

Full Length Research Paper

# “Agba (elder) as arbitrator: A Yoruba socio political model for conflict resolution” - A review of Lawrence O. Bamikole

Fayemi, Ademola Kazeem

Department of Philosophy, Lagos State University, Badagry expressway, Ojo, P. M. B 1087, Apapa, Lagos State, Nigeria. E-mail: [kcaristotle@yahoo.com](mailto:kcaristotle@yahoo.com).

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The paper is a critical review of Lawrence O. Bamikole’s paper, “*Agba* (elder) as Arbitrator: A Yoruba Socio-political Model for Conflict Resolution”. It challenges the fundamental assumptions of Bamikole’s paper as well as its central arguments as false interpretations, incongruent with the Yoruba worldview. Contra Bamikole, the paper argues that the capacity of the *agba* (elder) to manage conflict shrewdly in traditional Yoruba society was a combined function of the elder’s personality, proverbial communicative prowess, as well as an understanding of the social principles of conflict management in Yoruba culture. Beyond Bamikole’s narrow conception of *agba* (elder) as arbitrage agents, the paper holistically explores the concept of *agba* (elder) as a vital complementary institution for conflict management in contemporary Africa.

**Key words:** Conflict, arbitration, conflict management, *agba* (elder), peace.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental challenges that have confronted man in social history is that of the inevitability of conflict and disagreement in human relations. The reality posed by the challenge of conflict has more often than not, resulted into social problems, especially, when such conflicts are not well and properly managed before degenerating into violent confrontations. History is replete with records of conflicts and armed conflicts at various strata of human relations. Whether at the inter-personal, inter-group, intra-group, intra-national or international arenas, conflicts have been found recurring in social relations. The case of Africa is pathetic.

Africa in recent past has witnessed wanton wave of bloody conflicts, which had taken millions of innocent lives, and other inestimable material valuables. Millions of people are currently displaced and suddenly turned refugees. Violent conflicts in Africa (and anywhere else in the world) have disastrous consequences on social stability, peace, development and harmonious human existence. For these and other related reasons, scholastic concerns have been high in Africa (like elsewhere) in understanding the origins, nature, rate, causes and effects of conflicts, as well as understanding the efficient modes of resolving conflict and engendering peace in the society.

In view of the sensitive nature of the issues of conflict,

scholastic concerns have been multidisciplinary in approach, vis-à-vis legal, political, economical, diplomatic, sociological, historical and statistical approaches. In all these accounts, the focus has been on conflict resolution and peace studies. The conclusions stressed in these approaches have for the most part, been on the need for political restructuring, promoting good political, economic and corporate governance, respect for and observance of human rights, peace education, promoting dialogue, peace negotiations and agreement, stopping of proliferation of arms and granting of amnesty, etc.

While all these are necessary, stringent and commendable efforts towards conflict discourse and resolution in Africa, the point is that these approaches have not sufficiently proved effective in reducing the upsurge of violence and conflicts on the continent (Balogun, 2006: 272). In view of the disastrous consequences, which violent conflicts have had on social stability and human existence in Africa, the question is, what contributions have African philosophers made towards conflict and peace discourse in Africa?

The answer to this poser is quite disturbing; there is few evident literary works on the possible insights and contributions, which African philosophy (and indeed African philosophers) had made towards conflict and peace

discourse in Africa<sup>1</sup>. One very recent contribution to conflict resolution discourse, from an African philosophical perspective, is that by Lawrence O. Bamikole (2008), in a paper titled - "Agba (elder) as Arbitrator: A Yoruba Socio-Political Model for Conflict Resolution". In engaging with issues bordering on conflict in African philosophical discourse, one may perhaps ask, what should be the fundamentals? In other words, what should be the task of an African philosopher in a discussion on conflict resolution and peace keeping? What are the essentials, which such work must satisfy for it to be characterized as being philosophically cogent?

Without necessarily revisiting the methodological question of research in African philosophy, the focus of this paper is to contribute to the conflict and peace discourse in Africa by critically examining the thrusts of Bamikole's paper on the role of *agba* (elder), as a Yoruba socio-political model, for conflict resolution in Africa. Our concern in specific terms is to show that a viable philosophical contribution to conflict studies in Africa should provide justified worldviews, which combine a reliable account of African nature of reality with a system of ideals that can offer a systematic and realistic response to the problem of violent conflicts in contemporary Africa. Whether Bamikole's work falls short of this philosophical cogency or not is an important question, which answer will be revealed in the course of this paper.

### A conspectus of Bamikole's arguments

The crux and summary of Bamikole's argument in the paper are as follows:

- i.) Conflicts and disputes are inevitable phenomena of social and political life. (Bamikole, 2008: 1)
- ii.) Conflict is the differences in the interests of people or between groups of people, which could be material, religious, ethnic, ideological and any other thing that make people, fight one another (Bamikole, 2008: 3).
- iii.) There is no conflict that is not resolvable if and only parties to conflicts are willing to resolve them by showing understanding to one another (Bamikole, 2008: 5).
- iv.) Such an understanding (in premise iii above) is predicated on certain relations as truth, love, sincerity and mutual understanding.
- v.) At all levels of human relationship, there are certain norms both natural and those artificially created by the society that constitute the basis of people living together. Natural relationship could be by blood, kinship and brotherhood resulting from our belongingness to the same *Homo sapiens*. At the artificial level, human relationship has been solidified through the mechanism of dialogue, institutional and constitutional frame works, and contractual theories (Bamikole, 2008: 9 - 11).
- vi.) To resolve conflict requires sometimes a third-party or certain persons who enjoy the confidence of their fellow

human beings in a political society that can appeal to such relationships to reconcile differences among members of the society (Bamikole, 2008: 5 - 6).

vii.) In traditional and contemporary societies, different social and political institutions have come up with various inner mechanisms that are unique to their societies that can adjudicate in conflict situations (Bamikole, 2008: 1).

viii.) The concept of *agba* (elders) is a Yoruba socio political model for conflict resolution, and it is the third-party that is responsible for effective conflict resolution in indigenous Yoruba societies.

ix.) In traditional Yoruba culture, *agba* (elders) were usually relied upon as arbitrators and agents of conflict resolution in view of certain qualities possessed by this category of human beings (Bamikole, 2008: 10).

x.) "Agba (elders) are respected individuals identified by age and other qualities, which mark them out in their families, communities, nations, regions and the world. To be identified as an *agba* (elder), s/he must be fearless person ( *alakikanju*); s/he must be knowledgeable and wise but must be someone who gives room for criticisms (*ologbon, oloye, afimo ti elomiran se*); s/he must be tolerant (*alamumora*); s/he must be upright in all ways (*olotito, olododo*); s/he must not be selfish (*anikanjopon*) (Bamikole, 2008: 12).

xi.) There is dearth of this model of *agba* (elders) in our contemporary world because the present generation of elders has been influenced by the prevalent consumerist nature of contemporary political system (Bamikole, 2008: 15).

In furtherance of the above assumptions and arguments, Bamikole attempted making the paper existentially relevant, through an application of the model of *agba* (elders) as arbitrators to all areas of human relationship from the family level to the world level, where there is flame of conflicts. According to him:

What is important is that the level at which a particular *agba* (elder) would be operating will depend on his/her level of exposure. Exposure here refers to parameters like quality of experience, quality of reflective thinking on the basis of skill acquisition from both formal and informal institutions, expertise in different levels of human endeavor like economics, science and technology, the arts, law, agriculture, communication and information technology, etc. (Bamikole, 2008: 13).

Given the fact that there are different types and levels of conflict, such as inter-personal conflict, inter-group conflict, intra-group conflict, intra-national conflict and international conflict (Owolabi, 2008: 17), Bamikole submits that the elder with appropriate qualities relevant to the areas of conflict would be appointed to mediate in such areas (Bamikole, op.cit: 13). Illustratively, Bamikole cited Desmond Tutu, Tambo Mbeki and Kofi Anna as renowned elders that have resolved conflicts at the intra-national and inter-national scenes. Such eldership approach, Bamikole believes is a veritable alternative to the

current means of resolving conflict through wars and terrorism by different movements in national and international arena” (Owolabi, 2008: 1).

### **A critique of Bamikole’s conception of the Yoruba socio-political model for conflict resolution**

Having discussed above the fundamental assumptions and central arguments of Bamikole on the arbitrative roles of *agba* (elders) in resolving conflicts Yoruba cultural milieu, it is apposite at this juncture to philosophically appraise his views. Bearing in mind that the best tribute that can be rendered to a philosopher is to criticize his/her work and that criticism is the propelling drive in the growth of knowledge, this critical exercise is attempted to further stimulate reactions, conjectures and counter refutation in peace and conflict discourse in Africa.

On a positive note, Bamikole’s work deserves commendation, for at least, being an indigenous African contribution to the processes of overcoming conflict in Africa and beyond. In recommending the Yoruba socio-political model of conflict resolution, which is based on the arbitrative roles of the *agba* (elder), as a viable alternative to the current means of resolving conflicts through wars in Africa and at international political arena, Bamikole’s shares the intellectual orientation and optimism of Balogun (2006). And that is:

African philosopher can make relevant their discipline by critically and systematically exposing relevant ideas, values and beliefs in traditional African cultural system, which when applied and promoted in contemporary Africa, can effectively aid conflict resolution in 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa (Balogun, 2006: 281).

In sharing this intellectual task of the African philosopher, Bamikole explored the roles of the *agba* (elders) in traditional Yoruba society as agents of conflict resolution with a view to making such idea and practices relevant to contemporary social living.

While consonance with Balogun and Bamikole, I also share the above intellectual orientation, I however, disagree with some of the basic assumptions, upon which the argument of Bamikole in his paper rest. Considering his first premise that conflicts and disputes are inevitable phenomena of social political life, I agree with Bamikole’s conception that it is impossible for people to interact in society without incidence of conflict, difference and disagreement on issues and beliefs, and consequently shares his position that conflicts, if constructively managed, could be prevented without resulting into armed or violent conflicts.

However, looking at the second premise where Bamikole posits that “conflict is the differences in the interests of people or between groups of people, which could be material, religious, ethnic, ideological and any other thing that make people fight one another” (Bamikole, op.cit: 3), I think this definition deserves further

comments. Construing conflicts in terms of disagreement or differences, there are two underlying connotations it entailed: disagreement in belief and disagreement in attitude (Copi and Cohen, 2000: 100).

With respect to conflict in any matter, two persons, groups or nation-states may agree in belief and disagree in attitude; they may agree in attitude despite disagreeing in belief. It is also possible for the disagreement to be complete. In this case, the disputants disagree both in terms of belief and attitude. Without an appropriate understanding of these kinds of differences/disagreements in any conflicting situations, efforts towards resolution (?) or management may perhaps be futile. These fundamental distinctions are copiously ignored in Bamikole’s analysis.

Bamikole’s argument (in premise iii above) that conflicts in any form can be resolved on the basis of certain relations predicated upon truth, love, sincerity and mutual understanding is logically problematic, and invalid. This is because the relational terms- truth, love and sincerity, which are the conditions, upon which Bamikole said any conflicts can be resolved, are non-symmetrical. However, Bamikole used them not as non- symmetrical relations in the argument, but as symmetrical relations. A relation is symmetrical if ‘A’ has a relation to ‘B’; ‘B’ must have the same relation to ‘A’. Also, a relation is said to be non-symmetrical if ‘A’ has the relation to ‘B’, ‘B’ may or may not have the relation to ‘A’ (Bello, 2000:144).

Given that the categories of love, truth and sincerity are the conditions that can bring about mutual understanding and resolution of conflicts among disputing parties, and the logical impossibility involved in having these categories of relations as symmetrical, it is uncertain that these conditions can be met. This is because, meeting such condition would require that both conflicting parties love each other and relate the whole truth to each other in commensurate reciprocal degrees. The implication of this logical analysis is that hardly can conflict be ever resolved. Rather, conflict can at best be managed by arbitrative agents, which Bamikole identified as *agba* (elders).

Another central argument upon which Bamikole established his thesis is that the idea of brotherhood is the natural basis of human relationship and that certain human agents can serve as midwifery in fostering this brotherhood relationship for the benefit of mankind (as in v above). This argument is premised on the assumption that human nature is good, involving the supposed rationality of human. But on the contrary, human reason is sometimes a slave to human passions and emotions. Men do know what is good and right, but seldom do that which is right and good.

Human nature is not purely good. Man could be altruistic and egoistic, aggressive and socially cohesive. The implication of this is that man’s rationality is sometimes overruled by his appetites. Human nature, therefore, is a composition of the good and the bad. While the good side of human nature makes brotherhood of human

relationship possible, man's pessimistic tendencies inhibit the conditions of social condition (Fayemi, 2008: 12). This mixed characteristic of human nature scuttles the idea that human relationship is essentially brotherhood oriented. And the absence of a general ground of brotherhood is in itself, the rationale for societal continuous strife towards devising artificial means of mending human relationship with fellow men.

Bamikole confusingly vacillate between seeing the *agba* as agents and as institution of conflict resolution in traditional Yoruba societies. For specific illustration, he said at the beginning of the paper that "In traditional and contemporary societies, different social and political institutions have come up with various inner mechanisms that are unique to their societies that can adjudicate in conflict situations" (Bamikole, op.cit: 1). Expectedly, one would have thought that Bamikole would discuss the nature of this institution in traditional Yoruba thought, which the case study of the paper is. Instead, what he concentrated on, and which he expansively discussed was the picture of the *agba* (elders) as agents of conflict resolution in view of certain qualities possessed by this category of human beings (Bamikole, op.cit: 10). I think it is appropriate at this point to correct some conceptual misrepresentations in Bamikole's paper, especially as it concerns the *agba* (elders) as individual agents and as an institution. But before attempting this, let us examine the conceptual meaning of *agba* (elders). Bamikole tells us that:

The *Agba* (elder) are respected individuals identified by age and other qualities, which mark them out in their families, communities, nations, regions and the world. S/he must be fearless person (*alakikanju*); she must be knowledgeable and wise but must be someone who give room for criticisms (*ologbon, oloye, afimo ti elomiran se*); s/he must be tolerant (*alamumora*); s/he must be upright in all ways (*olotito, olododo*); s/he must not be selfish (*anikanjopon*) (Bamikole, op.cit: 12).

The above conceptual framework of *agba* (elder) is inadequate in expressing the Yoruba indigenous understanding of the *agba*'s (elder's) personality. It is important to know that for the Yoruba, the ascription of *agba* (elder) is not based on physiognomic terms. The reference to physiognomy in defining an *agba* (elder) is because of the different life experiences that have combined to shape the thought of an *agba* (elder) as a result of old age. The Yoruba value human experience, which comes by age and that accounts for the proverb - *bi omode ba ni aso bi agba; kole ni akisa bi agba* (If a child has material possession as much as the elder has, his life experiences cannot equate that of the elder).

These elders are not necessarily chiefs, whose positions are political as well as hereditary. But like them, they act as arbitrators and reconcilers when disputes occur in order to restore peace and maintain harmonious relations between conflicting parties. What is sacrosanct in recognizing an *agba* (elder) in Yoruba worldview is the intelligence use of language. The spoken word is highly

respected among the Yoruba and as a matter of fact, to be categorized as an *agba* (elder), one must be capable of intelligence use of language. J.A.I. Bewaji stresses this when he asserts that:

The demand for, and expectation of, decent, response-able and insightful use of the language is reflected in all aspects of communication, be it in verbal salutations, musical constructions, poetic performances, religious and spiritual displays and utterances, or in the negotiations of important formal and non-formal pacts, deals, treaties and business, etc (Bewaji, 2004: 159).

The Yoruba accord great respect for intelligent and expert use of language, especially the appropriate use of proverbs, and as such, the *agba* (elder) is expected to exhibit/demonstrate this capacity. And the capacity for exhibiting this expert use of language is not solely based on old age as there are some youths, who are witty in the genre of proverbial communication and intelligent use of language. These people are also seen as elders in their own terms. The Yoruba believe that the sagacious usage of spoken word is the harbinger of peace and war; the engine of culture and civility; the hallmark of conversational prudence and the epitome of intellectual maturity that may be socially used in conflict matters.

In addition to the features of an *agba* (elder) identified by Bamikole, it is important to add that it is the total actualization of the positive use of salient characteristic human features - mental, physical, psychological together with evidential moral uprightness, intelligent use of language, and wisdom that make a being an *agba* (elder) in Yoruba cultural context. Contra Bankole, *agba* (elders) is not solely based on the perceived credibility and qualities as he has given. Rather, the *agba*'s (elders') ability to manage conflict shrewdly in traditional Yoruba society was a combined function of the proverbial communicative resources, as well as other ethical, sociological and ontological considerations that define human personality in Yoruba worldview. As a consequence, Bamikole's interpretation of *agba* (elders) as a third-party is incongruent with Yoruba cultural worldview. And given this, it is doubtful if it can be a veritable model of conflict resolution in contemporary world as Bamikole advances. In fact, with such an understanding, the potential ability of *agba* (elders) is conceptually limited and incapacitated in confronting contemporary realities of armed conflict in Africa.

In view of this critical exposition, I think it is most appropriate to see the *agba* (elder) not solely as agents of conflict management in traditional Yoruba societies. It is more of an institution of conflict management. The structure of traditional Yoruba societies was basically communalistic. Given the communal and solidarity nature of traditional Yoruba societies, everyone is seen as potential contributors to peace making and keeping in the community. Whether young or old, male or female, rich or poor, everyone is expected to be the keeper and protector of the interests of others, which are, by extension, their own too (Gbadegesin, 1998: 294). The implication of this is

that an *agba* (elder) is not necessarily the sole agent of conflict arbitration in traditional Yoruba societies.

It should be noted that the communal structure of traditional Yoruba societies did not foreclose the insurgence of conflicts. Conflict is an unavoidable feature of social relations. In traditional Yoruba societies, conflicts are usually managed such that they do not degenerate into violence and armed conflicts. The early intervention of the *agba* (elders) in reconciling the disputing factions usually save conflict situation from escalating into violent situations. Whenever there is disputes between individuals and different parties, primacy is given to restoring the relationships, soothe hurt feelings and to reach a compromise on how to improving future relationships.

Reconciliation of conflicts is usually seen as a social responsibility by the elders. And this accounts for way the Yoruba proverbially say that *agba ki wa loja kori omo tuntun wo* (an elder cannot be in the market place and allow the reign of chaos). A person who watches while tension mounts between children, adults, groups and any warring parties is not seen as socially responsive. This social responsibility is voluntarily done, and as well as, institutionalized in different ways. For instance, when there is conflict between or among the co-wives in a household, the elderly male or female members' intervene, and if they do not succeed, the matter is taken to the *Olori ebi* (head of the compound). Where the reconciliatory attempt of the *Olori ebi* (head of the compound) failed, the matter is then taken-up to a higher authority, which is the office of the *Baale* (head of clan).

Bamikole takes for granted the existence of judicial institutions in Yoruba traditional society that were primarily responsible for the arbitration and reconciliation of conflicts. Though these institutions were composed of the *agba* (elders), which was Bamikole's focal point. While extricating the actual workings and components of the structure of these institutions, he only discussed the content outside the form. We think for any successful recommendation of the Yoruba model of conflict resolution as an alternative to the means of conflict resolution in contemporary world, as Bamikole has proposed, it is instructive to have an appropriate understanding of the elements, principles and workings of the eldership institution of conflict resolution in Yoruba thought. Doing this will enable us know whether those principles that facilitated the workings of the eldership institution are lacking or not in contemporary means of resolving conflict. It will also enable us know where the missing gap is and how to consequently bridge the gap and interface between traditional and contemporary modes of conflict resolution. The eldership institution is primarily for conciliation of disputes and armed conflicts. It does not have the force of law, but derives its authority from religious base, communal norms and values and social acceptability. The *agba* (elders) are clan-heads, prominent personalities, leaders of community based network, religious priest, etc. The eldership institution operates with neutra-

lity. The elders are cognizant of the fact that it is only when the social contexts that generated a conflict are properly understood before such reconciliation of interests is possible. Thus, for them, they realized that various conflicts/disagreement are caused by different things and as such, require different approaches. The questions usually asked by these elders in the process of managing conflict provide clues not only about immediate causes, but also reveal long-standing grievances; thus, offer wider and deeper insights into the differences [both in beliefs and attitudes] and similarities between the parties (Brock-Utne, 2001: 9).

Furthermore, the eldership institution has an internal mechanism of ensuring that conflicting parties actually oblige to the terms of agreement upon which the resolution was based. This they do through administering metaphysical oaths of the spirit of the gods and other primordial entities among the conflicting parties in order to ensure compliance to the voluntary terms of agreement, which the reconciliation is based. It is important to note however that it is not all cases of conflicts that require the invocation of oaths in Yoruba conflict resolution process. This only applies to extreme long aging conflicts. The metaphysical condition of conflict resolution is also a method used in discussing whether any of the conflicting parties is concealing wholly or partly, the truth of the matter. It is also instructive to note the use of symbols and interpretations of myths in the process of conflict management.

The ability of the elders to manage conflict in traditional Yoruba society was a function of some canons. There are some essential canons or principles that form the basis for resolving the fundamental disagreements and conflicts in daily discourse in traditional Yoruba society. The elders are quite conversant with these principles, which guide them in the arbitative and reconciliatory processes. The ideals of communalism, human personality, human rights and responsibilities, proverbial prowess, truth, justice, covenant keeping, impartial umpire and the willingness of defending the community brotherhood and humanity in one hand and keeping the prosperity of the cultural heritage on the other, are the motivating forces that facilitated the *agba* (elders) ingenuity for conflict management in traditional Yoruba societies.

There are communalistic accepted values and principles. In Yoruba societies, as well as many other African societies, cooperation and mutual helpfulness are the moral virtues highly prized and enjoined as essentials. The communalistic essence of African societies is implicitly latent in their traditional worldview, which according to Sodipo was preoccupied with human welfare, that what is morally good in that worldview is what benefits a human being, that what is decent for man and his community, and that what is morally bad is what brings suffering, misery, communal hatred and animosity, misfortune and death to man and his community. (Sodipo, 2004: 47).

Bearing in mind the fact that conflicts and violent conflicts are morally bad and inimical to the fostering of communalistic bond, people in traditional Yoruba societies owed it a duty to prevent and resolve crisis arising from different individuals or groups in the society. Thus, every member of the community irrespective of the age, sex or creed was a potential arbitrator expected to intercede in any conflicting situations around them. At the event that such efforts at settling the dispute in question and restoring the relationship was unfruitful at that level, then, upon a reportage of that to higher authority, the *agba's* (elders') arbitrative experience is sought.

The proverbial and symbolic communicative resources at the disposal of the mediator are other canons of indigenous conflict management among the Yoruba. In other words, conflict resolution and harmonization of thoughts in Yoruba culture require expertise in the people's oral tradition, good reputation, experience and a measure of objectivity on the part of the reconcilers. As an illustration, some of the proverbs used by the *agba* (elder) in the process of conflict management are:

i) *Anikan dajo o o seun, anikan dajo o seeyan. Igbati o o go t'enu enikeji, emi l'o da 'jo se?*

(It is a shameful act to either adjudicate or arbitrate on a case on the basis of the statement of only one party. Why should the verdict be given when the other disputant is denied?)

ii) *Bia banja, bi i k'a kuko*

(Our being in conflict does not warrant wishing each other's death)

iii) *K'eni ma binu kinu; ke ni ma baa j'ija kuja. K'eni ma j'ija kuja, k'e ni maba j'ebi k'ebi*

(Unnecessary annoyance begets avoidable violent confrontation. Avoid every slightest violent confrontation to prevent slightest culpability).

iv) *Ore kinya ore, ajose ni n diku*

(There is no permanent hostility in friendship; only that there is limitation in affective association)

v) *Are maja kan kosi, a ja mare kan kosi*

(No associates without dispute, no disputants without the possibility of reconciliation)

vi) *A ki f'agada se 'le aye, irukere l'a fin tun lese*

(The power of sword does not yield social co-existence; it is only through authority that social equilibrium is attainable)

viii) *Bi a o ba gbagbe oro ana, a ko ni r'e ni ba sere*

(Inability to forget the grievances of the past is the cornerstone of lonesomeness)

ix) *Se mi n bi o l'ogun ore*

(Seeking cause(s) of discord is the key to conciliation)

x.) *Inu bibi o da nnkan. Suuru baba iwa; agba t'oni suuru, ohun gbogbo l'oni*

(Indignation does not result into anything good. Patience is the best of character. A patient elder has everything)

From the above illustration of some of the proverbs used

in the process of conciliation by the elders, we can see that proverbs are signposts in Yoruba conflict management system. Through judicious application of proverbs by the elders in the arbitrative process, they calm the nerves of the disputants; understand the cause of the conflict; encourage disputants to nurture the culture of tolerance of other people's beliefs; illumine the minds of disputants in seeing and seeking non-violent alternatives when in disagreement with others; help conflicting parties in the cultivation of attitudes that will restore the relationship. And finally, proverbs usually serve as lubricating oil in searching for and ensuring that justice and fairness prevails in the process of conflict arbitration. Proverbs (i – ix) given above are indicative of these functions of conflict management among the Yoruba, and how the elders explore wittingly the communicative essence of proverbs in managing conflicts in their social milieu.

Truth is another vital principle, which made arbitration possible by the elders in traditional Yoruba culture. For reconciliatory reasons, parties in the conflict are usually enjoined to tell the whole truth in relation to the dispute in the process of cross-examination. Among the Yoruba, truth is understood as *otito*. According Oduwole, *otito* has two connotations: cognitive and moral (Oduwole, 2006: 14). In its cognitive understanding, truth is a property of a statement, while in its moral sense; it means character or intent behind human action. In this latter sense, the Yoruba regard truth as an ultimate good and virtue. It is referred to as *ododo* (honesty), *ohun-ti-o-to* (that which is proper). The opposite of truth in this moral sense is *iro* (lies). Unlike in its cognitive epistemological sense where *iro* means falsehood, *iro* under the moral connotation is synonymous with acts like *eke* (deceit) and *odale* (covenant-breaker). In both its cognitive and moral understandings, saying the truth is essential in the process of conflict management because it sheds more light on the disagreement, while *iro* (lies) conceals it.

In examining the premises of Bamikole's arguments further, I think he is quite right in his observation (in premise xii) that there is dearth of *agba* (elders) in our contemporary world because the present generation of elders has been influenced by the prevalent consumerist nature of contemporary political system (Bamikole, op.cit: 15). But there is more to the dearth of *agba* (elders) in contemporary Yoruba world than Bamikole depicted. The eldership institution erodes primarily because as population size of communities' increases, communities become heterogeneous, and the communalistic structure of the then traditional society (which had ample population) becomes loose. Besides, the statutory laws in post-colonial African societies fail to fully recognize the role of customary laws and the indigenous eldership institutions.

It is equally arguable that the erosion of the eldership institution is as a result of politicizing the institution through appointing traditional leaders as local officials. Though, this is a consequence of the consumerist nature of contemporary societies, which Bamikole had argued

for. And fundamentally, the cause of the dearth of this institution can be traced to the undue negative influence of Western values and culture on traditional values and norms. Alien institutions and modes of conflict resolution have overwhelmingly overthrown our sensibilities in contemporary Africa, such that we despise and see as relics of primitivism, our indigenous model of conflict management.

And lastly let us turn to Bamikole's thesis and recommendation of Yoruba model of *agba* (elders) on conflict arbitration, which he believes can be philosophically developed as a veritable alternative to the current means of resolving conflict through wars and terrorism, especially as it is reflected in different parts of the world today. I must objectively say that Bamikole's defense of this thesis and his attempt to make the concept of *agba* (elders) relevant to existential conflict issues in contemporary world does not succeed because the premises brought in support of it are too weak for the realization of the objective. Given the conceptual inadequacies, which I have identified in Bamikole's paper, I see as utopia his recommendation of applying the Yoruba socio-political model of conflict management to all areas of human relationship and conflicts both at local and international fronts.

## Conclusion

The trends of conflicts and violent conflicts in contemporary world are complex. This is not surprising in view of the population, multi-complex structure of contemporary societies, diverse interests of people and serious complications in the very causes of chaos. On this note, the indigenous model of the eldership institution of conflict management as it were in traditional Yoruba societies, considered alone, could not be a potent remedy for contemporary African conflict crisis. The ample population and other socio-cultural conditions facilitated the success of the eldership institution then had been surpassed in contemporary African world. As a consequence, Bamikole's attempt to philosophically develop the Yoruba eldership model is inadequate. He failed to provide justified worldviews, which combine a reliable account of African nature of reality with a system of ideals that can offer a systematic and realistic response to the problem of violent conflicts in contemporary Africa.

For effective prevention and management of conflict in contemporary Africa, this model needs to be re-invigoratively complemented and integrated within the larger framework of today's democratic institutions. In the search for new methods of handling contemporary conflict situations in Africa, we must integrate existing indigenous ideas and principles of dealing with various forms of conflicts within contemporary mechanisms of conflict management. This can be done by allowing the essential tenets, canons and principles of this eldership institution

to serve as the basis and guide of different democratic institutions and organs in Africa. The plausibility of this integration in preventing the scourge of present and future violent conflicts on the continent is not in doubt. This is because the usefulness of such integration will not be limited only to inter-personal, inter-group or intra-group conflicts management, but also engender the process of peace making and keeping at the international arenas. However, the critical task is how to show that this call for integration can be realistically achieved without arbitrariness. A further consideration of this is a subject of another discourse.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Works by African philosophers on conflicts and peace discourse are relatively few compared to their laudable contributions to other fundamental themes in the core branches of African philosophy. Some of the prominent African philosophers that have aired their voice on conflict discourse are: J. O. Sodipo, "Philosophy, Culture and Conflict Resolution in Africa", in Ayo Fadahunsi, Olusegun Oladipo (eds.) *Philosophy and the African Prospects: Selected Essays of Prof. J. O. Sodipo* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2004). Idowu Williams, "Theorizing Conflict and Violence: Contemporary Africa and the Imperative of Peaceful Co-existence", in *Journal of the Centre for Ethnic and Conflict Studies*, University of Port Harcourt, vol.1, no.1, 2004. A. B. Ekanola, "Towards an Enduring Social Peace in a violent Ridden Society: from a Culture of war and violence to a Culture of Peace and Non-violence", in *WAJOPS: West African Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 8, 2005. Oladele A. Balogun, "The Relevance of African Philosophy towards Conflict Resolution in Africa", in F. Odimegwu (ed.) *Philosophy and Africa*, (Amawbia: Lumos Publications, 2006). A. A. Agagu ( et al) (eds.) *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies: the African Perspective*, (Ado-Ekiti: University of Ado-Ekiti Press, 2008) . Lawrence O. Bamikole, "Agba (Elder) as Arbitrator: A Yoruba Socio-Political Model for Conflict Resolution", paper presented at The Afolabi Olabimtan Memorial Biennial International Conference held at College of Humanities, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijebu-Ode, 22<sup>nd</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> September, 2008.

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