The Role of Traditional Leadership in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building in Zimbabwean Rural Communities: The Case of Bikita District

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Abstract
The main thrust of this investigation was to explore the roles played by the traditional leadership in conflict resolution and peace building in the rural communities in Zimbabwe. The study investigated the gaps in the execution of the traditional duties of traditional leaders in conflict resolution in their communities. The study used the qualitative research design in its quest to get answers to the raised questions. The research found out that generally people in rural communities acknowledge the important roles played by traditional leaders in conflict resolution. It was also established that some traditional leaders are biased in the execution of their mandated duties, especially when dealing with political parties issues.
Keywords: Peace building, Traditional leadership, Conflict resolution, Settlement, Rural community.

1. Background to the Study

Traditional leaders play a pivotal role in settling community disputes across rural Zimbabwe. They are regarded as custodians of traditional law and receive the bulk of the cases dealing with violence which might be political, domestic or antisocial behaviour. Yet it appears that they lack the power and knowledge to prevent and adequately respond to violence as pointed out by Igbokwe (1998). The guiding objective of the traditional justice system presided over by traditional leaders in Africa in general and in Zimbabwe in particular, is to restore peace and harmony within the community. This is done by ensuring that disputants and their respective supporters are reconciled. It has been observed that at the heart of the traditional African adjudication system lays the notion of reconciliation or the restoration of harmony. According to Egbokwe (1998) three key factors help explain why most Africans in general continue to look to traditional and informal justice forums to resolve disputes: the vast majority of Africans continue to live in rural villages where access to the formal state justice is extremely limited; the type of justice offered by the formal courts may be inappropriate for the resolution of disputes between people living in rural communities or even those in urban areas can cause conflict within the community and affect economic co-operation on which the community depends; and state justice systems in most African countries operate with an extremely limited infrastructure which does not have the resources to deal with minor disputes in the villages. This study was guided by these factors.

2. Statement of the problem

Conflicts have become a common feature in Zimbabwean rural communities. As a result, there have been calls to ascertain the effectiveness of the traditional leadership in resolving such conflicts. Many community development projects have suffered stagnation or complete failure due to conflict resulting mostly from internal disputes within the rural communities. The cost of inability by communities to manage disputes contributes to underdevelopment and poverty. One key factor that has been associated with successful project implementation and sustained development is peace. Peace building therefore becomes an integral part of development process in any given society and the need for vibrant traditional leadership in conflict resolution becomes essential. Therefore, this study seeks to find out the role of chiefs in conflict resolution and peace building in the rural communities. The study sought to examine the extent to which traditional leaders abide by their traditional roles and duties in resolving conflicts in their communities. The aim is to come up with specific recommendations on how best to improve conflict resolution strategies by traditional leaders so as to promote peace and togetherness within Zimbabwean communities and beyond.

3. Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the research effort:
- What role do traditional leaders play in conflict resolution and peace building in Zimbabwean rural communities?
- What capacity gaps do traditional leaders have in the dispensation of their roles in conflict resolution and peace building?

- What training is received by traditional leaders to enhance their conflict resolution and peace building skills?
- What is the influence of the political climate in conflict resolution and peace building processes in rural communities?

4. Literature Review

Elias (1970) and Chimango (1977) argue that the cultural and socio-economic underpinnings of rural societies require proceedings which avoid an adversarial approach. Such proceedings tend to increase the tension and estrangement between the two parties, and between their supporters and thereby posing a threat to the moral cohesion of the community (Igbokwe, 1998).

According to Bob-Manuel (2000) cited in Birgit (2001) theorists and researchers when focusing on Zimbabwe should try as much as possible to move towards real life issues in all practicality. Social realities should be taken seriously. Conflicts should be viewed as non-isolated events in their social contexts. When Zimbabweans sit down to discuss a conflict, the talking usually covers all kinds of relevant background and goes into the thoughts and intentions of others. When there is a dispute between different parties, priority is given to restoring the relationships.

One of the most important results from a Cameroonian study by Nwoye (2006) is its finding on the African traditional notion of peace. According to the traditional Cameroonian people, peace is not seen as an absence of war. Nwoye (2006) points out that in almost all the cultures of Cameroon; peace is equated with freshness, health, well-being, harmony, calm and tranquillity. This is identical to the Zimbabwean situation where a number of traditional mechanisms aimed at promoting reconciliation exist. These involve truth telling and requests for forgiveness to achieve both reconciliation and to challenge perpetrators of human rights abuses. These often differ from the western legal systems that emphasise prosecution and retributive justice.

Nwoye (2006) argues that the absence of the above qualities is a sign of conflict which could be either latent or overt. It is harmony that provides farmers with good crops, fishermen with abundant catches and hunters with game. When there is enough food for everyone, peace would reign in homes and families, clans and tribes. As nobody had any reason to be envious of anybody else, neighbouring communities could live in peace, visit one another during the off-seasons and attend weddings and funerals. The Somali and the Burundi study surveys on the role of women in peace building and conflict resolution in traditional African societies also confirmed this notion (Moyo, 2004). Moyo (2004) further points out that, these studies showed that the themes, stories and songs told by women expect the children to demonstrate responsibility through reciprocity; honesty and loyalty through mutuality and deference; and faith and compassion through inner strength and self-control.

In many countries traditional authorities play a pre-eminent role as mediators of violent conflict. It is in this regard, according to Merry (1982). that the penalties, instituted usually focus on compensation or restitution in order to restore the status quo, rather than punishment. According to Elias (1952), in pre-colonial Africa the traditional leaders' forum in a number of societies assumed a more adjudicatory role for the most serious crimes such as murder and witchcraft. In such cases capital punishment would be considered. Otherwise their role as chiefs has been to bring disputing parties together and to create an atmosphere in which they can resolve their differences. Thus, the traditional leaders act as facilitators in conflict resolution.

5. Research Design, population and instrumentation

The case study research design provided the guiding framework for this study. This was so because the study focused principally on one district, Bikita, which is located in Masvingo province and is one of the 73 districts in the country.

The study was based on an infinite population of traditional leaders, police officers, teachers, tertiary students, villagers and village heads. Nonetheless, for feasibility and practicality considerations a stratified random sample of thirty five [N=35] was generated from the aforementioned categories of people.

Data was collected through a questionnaire and an interview schedule. To ensure that the data collected was valid and reliable, a pilot study was mounted. The trial tests run on instruments was made using mini-samples of 5 respondents. Both instruments were sequentially refined and perfected before their final application in the field.

6. Findings

The traditional role of traditional leaders in conflict resolution and peace building

The study revealed that traditionally conflicts are mainly managed by traditional leaders. This is often done by bringing the parties in conflict together to discuss the cause of the conflict, find a solution and reach a settlement. This process is supported by Pickell (2000) in Morgenmen (2003) who posit that reconciliation does not mean getting back together but it means helping the parties negotiate a workable way of living together. Responsibility for conflict resolution lies in traditional leaders, friends, relatives, church leaders and police depending on the

gravity of the case. Traditional leaders' role in conflict resolution is that of mediation and arbitration. Forgiveness and reconciliation are not easy to attain in all conflicts as memories of certain cases were not always easy to live with. Disputants must to some degree be able to say that justice has been done. According to van der Merwe (1999) this is important for the creation of a unified moral order; the feeling of correcting the wrongs has to be mutual. This is the main limitation in attaining full forgiveness and reconciliation. It is important for traditional leaders to address the need for justice. In political differences, political rivals often view forgiveness and reconciliation as a sign of defeat and weakness. It therefore needs a cunning traditional leader to formulate mechanisms which will result in a win-win situation or a win-lose situation without brewing discontent.

The issue of compensation employed by the traditional leaders is in concurrence with what Merry (1982) said. She argued that the penalties focus on restitution in order to restore the status quo rather than punishment. It is with this view in mind that the role of traditional leaders in the resolution of conflict was said to be the most uniting factor in the whole community and responsible for finding peaceful solutions to various conflicts that arose in the community and various groups they led.

The study revealed that civil cases are the ones arbitrated upon by traditional leaders within communities. Criminal cases are handed over to the state police. However traditional leaders failed to exercise impartiality in their judgement especially in cases where they are interested parties such as political rivalry and boundary disputes if there are relationship linkages. This position assumed by traditional leaders in conflict resolution is in contradiction with the concept of ethics as propounded by Avolio and Locker (2002). It is the traditional leaders' conduct and actions in conflict resolution that become a point of scrutiny by the community. This traditional leaders' ineffectiveness in arbitration/mediation could be attributed to inadequate public relations, mediation skills and knowledge on state laws.

The respondents expected the traditional leaders to possess the following qualities: impartiality; patience; knowledge; sympathy; integrity; trustworthy; understanding; and ability to consult transparently and to always avail themselves when called upon.

Capacity gaps in traditional leaders in conflict resolution roles within the community
The majority of the respondents felt that the degree of knowledge and skills possessed by traditional leaders for conflict resolution is satisfactory. However, traditional leaders need to keep abreast with the trends in the country or world at large so as to be more effective in their conflict resolution strategies. The mere fact that they move into leadership positions mainly through succession casts a doubt on their effectiveness in conflict resolution. Hence the success of such an important avenue for community development should not be left to chance. The study revealed that some traditional leaders do not understand community dynamics, hence their failure to mobilize people for a common cause. Some of the traditional leaders are egocentric and lack basic participatory principles. In Zimbabwe, of late traditional leadership has been preoccupied with their allowances and posh cars which they receive from government and have completely abandoned their conflict resolution duties. They do not consult community members on major decisions thereby allowing room for speculation and mistrust from the people. Some traditional leaders are involved in partisan politics hence do not command trust among people to handle disputes especially in matters of political rivalry. It is in this context that traditional leaders as actors should help conflicting parties understand that supporting human rights may enhance their negotiation position and co-operation if a solution to a dispute is to be found. The traditional leaders need to understand the relationship between rights and conflict and in particular the conflict-causing potential of human rights denial for them to come with the best intervention strategy.

Training undertaken by traditional leaders
The study revealed that the rural community was quite happy with conflict resolution efforts made by the traditional leaders. Only a handful of community members were concerned about the lack of training offered to traditional leaders to prepare them for their various roles in conflict resolution. It also came out loud and clear that there is lack of leadership skills amongst some of the traditional leaders. These inadequacies in some of the traditional leaders affected their performance in the area of arbitration, mediation and conflict resolution. It is noted that there is need to equip the traditional leaders with relevant knowledge and skills in order for them to be effective in their roles. Traditional leaders need to be provided with the necessary skills and training in the form of workshops and seminars for different categories from the highest to the lowest levels in the field of law, public administration, public relations, developmental policies and administration so that they could play their role more effectively. The study also revealed that the traditional arbitration process is vulnerable to abuse and bias as there are no written rules and judgment is at the discretion of the chief or the appointed presiding officer. Some of the arbitrators are often ignorant of the provisions of state laws on an issue they may be arbitrating over hence likely to pass judgment that may be at variance with state laws. It was noted through this study that there is no formal training that the traditional leaders undergo prior to practicing their leadership role in the community. However, some training takes place through consultations with other traditional leaders in and

around nearby communities on aspects of peace building.

The influence of the political environment on conflict resolution and peacebuilding

It was established that most traditional leaders are corrupt and biased in their judgements. In most cases most of them have become the ruling party mouthpieces and are so intolerant to opposition supporters. They also lack transparency. The research revealed that 94% of the traditional leaders in Bikita district are politically linked to the ruling political party and instead of being apolitical they have used their influence to punish those who belong to opposition political parties.

7. Discussion of major findings

In this study a number of common factors have emerged. These factors taken together indicate that the role of traditional leaders in conflict resolution hinges on their ability to arbitrate in relation to the establishment of facts, stating rules of law, and applying them as a way of restoring harmony within a disturbed community. The ability to settle conflict between the conflicting parties is an important component in peace building. The main focus was on the role of traditional leaders in conflict resolution within rural communities. Literature has already drawn a link between conflicts and social events. This is more applicable to the African way of life. Bob-Manuel (2000) cited in Birgit (2001) and Mararike (2003) concur with this principle. In view of this, it is important not to ignore these cultural commitments in the process of conflict resolution initiatives. In some communities traditional leaders are controversial people. The literature reviewed indicated the fallibility of the human person. Some traditional leaders abuse their powers by way of accepting bribes. This tends to compromise on their effectiveness in conflict resolution. One of the major challenges facing traditional leaders in conflict resolution is the restoration of social harmony. In arbitration, restoration is dependent on the accused being prepared to compensate the complainant. The study indicated that mediation and arbitration are both important components in conflict resolution. In mediation unlike arbitration, the parties to a conflict are the ones who are responsible for making a decision as regards their differences. Reconciliation is essential to the construction of sustainable peace. The related literature indicated that it is a profound process of dialogue between conflicting parties leading to the recognition of the other and respect for the differences, interests, and values. The study highlighted a number of essential competencies expected of someone responsible for solving conflicts. It can be argued that some form of training should be undertaken before one is appointed into a leadership position.

8. Summary, conclusion and recommendations

The research looked into the roles carried out by leaders in conflict resolution as well as identifying the capacity gaps that exist in their operations. It also sought to find out if there is any form of training undertaken by traditional leaders prior to assuming their responsibilities. The research found out that people generally acknowledge the importance of the role played by traditional leaders in resolving conflicts and disputes. It also established that most traditional leaders are corrupt and biased in their judgements, while some have become the ruling party mouthpieces. They are intolerant to opposition supporters. The study also revealed that the traditional arbitration process is vulnerable to bias as there are no written rules and judgement is at the discretion of the chief or the appointed presiding officer. Some of the arbitrators are often ignorant of state laws on an issue they may be arbitrating over hence likely to pass judgement that may be at variance with state laws. There is no formal training that the traditional leaders undergo prior to practicing their leadership role in the community. Since there is an outcry for peace in the country at large and in particular rural communities, ways of improving the efficiency of traditional leaders in conflict resolution has to be devised. As such the study makes the following recommendations:

Capacity building for traditional leaders

There is a lot of expertise amongst the traditional leaders in rural communities. However, there is need to compensate for their shortcomings in terms of exposure to state laws and their interpretation; and to enhance their effectiveness in conflict resolution prowess through workshops or seminars designed to induct the traditional leaders in modern law over and above their traditional oral historical perspective to the chieftainship. Other stakeholders who have the capacity to impart necessary skill proficiencies to meet the needs of the traditional leaders should be encouraged to come on board.

Distribution of state laws and acts

There is need to enhance effectiveness of traditional leaders in conflict resolution. The relevant authorities should facilitate distribution of relevant state laws and acts especially in such issues as inheritance, succession, Bill of rights to update the knowledge of traditional leaders in these areas.

Networking with others

Traditional leaders should be encouraged to share ideas and exchange notes amongst themselves on common issues in arbitration, mediation, forgiveness and reconciliation as well as conflict management. Furthermore, they need to develop partnerships and networks with institutions of higher learning like Zimbabwe Open University, Great Zimbabwe University and Midlands State University to mention just but a few, so as to enhance their knowledge and skills in conflict resolution.

Areas for further research

Based on the key findings the following thematic areas are recommended for further research:

- Role of politics in the traditional leadership decision making processes in Zimbabwe given the assumption that most traditional leaders are partisan to the dominant ruling political party.
- How to reconcile traditional arbitration systems and formal justice systems, or at least narrow the gap between the two.
- Re-aligning the traditional leaders act with the New Zimbabwean Constitution.

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