“WHAT AN OLD MAN SEES WHILE SITTING A YOUNG MAN CANNOT SEE WHILE STANDING”: UTILIZING SENIOR CITIZENS TO ACHIEVE PEACE.

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ABSTRACT

Many African communities still appreciate the role of oral literature in establishing and maintaining social order. Chief among the genres of oral literature is the proverbs. Achebe in “Things Fall Apart says that ‘proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten’ (Achebe, 1958:4). The Gikuyu, an ethnic group that lives in the Central Region of Kenya was among the heaviest casualties of the post election violence that was experienced in the country in 2007/8. To prevent recurrence of such tribal chaos several strategies and efforts such as the formation of Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission, introduction of peace education in schools and colleges and peace negotiations among warring communities have been put in place. However, no effort has been made to find out the role of oral literature, especially Gikuyu proverbs as a tool for peace building among the Gikuyu. This is what motivated this study. The aims were to identify the proverbs, explain their meaning and their context of application. The research employed the Woolman’s Active Peace theory as the theoretical framework. The research was obtained from 50 old men and women who were judgementally sampled. Collection of data was done using of an interview schedule. The data was later analysed in the light of the theoretical framework of the study

Key words: proverbs, peace, peace building,

INTRODUCTION

The Gikuyu people, also commonly referred to as Kikuyu, are a Bantu speaking people who reside mainly at the Central Kenya region. Their main economic activity is farming but they are also skilled tradesmen. Just like many other African ethnic groups, they are a patriarchal community. According to 2009 National Population and Housing Census results (2010:34), the community has more than 6.2 million people, making it the largest community in the country. This paper revisits Kikuyu folklore and will focus particularly on proverbs analyzing the role of seniors in leadership, in particular promoting peace and justice in the community. It adopts the theory of Active Peace as espoused by the John Woolman College Initiative which emphasizes that peace must go hand in hand with justice and wholeness.

It also adopts the Gautun’s meaning of peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace building. are also an integral part of , to also fit into a triadic and interdependent formulation or structure.

Among the Gikuyu community the notion of non-violence

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is very paramount. The community suffered extensively during the colonial period in an armed resistance against the Britons who had taken their land. Needless to say, the need to reconstruct and rehabilitate the community after the country’s independence from colonial masters was paramount.

The pursuit of peace in this community is a valued achievement that it is “incorporated into their language, especially into the proverbs” (Wanjohi, 1997:191).

Whenever someone quotes a Kikuyu proverb, the opening remarks are always .Gikuyu oigire (Kikuyu said) or athuri maikariire njung’wa ndiraiguire makiuga ii (I heard the elders saying as they sat on their ceremonial three-legged stools) and the proverb being quoted follows.

Among the Gikuyu the word for proverbs is ‘thimo’ which means measured steps. This word is derived from the word ‘gūthima’ which means to measure. It therefore means that for a proverb to come into existence it must be describing a phenomenon that those coining the proverb have critically looked into and understood it properly. They must cautiously and consciously measure the extent and implication of the words that they use. To do this they must of necessity be wise and perhaps this is why the proverbs among most African societies are a preserve of the senior members of the community.

Kipury (1983:149) asserts that it is an accepted fact among the Maasai that wisdom is enshrined in the old members of the community and that seniority is a mark of wisdom. When a proverb is used in the presence of the youths it is often contextualized in a narrative situation so that the youths may understand the message. This assertion can perhaps explain why the youth castigated the use of form of oral literature, among them riddles and proverbs during the recently held general election campaigns to such an extent that they appeared as a criminal offence almost punishable by law.

However, although the Kikuyu proverbs cover all aspects of life, this paper focuses only on those proverbs that deal with peacemaking, peacekeeping and justice.

STATEMENT OF THE ROBLEM

Kenya is undergoing healing after post election violence that was experienced in the country in 2007/8. To avert repeat of violence, several peace building initiatives have been put in place. These include the formation of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission, sporting activities, peace negotiations among the warring communities as well as introduction of peace studies in schools and colleges. The Gikuyu community is among the ethnic communities that were most affected by the post election chaos, and although the above strategies have been widely used to promote peaceful relations, the role of oral literature, especially Gikuyu proverbs in pursuit of this peace has not been acknowledged and accounted for in peace studies and peace efforts in Kenya.

Objectives

This study had the following objectives

i) Identify kikuyu proverbs that advocate for peace and justice

ii) Explain the meaning of these proverbs

iii) Explain how these proverbs apply in context for peace and justice

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Achievement of peace in the community is a consequence of individual and collective initiative. This is what Johan Galtung advocates for in the Theory of Active Peace (1964) which calls for creation of systems that create and sustain peace in the society. Lasting peace in the society, he notes, can only be achieved by addressing ‘root causes’ of violent conflicts and supporting the indigenous capacities for peace management and conflict resolution following his steps, the Johan Galtung College Initiative have identified the five pillars of active peace. They have identified peacemaking as a discrete discipline, that it can be taught, calls for
collective responsibility to make peace a reality. They have identified a peace triad comprising of three facets; peacemaking, peace keeping and peace building.

Peacemaking in this respect is the transformation of conflicts away from violence, oppression, and subjugation by social and political means (John Wilmerding 2013). He further reports that peacekeeping on the other hand is the nonviolent accompaniment while Peace building entails efforts that sustainable Development such as provision for human needs so that the associated conflicts involving sustaining life (land, water, food, health care, etc.) are ameliorated or eliminated.

The United Nations regards peace building as action to solidify peace and avoid relapse into conflict or activities undertaken on the far side of conflict to reassemble the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations something that is more than just the absence of war.

The interest of this study is on peace keeping; the efforts that elders of the Gikuyu community and by extension elders in Kenya undertake to maintain peace and social cohesion. The precepts of Active Peace theory are therefore paramount in this study.

John Wilmerding (2013) defines peacemaking as any of several types of applied exercises in intervention, or constructive social group processes. This is in line with this study’s proposition, that oral literature can and has been used as an intervention tool to maintenance of peace and order in the society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Kikuyu Proverbs on Peace and justice

In the Gikuyu society, a proverb may have more than one application which makes it possible for one proverb to appear under several sub-headings. It therefore means that this paper may depict some semblance of repetition of some proverbs in the discussion. Also due to time constraints the paper will only focus on about ten Kikuyu proverbs dealing with peacemaking, peacekeeping and justice. It will provide the proverb in Kikuyu language, its corrupted fashion if any followed by its literal translation and its deeper meaning which in turn leads to its application and context.

Kikuyu: Muthuri aikariire njung’wa onaga kuraya gukira kihii ki muti iguru.

Literal translation: An old man sitting on a three legged stool sees farther than a young man who is on atop a tree.

Corrupted: Muthuri aikariire njung’wa onaga kuraya gukira kihii ki muti iguru (gikiiya macungwa).

Literal translation: An old man sitting on a three legged stool sees farther than a young man who is atop a tree stealing oranges.

Deeper meaning: Age is a mark of wisdom and an old man is likely to look before leaping while the young man will act hastily without first focusing on the repercussions which may be disastrous.

It goes without saying that if one climbs a high place he or she is likely to see farther than someone who is standing let alone one who is seated on a stool. Yet the sages say that when a man who is old sits on a stool he sees farther than the young man who has climbed on a tree, if this proverb were to be interpreted literally.

The concealed meaning of this Kikuyu proverb reveals that an old man is wise and would see beyond the literal or the peripheral value of something. An old man would discern between situations that would appear a mystery to a young man for instance, in cases of disputes or violence an old man would

METHODOLOGY

The sample was gotten by judgemental sampling since the research had to collect the data from the old people in the county. Interview schedule was used to collect the data since some subjects could not write. The data was also recorded on a tape recorder for further reference during analysis. The data was later translated, transcribed and analyzed in the layout of Woolman’s Active Peace Theory.
easily foresee when war or violence would occur and try to avert it at all costs even if it means appearing like a coward.

The young man may view this as a sign of cowardice and try to provoke the old man who will assume that he neither hears nor understands what is going on. For example during the campaigns of the 2013 general election, when the elderly were referred to as the analogue and the youth referred to themselves as digital, the elderly pretended not to hear or understand the imagery used on them or the message being communicated to them.

They played deaf and dump to this provocation suggesting that they wanted to maintain a peaceful atmosphere which in turn culminated in a peaceful election. This is simply because they foresaw and knew that ngarari ni githuria kia mbaara (Barra,2010:128:704), which literally translates into “arguments are a source of strife”. Perhaps to the young man the so called analogues were deemed cowards yet in reality they feigned ignorance intentionally to avert bloodshed such as that Kenya experienced in 2007/8 after the elections.

The old men, despite the fact that every person of means has gone digital due to the ongoing need to fit and cope with upcoming technology did not strive to tell the young men so. Also the youth knew very well that in spite of the fact that the seniors used oral forms they could equally boast acquaintance with modern media such as twitter and face book.

As though vilifying the aged is not hurting enough to them, the youth have corrupted the original proverb to serve their purpose through what Oyelade (1999) calls playful blasphemy, as is evident in this proverb; muthuri aikarire njung’wa onaga kuraya gukiria kihii ki muti iguru “gikiya machungwa” which literally translates into an old man seated on a three legged stool see farther than a young man who is on top of a tree stealing oranges.

Here the original proverb is disparaged as the youth wants to show that not only is he on the tree but he is so busy doing something that would benefit them; stealing oranges, that he has no time to see any farther. In this case he demonstrates a ‘don’t care attitude’. Yet the action that makes him busy is in itself a vice that the society castigates and though literally he may not be blamed for not seeing, he is liable for punishment for committing a crime punishable by law. The sacrilege committed on this proverb renders it wise for that society castigates and though literally he portrays the youth as so engrossed in the crime that they do not care about what is happening around them.

For a senior, when they realize that things may go wrong and breed war in place of peace, he would be quick to quip “mbara ti ucuru” which literally translates into ‘war is not porridge.’ Porridge here is deliberately used as a form of traditional beverage for that is what the community used before the introduction of modern drinks such as tea and coffee. In quoting such a proverb, an elder would simply fold his paraphernalia and just walk away from such a confrontational scene.

This to the onlookers may appear like an act of cowardice especially if s/he was part brawl. If the senior is not part of the quarrel and is an arbitrator s/he will insist on the need to engage in dialogue in order to find an amicable solution to the ensuing dispute. To support his suggestion he may emphasize that employing dialogue to attain peaceful resolution to conflicts is a noble attribute inherent in human beings and demonstrates dignity and maturity as opposed to irrationality and brutality.

Another proverb used to buttress the idea of dialogue, also espoused by Njururi, (1969:i32)is hinya ndugunaga , whose literal translation is ‘strength avails nothing.’ This implies that one cannot attain lasting benefit through the use of force, and that any good that can emanate from use of force as opposed to dialogue is both unreliable and insecure making peace alien to the one who has used force. Such a situation is akin to the one experienced in Kenya during the post election violence after the 2007 general election where force was used to commit atrocities- kill, maim, rape, lynch e.t.c to acquire property. But these gains were short-lived since with time, the culprits were brought to book and
During the discussion the elders cited the reaction by a section of leaders from a certain community as one that could disrupt peace in the country. This emanated from an utterance by the president of a neighboring country when he jokingly said a particular community from the country should be asked to stop ‘stealing his cattle’. Though he introduced his remark as ‘in a lighter note’ some leaders of this community mentioned were so enraged to the extent that they went to the press and publicized the affair demanding an apology from the said president. The Kikuyu elders commenting on the issue termed this as magnification of the utterance which is tantamount to brewing a storm out of a teacup.

They had this proverb in support ‘itheru ritirutagirvo mugai’ which is literally translated to ‘For a jest, one should not take the arrow out of the quiver.’ In other words, it is not necessary to find fault where it was not meant, a prudent person weighs every situation and differentiates between the important and unnecessary. The issue mentioned above, Kikuyu elders felt, needed wise dialogue and counsel to quell since the president is at liberty to offer or not to offer the demanded apology, which might in turn provoke the aggrieved community to fight. They also said ‘ndeto ithukagio ni gutenderio’ whose literal translation is ‘matters are made worse by exaggeration’. This means that it was better for the leaders to leave the situation as it was and if possible feign ignorance to promote the prevailing peace between the two neighboring communities.

An equivalent of this is what Barra, (2010:68:377) quotes, matumbi ma njamba matituranga , whose literal translation is; cocks’ eggs do not hatch each other.’ Contextualized, the proverb means that a man would prefer to cohabit with a woman rather than with another man and that there should not be two people welding authority in the same environment. The proverb also implies that two cocks cannot live harmoniously together without one subordinating to the other in order to coexist peacefully. This explains why in the systems established in the country be it in the government or other institutions there is only one head and the rest work under him/her. The most applicable context of this proverb is in resolving family conflicts where the seniors are called upon to arbitrate and perhaps the wife has been insubordinate to the husband. They will normally advice her to submit to her husband for peaceful coexistence and also chide the man for failure to command respect in his home.

Ngemi ciumaga na mucii/ wega umaga mucii. These translate to ‘charity/prosperity begins at home. The home, individual and collective, is the genesis of peace and justice and if there is neither peace nor justice at home the country cannot experience these highly cherished values. For the country to achieve and maintain peace and justice the home must lead by taking centre stage.

Commenting about the relationship between peace and war and whether the presence of one brackets out the other, the seniors reiterated that peace is not necessarily the absence of war. They alluded to the proverb, gutemwo na kanua ti gutemwo na rahi meaning ‘Cutting by the tongue is different from cutting with a machete’. In other words negative consequences/ penalties that may emanate from resolving differences or crises through dialogue are easier to bear as opposed to forced solution through violence.

The elders also advocate for respect for institutional authority. For instance they say, ‘mugambo wa kirindi no ta wa Ngai. Literal translation: when the people have spoken, it is God who has spoken/the voice of the people is the voice of God. In other words it is god who installs leadership and people
have an obligation to obey those in position of power.

CONCLUSION

This paper has underscored the need for diversification of peace building procedures with specific emphasis on oral literature. The results of this study sustain that elders should not be overlooked in the pursuit of peace. According to this research, the seniors argue that in any event of conflict, reason and dialogue should be preferred to the use of physical force or strong language. The solutions obtained through this mode are more convincing and enduring and the application of dialogue and reason demonstrate human nature and dignity.

RECOMMENDATION

So far Kenya has had a successful peaceful election and most of the Kenyans are content to claim that they are peaceful and they should move on. However, since peace is not only absence of war, this paper recommends that Kenyans need to have literary dialogue through their oral tradition and indigenous language. This will help cope with their emergent peaceful situations. This paper also recommends that the senior citizens should be engaged in peace-building and conflict resolution. This is because these senior citizens could play a big role in maintaining true peace.

References


