

## **Traditional conflict prevention and resolution strategies among the Manyika people of Zimbabwe: A spiritual dimension.**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper emanates from a qualitative study which was conducted in the Manicaland province of Zimbabwe whose aim was to explore how peace and conflict are interpreted in the context of traditional resolution and prevention strategies and models. There is wide acknowledgement that there exists a spiritual facet to conflict in the Manyika traditional setting. Focus was put on exploring the conflict resolution and prevention strategies that are in place as far as the spiritual dimension of conflict is concerned. It analyses and connects the uncelebrated models for conflict prevention and peacebuilding between members of the living and the dead. The paper also discusses the responsible individuals and institutions who take the responsibility to engage the spirit community in negotiation and mediation processes in the context of ChiManyika tradition. A clear distinction of the traditional practices which are specific for conflict prevention and those which resolve conflicts is made with emphasis on how they both emphasise sustaining relationships. Other peace concepts of reconciliation, justice and human security are also analysed within the cultural traditional framework. The paper makes some recommendations which could contribute to the alignment of these traditional strategies to the current policies and peacebuilding frameworks.*

**Keywords:** Conflict, Conflict prevention, Conflict resolution, Traditional strategy

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Global conflicts have attracted and received much attention and publicity from the international community which in reaction deploys peacekeeping and security forces, formulates peace resolutions and in some instances, provides financial aid. Among the different reactions to conflict are the United Nation's Uniting for Peace Resolution 377 (1950), Resolution 2131 which is a Declaration on the inadmissibility of intervention in the domestic affairs of states and the protection of their independence and sovereignty and the Manila Declaration on the peaceful settlement of disputes (1982) and many others. Peace mechanisms and models that have been crafted with a one-size-fits-all approach continue to be universalised as the standard for peacebuilding in any possible context, Africa included. However, these mechanisms and models seek to address violent conflicts whose causes have been explained by various scholars as key elements of global power such as natural resources (Bannon & Collier, 2003) and their unsatisfactory governance (Collier & Hoeffler. 2005), corruption and inept leadership (Olaosebikan, 2010), human insecurity and bad governance (Collier, 2007) and economic causes (Collier& Hoeffler. 1998).

However, in African tradition, conflict can take a spiritual facet which goes beyond conversations and physical fighting but is characterized by disharmony with the spirit community. This paper will focus on that conflict between the living and the dead. The spiritual dimension of conflict has been overlooked by authorities and writers in the field of peace and conflict who limit the indicators of conflict to social disorder, destruction of physical environments, looting of resources, rise of informal economies and economic failure, violence, human rights abuses, human displacement, and death. The kind of conflict which considers the socio-cultural beliefs, fears, values and interests of the African people continues to be missed, probably because it does not manifest in more visible ways.

However, under-documentation of this conflict dimension does not translate to Africa surviving merely by adopting the Western-designed models for the sustenance of her peace. Instead, Africa has resorted to peace institutions and traditional mechanisms that include rituals for purposes of conflict resolution, prevention, and transformation. Institutions include the African Union's Peace and Security Department and Economic Community of West African States at regional level while mechanisms

include the *Gacaca* courts of Rwanda, the *dare* (traditional court) among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, the *inkundla* among the Ndebele, *mato oput* used in Uganda and the gamba ritual of Mozambique that are used at local levels.

Despite their significant role in mending broken relationships, cleansing and reintegrating former soldiers back into communities, and building peace through resolving conflicts, these models do not adequately fulfill the aspiration for peace as it is interpreted by the Shona people, among other African cultures. This kind of peace is attained through observing certain practices that include, but are not limited to harmonious living relationships, payment of debts, honoring parents and elders as well as valuing and performing all traditional rituals prescribed by culture at various stages of life from birth, marriage through to death. Peace is, therefore, not only construed in terms of positivity or negativity as suggested by Galtung (1996) but is construed, particularly by the Shona people, as a combination of *rugare* (self-sufficiency), *runyararo* (tranquility), co-existence and good fortune. Against this background, the purpose of this study was, therefore, to explore the traditional conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms that are observed by the Manyika people because traditional beliefs and values vary and hence there is no straight jacket for the different ethnic groups, although similarities may be identified. The Manyika people are in the Manicaland province of Zimbabwe.

## **2.0 Peace within African Tradition**

The conception of peace in African cultural beliefs is influenced by the perceived purpose for life. For the African people, peace is not a single dimensional phenomenon but rather has personal and communal dimensions which encompass names, rituals, and collective memory. As such, both conflict and peace are inheritable in the African context. Thus, one's past experiences impact them and those with whom they share relations (Taylor, 1963; Appiah-Thompson, 2019). For instance, a person may suffer the wrath and should pay for a sin committed by either living or long dead biological parents, generational cousins, forefathers or anyone of their bloodline. It is at this point that rituals are used to restore a state of equilibrium (Sarping, 1989). Peace is, therefore, not a mere post-conflict phenomenon whose establishment is achieved following violence, but a desired ongoing condition that is preserved within a people's cultural beliefs and values.

Communities across Africa share a deep and socially constructed understanding of peace at local and micro levels which is not adequately defined by the visibility of normatively defined peace indicators as they have been identified on the Global Peace Index. This understanding is not limited to the conventional construction of the phenomenon but is defined by the supposed purpose of life. Peace is fabricated around how individuals live their life, whether or not they live in harmony with the natural and human environments. There is no measure for peace just as there may not be any visible indicators for conflict which sometimes manifests in latent ways such as inherited long-standing unsettled debts and unresolved inter or intra family disputes and misunderstandings. Instead, building peace may not necessarily be achieved through clearly cut defined systematic steps as prescribed by Lederach (1997) in his peace building theory, but through sustaining fair and just relations. For the African people in general, the Manyika people included, sustainable peace is not a phenomenon that can be said to be achievable after the eruption of violent conflict, but rather is an ongoing process that progresses at every stage of human life. Therefore, the uncontested Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) model for sustainable peacebuilding tends to be inapplicable when addressing the personal, social, and spiritual dimensions of conflict. This is because the model is designed for safeguarding communities by taking away weapons from armed groups and prepare them for integration into communities. In that regard, the kind of conflict under study is without firearms, machetes, or militia. Instead, the traditional and more local approach could be a solution to this kind of conflict.

Studies from cultures have shown that traditional conflict prevention and resolution strategies such as *nhimbe* have been used by the Shona and Ndebele people of Zimbabwe (Sithole, 2020) to pull community members together for agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Chivasa (2019) has also identified the practice of *kuripa ngozi* as another conflict resolution model among Shona communities. Other strategies such as death, appeasing the dead, *chisahwira*, *bira* concept, *jakwara*, as well as storytelling have also been identified in previous studies among the Zezuru (Dodo, 2015). Given that these studies focused on the Shona people in general, this study focused on the Manyika people, which are a subset of the Shona people to explore any and variations that could be specific to the group under study.

### **3.0 Methodology**

The study was purely qualitative, and four villages were purposively selected from Mutare Rural District, namely, Chishakwe and Mwaamba villages in Chishakwe and Mwandambira and Chikwanha villages in Marange. A sample size of forty people was selected at household level from the population. Data saturation was however reached at 37 and a stopping criterion of 3 more participants was observed as suggested by Francis, Johnston, Robertson, Glidewell, Entwistle, Eccles, and Grimshaw (2010).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling method. This method was used to select from the general population, some village elders, traditional healers, traditional leaders and spirit mediums that were thought to most likely contribute with appropriate data in terms of depth and relevance. Ten participants were selected from each village and in-depth interviews were conducted. Of the ten informants from each village, eight were ordinary individuals and two were pulled from custodians of tradition that include village elders and traditional leaders. Traditional healers communicate with the ancestors because they are spirit driven, therefore are directly involved in traditional issues. The primary reason for collecting data from the different categories of people was to collect the views and experiences of people of all age groups and social standing. This was also done to triangulate the data collected from the selected communities. Age of the respondents was an important factor because undocumented information is often passed on through oral tradition by the village elders. This qualifies them to be the custodians of culture, traditional values, and customs.

In addition, elderly people often facilitate all rituals, and they are an invaluable archive. They were deemed important in this study on the basis that they are the custodians of how rituals are performed, and social memory is created and handed down because of their age and experience. Likewise, traditional healers and spirit mediums play a key role in mediating spiritual processes under which rituals and social memory fall.

Consent to participate in the study was sought and given. Face to face in-depth interviews were conducted. This was the most appropriate data collection method because of the nature of the study which required to tap the participants' views,

experiences, and interpretation of the concepts under study. It was semi-structured therefore, critical to capture the various interpretations through open-ended questions.

#### 4.0 Results and Discussion

The study outlines the realistic nature of spiritual conflicts and confirms some of the findings by Dodo (2015) and Chivasa (2019) thereby indicating some similarity between the Manyika and the other tribes. Traditional leaders, traditional healers and spirit mediums tend to share the same view that when spirits, especially ancestors are angered, they create situations which pushes the family to react and traditional strategies are therefore used to address the situation. Further, only traditional mechanisms can yield the desired results because there are no other means, other than the traditional ones, of engaging the spirit community for a negotiation to be done. Traditional healers and leaders shared the sentiment that conflicts with the spirit community are better-off prevented than resolved because any attempts to resolve them attracts more harm if not done well. This group also made clear indications that the spirit community can, in fact, be negotiated with and in some case, spirit mediums take a mediatory role in facilitating communication between the living and the dead. It also emerged that the strategies that are used vary on how the conflict manifests.

Prevention strategies	Resolution strategies
Traditional beer	Traditional beer
Death rituals (kupeta mufi, kugova nhumbi, nyaradzo)	Kuripa ngozi
	Kutanda Botso

**Table 1 Traditional strategies for conflict prevention and resolution**

#### 4.1 Negotiating peace with the spirit community

There is acknowledgement of the spiritual dimension of conflict within the traditional communities and such acknowledgement leads to strict adherence to certain clearly defined rituals and practices which should not be broken, lest the spirits are offended. But what is peace and how can it be achieved through traditional conflict resolution and prevention strategies? Out of this question arose a multitude of responses that

pointed to peace as a state of mind which comes with the knowledge that there is a balance of power between the living and the dead. Findings revealed that death does not signify the end but one's entrance into the community which is closer to Mwari (God). This is achieved through elevation of the dead to a point where they can communicate with both Mwari and the living, hence the need for spiritual appeasement through homemade beer, commemoration, and memorialization ceremonies. All these ceremonies are construed as negotiation models for justice, peace, and security by the living.

Negotiation and mediation are therefore not western concepts that are new knowledge to the Shona cultural setting; neither are they unique to political spheres but have been known to local communities for ages. The findings revealed the role played by traditional healers, spirit mediums in negotiating for justice and equality through dialogue between the dead and the living. Not only do they negotiate when there is physical harm on the living or demand for justice, but they also take preventive measures to calm the potential anger of the dead. As such, rituals are a form of a negotiation tool and do not only focus on one dimension of conflict but also addresses relationships and bring about a win-win result. These rituals include *kuripa ngozi* and *kutanda botso*. The concept of *kuripa* would be equivalent to an admission of guilt which is followed by an appeasement of the wronged spirit. This comes in different forms and for various reasons as discussed below.

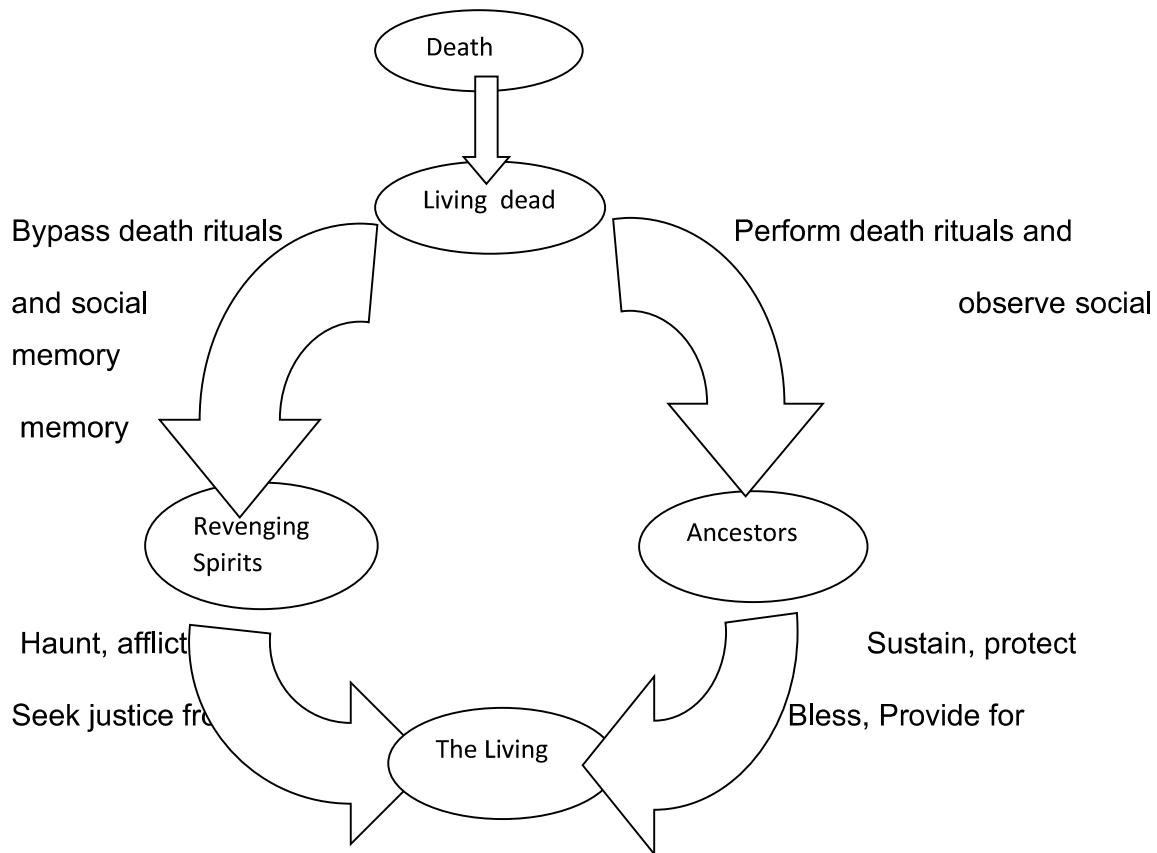
#### **4.2. Conflict Prevention and Resolution Strategies and Platforms**

The study revealed that some mechanisms do apply for the purposes of preventing the conflict while some specifically resolve the conflict already in existence. The latter do become relevant as both conflict resolution and peace building as it mends relationships that would have been dented. This section discussed these strategies and what they are meant to achieve, in the understanding of the Manyika people.

##### **4.2.1 Death rituals**

Evidence shows that the Manyika people, do subscribe to the death rituals as part of their tradition. Death is believed to be a transforming force that does not strip away the identity of the dead. As such, the dead do expect to be treated as equals with the living in the sense that they need to be recognized and identified with their families,

relatives and friends and this identification can be strengthened by means of passing down individual names of the dead to the living. The practice also serves the purpose of eliminating potential conflict with the dead and ensures enhancement of the well-being of both the dead and living. It also symbolizes the legitimate domestication of the spirit of the dead, an act that is presumed to foster a sustainable peaceful relationship between the dependents and the provider. In return, the study revealed that the living are provided with security through financial blessings, rain, successful reproduction and good health. Therefore, rituals regulate power relations between the dead and the living, thus, creating a conducive environment for a peaceful relationship to thrive. Figure 1 below demonstrates this relationship.



**Figure 1: Life after death in relation to peace (Jeranyama, 2014)**

Whilst focusing on the living-dead relations, these findings clearly identified the rituals that are conducted upon the death of an individual and how identity influences specific decisions and responsibilities. Death rituals are practiced from the moment



an individual is pronounced dead through to post burial. Specific rituals are conducted by specific individuals who have that obligation to take the leading role as prescribed by culture. These include the mother of the deceased. These rituals involve folding the dead (*kupeta mufi*), a process conducted by a niece, nephew, or wife to ensure that all body parts are positioned well for burial before covering it with a blanket. The relatives of the deceased are informed by word of mouth and a small cash amount or domestic edible animal before mourning is officiated. This is followed by washing the body of the deceased by the same person who folded the body. In the absence of the culturally designated persons, totems can be used to single-out the appropriate individual to stand in as the relative. When that alternative is chosen, any individual who shares the totem with that of the desired relative takes over the responsibility. For example, where the mother, with the (*Shumba*) lion totem would have participated, any woman of the same totem may take over the responsibility. If the deceased has a house, it is required that their body lays in state overnight in that house as it is believed to be an opportunity to bid their house and farewell as well as to give the family an opportunity for closure through any final ritual<sup>3</sup>. Those who die single still have their bodies spend a night in their parent's house. Everyone attending the funeral gets an opportunity to view the dead body as farewell. When the time comes to dig a grave, the deceased's father or nephew presides over the process by marking the four corners of the grave. After burial the belongings of the dead are distributed among their family and relatives (*kugova nhumbi*).

Resulting in conflict with the ancestral community are some of the emerging memorialisation practices that comprise of the seemingly anti-cultural practices that were reported as the causes of family disputes and potential anger-stimulating practices which result in spiritual conflict with ancestors. Interviews with the village elders who also are the custodians of tradition revealed that while some have slowly abandoned certain traditional practices for Christianity, the new ways of memorialisation involve practices that they are not comfortable with and are not willing to partake in. Traditional healers and faith-based healers from apostolic

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<sup>3</sup> This practice had been stopped during the Covid-19 pandemic and this significantly changed the mourning and funeral rites of the Shona people.

churches strongly argued against the filming of funeral proceedings, particularly body viewing as these practices show lack of respect for the dead.

#### **4.2.2 Kuripa Ngozi**

In this study, the adopted concept of *ngozi* is that when the spirit of a dead person haunts the living, demanding a decent send-off or seeking explanation for their failure to perform a specific death ritual for them. Admission of guilt is then expressed by fulfilling the demands of this spirit through a ceremony, during which, family elders call upon the angry spirit and present their appeasement. Those from a more traditional background indicated that it is the spirit that, when consulted, gives direction on what should be done, by whom and when. The result is the appeasement of the angry spirit, with peace guaranteed thereafter.

#### **4.2.3 Kutanda botso**

The other facet of *kuripa* manifests through *kutanda botso* (self-shaming). There is a unanimous understanding that should a child wrong (especially by scolding, beating, or despising) their mother and she dies before the child has sought forgiveness, this child will eventually have to pay for their wrong deeds even after their mother's death. The Shona people believe that a mother is a very important member of the family and should be treated with caution as she comes from a different bloodline. In that regard, if wronged and dies without settling issues with her child, the child will have to seek peace with their deceased mother. The ceremony involves cleansing the spirit of the aggrieved biological mother so that the spirit of vengeance may be exorcised, and the perpetrator forgiven (Chavasa, 2021). These peace negotiations involve the relatives (brothers and sisters of the wronged mother), who often are recipients of the peace offering that can be in cash or gifts. However, they do not just receive but further present this reparation to their late sister. This study revealed that, ignoring this process results in bad luck, failed marriages, and lack of social security in all its forms. This backs up the African Philosophy that death renders the dead some power to influence the lives of the living as "living dead" coined by Mbiti (1969), the "living-timeless" (Banana, 1991) and "intangible assets" (Mararike, 2011). Hence, in the absence of peace, there is no development.

#### **4.2.4 Dare**

*Dare* is a traditional court system where decisions are taken by consensus at family level, this is where conflicts are deliberated with the intention of resolution, through accommodation of all parties involved in search of an effective compromise. This platform creates a conducive and neutral venue for issues to be deliberated and resolved. This study clearly showed how this system remains uncontested both at family and community levels. Reparations are also discussed on the platform.

#### **4.2.5 Conflict resolution and prevention strategies: For peace or out of fear?**

From a traditional perspective, there are strategies and models to create harmony with the departed and create transformative relationships. This harmony guarantees positive interaction through provision of social and financial security, material blessings, fruits of the womb, bumper harvests, and good health. The strategies also symbolically explain commitment to reinvent relations between the living and the dead to create a smooth and beneficial relationship. Although death ritual processes are described as an expression by the living for the need to build sustainable peace with dead relatives who in turn provide relational and material peace, narratives of fear are not dismissed as unworthy. Indeed, these strategies are a vehicle for peace building but fear of possible wrath from the dead also drives such practices.

Despite that these strategies serve to build peace; some have also become major sources of conflict at family levels due to different religious denominational beliefs and traditional values. For instance, passing on the names of the dead may be done with good intentions but can also fuel conflict within families. While the traditional intention of the rite was to keep the name “alive”, fear of witchcraft and negative spirits may cloud the decision to pass down a name. Further, rituals such as *kurova guva* which are common among the Zezuru, are replaced by *nyaradzo* which is a memorial service whose proceedings are conducted by the church.

#### **5.0 Conclusion**

The study managed to bring out strategies that the Manyika people practice as ways of preventing both human to human as well as human to spirit conflicts. These strategies could be designed in a manner that can inform policy, particularly those who guide the traditional justice system. There is a very high acknowledgement of

traditional conflict prevention and resolution strategies within the Shona family setup. These strategies emerge as facilitative measures emanating from the belief that, death transforms one into a member of the ancestral community which can either invite positive or negative forces into the life of the living. However, these positives are guaranteed by adequate observation of rituals as they are believed to be facilitators of the entrance of the dead into the community of ancestors. Within this traditional framework, the conventional conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms tend to be inadequate and almost inapplicable as far as this nature of conflict is concerned. Hence, it was the objective of this paper to bring out a unique conflict nature that can only be resolved through traditional conflict resolution techniques.

Within the Manyika and wider Shona traditional setting, relationships do matter and have influence in as far as development and sustainable peace are concerned. Building peace need not be expensive, but could follow traditional processes at the local level, using local resources and strategies. The study therefore makes the following recommendations to the government of Zimbabwe:

Firstly, that these conflict prevention and resolution strategies be revisited and modelled in a manner that aligns them to other complementary frameworks, such as those which focus on human rights protection and promotion. This would require complementary effort by the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission and the Human Rights Commission.

Finally, that these traditional practices be designed into a documented peacebuilding model that can be the basis for unlocking potential for restoring and strengthening relations for sustainable communities.

#### **Author contribution statement**

Both authors of this paper have directly been involved in its development and analysis and have approved its submission.

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