by others. In light of the subject of discussion here, the concept of *ubuntu/hunhu* is more than relevant in the sense that it encourages a communal based approach to life rather than individualism. It is centered in the culture of indigenous people and dictates how they should view themselves *vis a viv* what surrounds them. It is apparent that this concept is central to a study of this nature because it forms the basis on which to found any form of analyses for the cultural behaviors of the Ndebele people. Such an interpretation is cemented by Tutu (2000) definition of the concept which says:

“Ubuntu is a concept that we have in our Bantu languages at home. Ubuntu is the essence of being a person. It means that we are people through other people. We cannot be fully human alone. We are made for interdependence, we are made for family. When you have ubuntu, you embrace others. You are generous, compassionate. If the world had more ubuntu, we would not have war. We would not have this huge gap between the rich and the poor. You are rich so that you can make up what is lacking for others. You are powerful so that you can help the weak, just as a mother or father helps their children.

When one takes a surgical examination of the quote by the bishop, one would arrive at the conclusion that any meaningful discussion on kinship ties and their influence among the Ndebele people cannot be done outside the realms of *ubuntu/hunhu* especially for its attributes of managing conflict and promoting respect for one another in our societies.

1.2. Kinship Ties

The Thesaurus English Dictionary (2012) defines kinship as “a close connection marked by community of interest or similarity in nature or character” as well as “relatedness or connection marked by blood or marriage or adoption”. While this is a purely linguistic definition of the subject under study, one cannot deny the fact that it also captures, may be not precisely, and brings out the same interpretation that informs a study of this nature. In light of that, the concept of kinship will be elaborated in line with the African perceptions of what a relative is and how relatedness is essential for the mutual responsibilities and respect for individuals. The kinship ties will be interpreted as that long winding string which ties so many individuals together starting

with the immediate then stretching out to the extended family as well as the elderly or senior members of the community. Mbiti (1975) qualifies the invaluable part played by kinship structures in most African societies where he points out that even the elder members of the society qualify to be negotiators for conflict resolution by virtue of their age since there is a general belief that “wisdom comes with age”.

Kinship structures were created by and large by the people as a way of maintaining order, peace and security in their communities after they realised that once there is some sort of relationship between two or more individuals, there is bound also to be some kind of respect among such. Maphosa (1998) makes reference to the role played by the extended family which he sees as a very effective force which can be used in issues of sustainable development simply because it taps from the very essence of their survival. The respect for each other varied from one individual to another depending on the definition of the connecting relationship but all the same, this respect was still a force to reckon with since at the end of the day it could emerge that the whole village is somehow related one way or the other. Regardless of how close or how distant the connecting relationship was, the bottom line is that there was and in some cases, still is that due respect for kinship ties. As such, respect for one another was not only enforced by the fact that individuals are from the same family but also the fact that by and large they are related. It would be naïve for anyone, this presenter included, to suppose or worse still, suggest that there is no conflict and quarrelling amongst the local people just because there are these kinship ties. On the contrary, there are various conflicts of varying magnitudes. However, there are some positions of responsibility that are assumed by certain individuals like the aunts, uncles, and the elderly which are automatically positions of authority in most African societies including the Ndebele for the sake of making sure that in the event of conflicts and instability among the people, there is always a way of restoring peace and stability in both the family as well as the community at large. Haralambos (1990).

The fact that most people in African societies have respect and high regard for these structures that are dictated to them by their various societies is a solid base on which to found our quest for world peace and stability starting at the grassroots. In addition to that, the idea that Africans have an innate and unquestionable respect for an individual once they understand that that individual is related to them one way or the other means that the same concept can be used even to a higher level to influence them to solve their conflicts amicably without war and violence. Both kinship and respect for its structures is what motivates this presentation which explores the possibility of finding peace and conflict management from the structures that are laid down by the people such that they become active participants in finding lasting solutions to violence. Such structures as outlined below are a symbol of the indigenous people's creativity as well as their ability to organize themselves for the sake of peace and progress.

2. THE FAMILY

According to Ndlovu and Ngwenya (2010), “like all other Africans, the Ndebele are a family-centered-people...” However, the concept of a family in both the African and the Ndebele communities is not egocentric or limited to biological connections but covers a wide range of individuals starting with the immediate family unit normally made up of a father, a mother and children. It then balloons outward to cover what is commonly referred to as the extended family where we have the grandparents, the aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, grandchildren, neighbors and the others. This boils down to what has been regarded as “blood relatives” meaning that they share certain genetic links as well as genealogical circumstances which the Ndebele in particular prefer to call *izihlobo zegazi* (blood relatives). The fact that these have got traits of the same blood is not taken lightly in the African community where blood is considered sacred and to some extent “holy” such that it is the one that ties people together hence the saying “blood is thicker than water”. It is this idea of blood that commands the respect for each of the members of the same family for instance the reason why one can not get married to his sister solely lies in the fact that they have or share the same source of blood. The Shona people actually have a saying which goes “*rinongova ringanameso zamu rehanzvadzi*” (it is an admire and leave, like the breast of a sister) which translates to the fact that no one is allowed to lust after his sister’s breasts no matter how attractive they may appear to be. As a result, it is in fact considered taboo for a brother and sister’s marriage arrangement to be sanctioned and there is a general belief that if people engage in such, they face the wrath of the ancestors and the family spirits. Most African societies do not want to anger their spirits, for obvious reasons, fear of the unknown, and as such no sister or brother can get into a marriage arrangement.

The brother is expected to respect his sister in all respects and make it a point that he is there to protect her from possible assailants who most of the times are suitors. What is of interest here is that brothers and sisters from the same family have an obligation to respect, protect and honor each other just because they have the same blood flowing in their veins. One may hasten to highlight that the idea of brother and sister is not confined to the immediate family; it also moves out of this nucleus to cover those members who are born by uncles (fathers’ brothers). In its original sense, there was no marked distinction between the brother/sister from my immediate family and the brother/sister who belongs to the family of my father’s brother. It was (and still is) common practice among the Ndebele and the Shona to occasionally exchange children in order to destroy that mentality of saying ‘I belong to this family, or I belong to that family’ alone and no other such that one is not only restricted to a single family unit where they are biologically born. It is only now that my brother from my uncle’s side is referred to as my ‘cousin’ brother, at least in the sense brought about by the English language. While this terminology is a result of linguistic variations between and among languages, it has a destructive effect on the amount of respect and value that our brother/sisterhood was meant to impart.

The fact that we share the same surname is evidence enough that we belong to the same family and the respect we give each other is the same as that we render to our blood brothers and sisters. In that case, in the traditional African set up, it was not easy to separate children from each other as long as they were brought up together, better still, people stayed together such that a single village could comprise of people who belong to one big family for example the Gwebu family under Chief Gwebu in Buhera. It would be naïve for one to assume that such a situation was immune to conflict and quarrels but the bottom line is that, the solutions to such problems were easily found since already we would be tied by the same blood and surnames. It is the submission of this presenter that, the fact that sisterhood and brotherhood has had a track record and potential of enforcing peace in the immediate as well as the extended family, the same idea and concept can be harnessed to ensure that there is peace in local communities as this will also go a long way in making sure that there is national stability. One may be quick to point out that this respect comes as a byproduct of culture and like any other facets of culture, it is inculcated in the system as the children grow. History has demonstrated that that culture has the potential to unite and separate, and at once to include and exclude. But the extent to which it leans towards any of these tendencies varies according to the manipulation of the cultural factor towards conflict neutrality or conflict pro action. This argument finds so much meaning in the observations by Lederach (1995) who says:

Culture is a shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing and responding to social realities around them.

Since culture has the ability to unite, and yet disunity is what seems to be our major problem, one would recommend that today's society looks back and take a leaf from its traditional institutions in order to manipulate them for the sake of positive progress in attaining peace and tranquility for our strife riddled societies.

2.1. Cousins

The concept of a cousin in most African communities is almost similar but most importantly it is very different from the way it is defined in the western spheres. The cousin in the traditional context is the one who is descended from the aunt who happens to be a sister to our father or an uncle who is the brother to our mother. Children from the aunts' side are a very special set of relatives since they are born by our fathers' sister or sisters. Most of the time we do not share the same surname with these ones because they use a surname from their fathers' side but they remain an integral part of our family. Very little can be done without involving them and in most cases they are called upon to come and solve internal family conflicts. In the majority of cases, cousins are the ones who act as intermediaries when people of the same family pick a fight. This is confirmed by Yankah *et al.* (1995) who points out that the principle of using intermediaries in conflict management is not unique to the Ndebele but common to most African societies:

The use of an intermediary, through whom formal talk is rooted, is the social dimension of the general practice and direction that permeates the speech of several cultures in Africa

These (the cousins) intermediaries can also be given the opportunity to make some of the major decisions for the family mainly because they are considered to be more neutral than the immediate family members. One cannot run away from the fact that the issue of blood is considered in the case of these cousins, (*abazawethu*) though it is to a less extent. The Shona people call them *vanasekuru* (uncles) which puts them at the same level with their adult counterparts who are also *vanasekuru*. It is also apparent that, cousins of this nature can not be allowed to marry one another under whatever circumstances and that is where the subject of blood relationship comes into play. These are considered as our blood relatives who are not even available for marriage although here and there some communities actually favor them for marriages and as such they are given the due respect for the same reason.

Conflict with cousins is not a common feature among the Ndebele and no one is justified to raise such as long as they are quarrelling with their cousin who in most cases is regarded as the peacemaker among the kith and kin. It is important to note that the cousins widen the family circle such that if truth could be told, the number of people who are related through this way has already grown so much since the number of people involved in this relationship circle can not be underestimated. It therefore, means that, if the number of people who are related in form of cousinship can take advantage of the traditional responsibilities and duties it entails, and should they minimize conflict among themselves, we may have almost the whole village living in peace and harmony. The same concept of mutual respect and conflict management can be harnessed and applied to today's strife riddled society in order to find a possible solution to the various socio-political problems. Such an approach is also supported by Bob-Manuel (2000) who believes that "if Africa has to put the "falling apart together", her original values must be re-visited."

2.2. Aunts and Uncles

The definition and idea of who the aunt and the uncles are in the African context has already been clarified above so they need no further explanation. Aunts and uncles play a very significant role in the African and particularly the Ndebele communities. The two titles (aunt and uncle) are surrounded by an aura of socially prescribed respect, dignity and responsibility among the people and anyone who bears such a title has to be treated that way by everyone who is connected to them thereof. The same duties that are prescribed to the cousins as highlighted above also fall within the jurisdictions of both the aunts and the uncles but this time at an advanced level. These are responsible for more complex and sensitive issues of the family and no one can go against their word and still command respect from the community. In certain cases, they resolve marital conflicts between their brothers and sisters in-law and the other way round in the case of uncles. What is of great importance here is to note that the society is the one which prescribes the level

of respect that is due to both the aunts and the uncles and as such no one is expected to question their authority.

It is very common that some boys and girls become mischievous and impregnate each other but the boy goes on to deny responsibility afterwards. In that case, usually marriage becomes impossible and the fate of the child is left in the hands of the girl and her family. In conflicts of this nature, most African societies seem to have unanimously laid the responsibility of raising that child to either the aunt or especially the uncle because he is the brother to the child's mother. The child can grow up in the custody of the uncle and at times will even assume the surname of the uncle without any legal implications. The Shona and Ndebele usually regard the uncles as the mothers of their sisters' children regardless of them being male. This social responsibility even stretches to the extent that the uncle has got the absolute right to solicit *lobola* in cases where they raise the girl child but on the other hand they are the ones with the responsibility of raising the *lobola* for those who are boys despite the fact that they are not their biological offspring. It is important to emphasize that these social duties and responsibilities are only meaningful if they are examined and let alone executed in the context of culture. In line with this, Kambudzi in [Chiwome and Gambahaya \(1998\)](#) posits that:

So the question is how we can make a creative and constructive use of culture in African countries as a measure of minimising armed and destructive conflict. Several measures can be tried separately or in complementation

It is therefore unarguable that the value placed upon the role and position of the uncle and aunt in most traditional societies is a strong base on which to place all our efforts to build peace from the grassroots. If people are prepared to respect an individual just because their culture says so, they can respect anyone provided their culture is taken into account and that means the aspect of respect is something innate in an African and can be utilized for the benefit of the next person.

[Hunt \(1966\)](#) has stated that the pervasive nature of the extended family in developing countries is such that formal legislations and objectives are largely in the façade and its operations are rooted on the blueprint of family ties. In the same vein, but with reference to the significance of the extended family in issues of development, [Eke \(1998\)](#) points out that the role of the extended family in and the rationality of indigenous business practices can be appreciated only when we take culture into consideration hence:

Build(ing) on the indigenous by making it determine the form and content of development strategy, aspirations and or social institutions which are important in the lives of the people.

The bottom line is that the aunts and uncles as the source of the extended family have the social responsibility of making sure that it progresses from one stage to the other and as such

they play an important role in issues of conflict management and most importantly they are a symbol of unity for a large group of people.

2.3. The Senior Members Of the Society

Most, if not all, African societies have high regard for the senior members in their communities mainly because of the old adage which says “wisdom comes with age”. This adage is also supported by Mbiti (1975) who underscores the respect that one earns by virtue of their age in most African societies. In that case, the society expects old people to be responsible enough to solve most of their problems without any form of partiality, fear or favor. There is an unwritten law which permits those aged members of the society to be consulted on major issues that affect the community regardless of whether the issues are peculiar to a specific family or what. An elderly person may be consulted or called upon to intervene in a quarrel that involves family members because it is believed that his age will give him the necessary neutrality that is required in solving such matters. In support of this, Yankah *et al.* (1995) posit that:

The use of an intermediary, through whom formal talk is rooted, is the social dimension of the general practice and direction that permeates the speech of several cultures in Africa

Matters that have to do with problematic girls are usually referred to the elderly ladies who use their wisdom and expertise in controlling and giving suitable lessons to the girls. At the same time, society expects the girls to respect the kind of advice that they are given by the elderly people at least for the sake of their age. It will also be realized that even married girls or ladies often consult these grandmothers on marital problems regardless of whether they are educated or not. The general belief is that anyone who defies the advice from the aged members of the society will attract a bad omen and spell upon him/herself and therefore very few people would dare tread where even angels fear to tread and as such there are insignificant cases of disobedience. It is even more emphatic if the grandparents belong to one's family. Any defiance to the advice from the elderly and senior members of the community is tantamount to isolation from the community because it is believed that their word cannot go and come back without effect hence the proverb “*ilizwi lomuntu omdala kalizweli phansi*” (the old person's advice does not fall onto the ground). It can not be over emphasized that the success of these social institutions lies squarely in the appreciation of the culture of the particular society. In this case, it is in the context of the African or particularly the Shona/Ndebele culture that the concept of respecting elders as problem solvers can make sense and they be given that chance to intervene in the current political stalemate which obtains in most African countries.

2.4. The Mother

One of the most important members of the family in a normal African family is the mother of the home. First and foremost, the mother is taken as a stranger or a visitor in the home and as such she is treated with all the respect and comfort that is given to a stranger or visitor. She is sometimes excluded from some of the family issues for the same reason that we would not involve strangers in our family matters but the exclusion is understandable to the concerned parties, the mother and the family at large. However, for the same reason of being a stranger, the mother is believed to be untouchable in terms of subjecting her to violence or in simple terms, beating, because anyone who beats up her may attract a curse for the whole family from the mother's ancestors who are also believed to be strange to her marital family. Her gods are not known and how they react to certain provocations is also unknown so we are safer without provoking them and hence no one can beat his or her mother and get away with it no matter what the circumstances. In fact it is taboo for one to anger their mother and everybody should try and make sure that their mother is always happy in order to avoid unnecessary complications. Any altercation with the father is normal and pardonable just because he is my blood relative, I even share gods and spirits with him so they cannot turn against me.

The point being driven home is that, anyone who holds the title of "mother" has that security that surrounds her and therefore she commands that respect from all those who call her by that title or once she gets to that socially acceptable age of a mother. It is important to note that the title "mother" is not only confined to her direct offspring but even every other member of the community. The Shona people symbolize the importance of the woman by making sure that right from the time a girl gets married, her suitor pays a cow which is specifically given to her mother which is called *mombe yohumai* (another's cow). The Ndebeles do the same and call it *inkomo yahlanga* (a cow for themother). Both the Ndebele and Shona believe that if this cow is not given to the mother of your wife, it can be a source of complications in marriage which range from general conflicts to barrenness. The key point to note here is that all this belief and respect is deeply rooted in the people's culture, outside which it does not make any sense. This is why Cabral (1979) says:

Culture is ... the fruit of a people's history, by the positive and negative influence that it exerts on the evolution of relations between man and his environment and among men and human groups within society, as well as between societies.

The underlying factor therefore is that the culture of the Ndebele people shapes the way they treat each other and in this case it shapes the way they view and handle any matters that have to do with those who are mothers in their societies albeit for the sake of making sure that people live harmoniously with each other. What one can deduce from this cultural act is that women have a special recognition in the African societies which are symbolized by both tangible and intangible

incentives. If that is the case, and if African peoples are endowed with this gene of cultural respect and moral obligation to treat women and mothers well, it is possible to solve a number of conflict situations that we are experiencing as a continent. The challenge therefore, is to advocate for proper cultural recognition of women in which all those who deserve to be treated as mothers are treated as such by everyone such that even those who are responsible for the legislations in various countries may do so in this context and make sure that the nations respect mothers for the roles they play in the propagation of peace and stability in communities. If it could be properly managed, this idea would see less violence being perpetrated against women and better still, their ideas being considered in matters of peace and conflict management since they are the worst victims in such situations.

3. CONCLUSION

Having interrogated the various attributes of the Ndebele kinship ties and structures, it is imperative to note that the concept is way richer and more sustainable than most of the modern strategies of managing conflict in the world at large and in Zimbabwe in particular. Kinship is a major factor that has, and continues to bind so many families together in most African societies mainly because it is rooted in the culture of the local people so much so that, as long as the local people are still keen on manipulating other facets of their culture for their own benefit, they can still do the same with kinship and lead us from a point of weakness to a point of strength. The bottom line for the effectiveness of this proposed approach is to first realize and then emphasise that this is an approach that makes sense within the confines of culture and therefore, can only fully materialize within the same. More so, it cannot be over emphasized that kinship derives its strength from the traditional and indigenous concept of *hunhuism/ubuntu* which forms the basic definition of life for the Ndebele.

It is that *ubuntu/hunhu* which defines what a whole individual is and it is the one which gives direction on how one should behave and carry on with life especially as regards those that are in the surroundings. In other words, kinship is part of *ubuntu* and for the Ndebele, anyone who violates *ubuntu* affects their relatives directly or indirectly and since individualism is not part of us, our kinship ties can, and are, so strongly revered so much so that using them for conflict management would not pose a serious problem. It is fortunate that UNESCO is in the business of promoting indigenous cultures in developing nations which then makes it possible for local government ministries of arts and culture to map out a strategy of manipulating indigenous cultures to resolve some of the socio-political conflicts that continue to bedevil our societies. Zimbabwe for instance, is in the business of empowering its local traditional leaders like chiefs, sub-chiefs and headman in order to restore their traditional authorities which were destroyed by the colonial system. Traditional leaders are custodians of culture, they live with and among the people every day and have a strong influence in their communities. This enables the kraal heads to know what is going on in their entire families and therefore the same can be given enough

support and respect so that they help in promoting the family structure and settlement of conflicts at family and kinship levels before they can be taken to outsiders who meet at the *dare/idale* (traditional court). Schools are also a good starting point for such a programme where children can be taught the cultural value of the kinship system at a tender age and be challenged to put it into practice such that in the long run it will filter through to the whole society.

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