



An Analysis Of Shona Conceptions Of Conflict In Zimbabwe

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Abstract:

One of the basic premises of Peace Studies is that conflict is inevitable. The inevitability of social conflict suggests that it should not be viewed as a negative force but a resource for social change and development. Thus, it is important to have an understanding of how conflict is perceived, expressed and interpreted by a particular social group. Using participant observations and documentary analysis sources this paper takes Shona peoples of Zimbabwe as a point of reference to argue the case for the importance of understanding the knowledge bank of a particular social group in relation to conflict and to draw lessons for the future. The findings showed that conflict knowledge bank held by a particular social group will always serve as a framework for dealing with social conflict whenever it occurs. In view of the above, this paper recommended that the knowledge bank of every social group should be considered as the entry point for any conflict intervention.

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1. Introduction and background

Globally, conflict is one of those concepts that are not easy to define because it is complex and diverse (Adler and Towne, 1990; Chetkoff-Yanoov, 1997:27; Tillett, 1999a; 1999b; Isenhardt and M. Spangle, 2000a; 2000b:13). Generally, different cultures describe conflict differently. For example, among the Shona peoples of Zimbabwe, there are different sets of terms and phrases that describe conflict which sometimes seem to be a bewildering array of information. Clarity on basic concepts such as conflict is important because this has implications on how it can be addressed.

Lisa Reber-Rider in her article '*Building cultures of peace in the world: one peace center at a time*' advises that there is no one single culture that can reflect what conflict entails for the entire world rather each culture has its own way of understanding and conceptualizing this concept (2008: 87). Typically, the Shona culture has terms and phrases that are used for describing conflict as shown on the table below. In the Shona understanding, conflict occurs when calm, social harmony and equilibrium is put off balance and when disturbing events crop up.

This paper examines a sample of Shona terms and phrases that are usually attached to or associated with conflict. The paper is based on literature and insider participant observation sources. The writer grew up in one of the southern *Shona* rural communities in Masvingo, Zimbabwe and has intimate knowledge on the Shona conceptualization of conflict and its implications for peace. Within this framework, the paper argues that, although traditional Shona terms and phrases may be perceived as non-scientific and unsuited for contemporary issues, from a post-modernistic point of view, they are in fact, as argued in this paper, a potential resource for dealing with conflict in the host community. Shona people constitute 75 % of Zimbabwean population.

2. Depictions of conflict in the Shona community

The sample of Shona terms and phrases below reveal at philosophical level how conflict is perceived and understood. How these terms and phrases are understood, the meanings they convey serve as frameworks for dealing with conflict. Whether conflict is

perceived as positive or negative this is reflected through these terms and phrases.

Table 1: Shona depiction of conflict

Shona	English translation
1. <i>Bopoto , Kupopotedzana, Musindo</i>	Uproar, quarrel, squabble, fight
2. <i>Bvonga-bvonga</i>	Disturbance, fracas, quarrel
3. <i>Bokoshindi dzvitsvii rezvidzvororo</i>	Turmoil, havoc
4. <i>Burushashike</i>	Disharmony, disorder, turmoil
5. <i>Chigumbu</i>	Grievance, complaint, protest
6. <i>Daka</i>	Stirring up a conflict, grudge, bitterness
7. <i>Gakava, kukakavadzana, nharo</i>	Dispute, disagreement, feud
8. <i>Jambanja, Madhisi-nyongoro</i>	Disorderliness, discord, messy
9. <i>Kukonana</i>	Disagreement
10. <i>Kukandidzana nyoka mhenyu</i>	Throwing stones at each other
11. <i>Kunetsana</i>	Annoy, irritate
12. <i>Kupanana makotsi</i>	Being offensive to one another
13. <i>Kupokana,</i>	Contradiction, dispute At odds, at variance
14. <i>Kupesana, Mapiyaniswa</i>	Quarrel, clashes, disagree, antagonism
15. <i>Kurwa, Kurwisana</i>	Fighting over something, competition
16. <i>Kusanzwisisana</i>	Misunderstandings, quarrel
17. <i>Kusapindirana</i>	Discord, dissension
18. <i>Kutadza kuwirirana</i>	Discord, friction
19. <i>Kutadzirana</i>	Offending one another, insult
20. <i>Kutosvorana</i>	Falling out
21. <i>Kutukana</i>	Scolding at each other
22. <i>Kusawirirana,</i>	Disagree, conflict
23. <i>Kuvengana</i>	Rivalry, hatred
24. <i>Makakatamwa</i>	Tug of war
25. <i>Manyama-amire nerongo</i>	Topsy-turvy, chaotic situation
26. <i>Matsurundundu</i>	Struggle, fight
27. <i>Mhesanwa, Shayisano</i>	Clash, shunning one another
28. <i>Mhosva</i>	Crime, issue, wrongdoing
29. <i>Nyonganyonga</i>	Chaos, turmoil, havoc
30. <i>Nyaya</i>	Case, offense, issue
31. <i>Pfunde-pfunde</i>	Resentment, hostility, antagonism

Source: Own concept

2.1 Examining Shona terms and phrases

To better understand the Shona people's basic convictions about conflict and its functions during social interactions a review of a sample of terms and phrases is made. This is especially true for terms and phrases such as (1) *Bopoto* (uproar, quarrel); (2) *bvonga-bvonga* (disturbance); (14) *kupesana*, (quarrel, clashes); (23) *kuvengana* (rivalry, hatred) and (9) *kukonana* (disagreement) to cite but a few.

(1) *Bopoto*, *kupopotedzana*, *musindo* (uproar, quarrel, squabble) refers to a loud uproar. When used with reference to conflict these terms signify a situation in which the parties to a conflict use everything at their disposal to express their displeasure. This conception is akin to the assertion that for a conflict to exist all that parties must be aware of the disagreement. This explains why conflict is defined as an "expressed struggle..." (Adler and Towne, 1990: 355). Thus, *bopoto*; *kupopotedzana*, *musindo* represent a negative response to conflict. For instance, *kupopotedzana* is a violent quarreling in which the parties are involved in a fight resulting in the other party

sustaining physical or psychological injuries. Interestingly, Michael Gelfand has listed violent quarreling as one of the bad qualities loathed by the Shona (Gelfand, 1999: 88). All the same, there is a sense in which a bad quality can be equated with a negative response to a conflict situation.

(2) *Bvonga-bvonga* (disturbance) is from the verb *bvonga* (to stir up, disturb). *Bvonga* is associated with an unruly person who disturbs (*bvoronga*, *bvorongonya*) the peace (*rugare*, *runyararo*) into something out of shape; putting peace into disorder or jumbled up (Hannan, 1996). The verb *bvonga* has some scapegoat overtones given that *bvonga* is associated with a person alleged of disturbing existing harmony. The inherent negative overtones in the verb *bvonga* potentially evokes the: *us* and *them* dichotomy between the parties to a conflict. Thus, *bvonga* is not really a conflict but is a label given to the part to a conflict perceived as bad.

When the repeated verb *bvonga-bvonga* is used with reference to conflict, it usually depicts a state of affairs or situation

that is out of shape so that the main thing is lost in disorderliness. Simply put, when a conflict becomes *bvonga-bvonga* a number of things (issues) get mixed up that it becomes almost impossible to separate the tail from the head. (25) *Manyama-amire nerongo* (topsy-turvy, chaotic situation); (4) *burushashike* (disharmony, disorder, turmoil); (8) *Jambanja, madhisi-nyongoro* (disorderliness, discord) are some of the terms and phrases that convey a similar situation. *Bvonga-bvonga* is better described by M. W. Isenhardt and N. Spangle as a stage in conflict when “a number of issues proliferate as the parties become absorbed in the emotions of the situation” (Isenhardt and Spangle, 2000b:17). Similarly, the phrase (3) *bokoshindi dzvitsvii rezvidzvororo* (turmoil, havoc) is a stage in conflict in which the parties engage in a do or die contest or a dog-eat dog situation. That (2) *bvonga-bvonga*; (25) *Manyama-amire nerongo*; (4) *burushashike*; (8) *Jambanja, madhisi-nyongoro* and (3) *bokoshindi dzvitsvii rezvidzvororo* depicts conflict as negative is indisputable if what they convey linguistically is anything to go by. Thus, how these terms and phrases are understood

can potentially evoke negative response to conflict.

(23) *Kuvengana* (rivalry, hatred); (6) *daka* (stirring up, grudge, bitterness); (5) *chigumbu* (grievance, complaint, protest); (31) *pfunde-pfunde* (resentment, hostility, antagonism) also signify a stage in the cycle of conflict escalation. At this stage of conflict the parties are pre-disposed to expressing revenge, hurting and bitter emotions. When a conflict has reached this stage “it escalates in a series of tit-for-tat exchanges...” (Bloomfield et al., 1998: 37). That conflict is not static is well documented (Cormack, 1989: 7).

A conflict that has reached the stage of *kuvengana*; *daka*; *chigumbu* and *pfunde-pfunde* is usually emotionally charged and therefore negative. Michael Gelfand translated *daka* as irreconcilable hatred and has listed *daka* as one of the opposites of Shona cardinal virtues. In this context, *daka* is likened to a fire that continues to break out in someone’s heart making it difficult but not impossible for the parties’ interests to be reconciled (1999: 95). That *daka* is a stage of conflict and a bad quality are both sides of the same coin. One is focused on the

conflict situation the other is focused on the personalities of the parties to a conflict.

As outlined in the list above, there is another class of terms and phrases which depict conflict in a slightly different light. For example, the noun (14) *Kupesana*, (quarrel, clashes) which is derived from the verb *pesa* (to miss) when inflected with the prefix (*ku-*) and the suffix (*-ana*) it becomes *kupesana*. On one hand, this noun literally, depicts a person who is walking towards a direction that is against the wind while it blows him/her off his/her course. On the other, it refers to two opposing views within a person's life. Terms such (24) *makakatamwa* (tug of war); (13) *kupokana* (at odds, at variance) falls under what G. Kent calls a dilemma. A dilemma is "a case in which one party has difficulty in making a choice" (Kent, 1993: 376). David Cormack describes a dilemma as inner conflict which involves irreconcilable tension (1989: 17).

Alternatively, *Kupesana*, (quarrel, clashes); (24) *makakatamwa* (tug of war); (13) *kupokana* (at odds, at variance) can refer to interpersonal conflict. In this case, *Kupesana* means two or more people with totally opposing views, interests or goals.

Related to it are (22) *Kusawirirana*, (disagree, conflict); (17) *kusapindirana* (discord, dissension); (16) *kusanzwisisana* (misunderstandings, quarrel); which stresses existing incompatibles between two or more people. The maxim: *it takes two to tango* is based on this premise. Conventional explanations on conflict are based on a group of terms and phrase embedded with the idea of *Kupesana*, *Kusawirirana*, *kusanzwisisana* and *kusapindirana*. Under this framework, it takes two or more parties with incompatible goals, interest and needs for a conflict to exist (Cornelius and Faire, 1989: 13; Adler and Towne, 1990: 355; Johnson and Johnson, 1997: 355; Isenhardt and Spangle, 2000a:2; Reychler and Paffenholz, 2001:5).

Another Shona term that mean the same as conflict is (20) *Kutosvorana* (falling out). This term is derived from the word *tosvora* (dazzle, blinding someone). When used with reference to conflict it usually signifies close friends that may have had a temporary falling out on their relationship (Hannan, 1996). On the interface between conflict and friendship, R. B. Adler and N.

Towne have this to say: “no matter how close, how understanding, how compatible you are, there will always be times when your ideas or actions or needs or goals won’t match those of others around you” (Adler and Towne, 1990:357). What these authors underscored is that conflict involves individuals and groups close enough to interact socially at different levels. It follows that conflict occurs when a friend is treated like a stray dog, when a friend is treated like a stranger, and when a friend is treated like an enemy (Smedes, 1996: 5-16).

Also, the other Shona common term for conflict is (9) *kukonana* (disagreement). Linguistically, the prefix *ku* is a demonstrative. Thus, *ku-konana* is a noun based on the verb *kona* (attempt without success) which when inflected becomes *kukona* (non-accomplishment). When used to refer to a conflict it becomes *kukonana* (disagreement) signifying that when people experience *kukonana* there is no success or accomplishment in their goals or interests whatsoever. As argued already, this term is one of those that are commonly used among Shona communities. Typically, what *kukonana* conveys is usually determined by

the social positions of the parties to a conflict but the bottom line is that it can be employed on a variety of contexts. For example, *kukonana* can be used interchangeably with the term divorce especially with reference to couples. In other contexts, it can be used to refer to existing tension between a father and his daughter over what the father may consider as misconduct by her daughter. To this end it is clear that terms and phrases that are used for describing conflict have a range of meanings which is suggestive of the fact that what each particular term or phrase conveys should not be taken for granted. Each particular terms and phrase should be scrutinized in order to better understand the nature of conflict it represents.

2.2 Conflict and its importance in the Shona community

Overall, the traditional Shona community did not regard conflict as a social ill. The expressions *kutadza kuri muvanhu* (every human being makes mistakes); *hapana asingatadzi* (no man or woman is free from making blunders); *munhu wese anokangaisa* (mistakes are common) and the proverb

kuposha ndokwavanhu (to err is human) indicates a philosophy of life that embraces the positive role of conflict in community (Hamutyineyi and Plangger, 1987: 316). As such whenever a conflict occurs the Shona peoples would argue that *chiripo chiripo ndarira imwe hairiri* (what is there is there. One bracelet does not tinkle on its own) to mean that nothing happens without a cause. Related to this proverb is *chiutsi hachipfungairi pasina moto* (there is no smoke without fire) (Hamutyineyi and Plangger, 1987: 208-9). Thus, when conflict occurs the traditional community would work together to discover the cause and prevent conflict from recurring.

Accordingly the aspect of trying to find out the cause of conflict using proverbial sayings indicates that the Shona community to some degree is aware of the fact that conflictants are always blind to own faults. Proverbs such as *munongedzo hauzvinongedzi* (the index finger does not point to itself) and *chidembo hachinzwi kunhuwa kwacho chomene* (the pole-cat cannot smell its own stink) reflect this notion. These proverbs mean that “a person rarely blames himself. All people point to

the mistakes of others leaving their own blunders untold” (Hamutyineyi and Plangger, 1987: 204-5). This explains why the Shona community would employ a cooperative approach to problem-solving in order to discover the adequate cause of the conflict. The Shona people’s co-operative problem-solving approach is heavily influenced by a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood which is underpinned by the kinship system. This explains why the Shona people believed in community responsibility to both sanction commendable behavior for its members and to resolve any emerging conflict.

Furthermore, to illustrate that the Shona people placed some degree of importance on conflict in human life, George Fortune; Moderkai Hamutyinei and A B Plangger argue that the traditional Shona community had proverbs that kept them reminded of how social conflict develops. *Mviro-mviro yemhanza ishosha* (the onset of baldness begins at temples) reminded this community that conflict usually develops gradually. Related to this proverb is *kamoto kamberere kanopisa matanda mberi* (a small problem can cause

more serious issues in future). These proverbs point to the fact that small faults may result in serious troubles. This idea is reinforced by another proverb *atswinya arwa* (one who has pinched has fought) meaning that every little contribution counts (Fortune, 1976:26, 29; Hamutyineyi and Plangger, 1987:200) As evidence suggests, the traditional Shona community has to some degree embraced the existence of conflict. This explains why the Shona community has come up with a wide range of terms and phrases that describe conflict.

3. Way forward

There are a number of lessons that can be learnt from studying a list of words and phrases that depicts conflict among the Shona people. Firstly, these terms and phrases indicate that the Shona culture has a

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set of terms and phrases that are specifically meant to describe conflict implying that the phenomenon of conflict is understood among the Shona communities. Secondly, these terms and phrases reveal at philosophical level the important differences in conceptualization of conflict across the different cultures. Finally, words and phrases listed above provide some glimpses of the Shona people's basic convictions about conflict in relation to human beings in the community and the world around them. Overall, the meaning conveyed by these terms and phrases shapes the behavior and interaction of the parties to a conflict. Accordingly, clarity on these terms and phrases is important because this has implications on how conflict is addressed in the host community.

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