"No Monkey Destroys his Forest:" A Review of Traditional African Interpersonal Conflict Management

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Abstract

This manuscript explores, reviews and categorizes research discussing interpersonal conflict management in Africa both to clarify what has been studied to date and to provide a foundation for further study of interpersonal conflict both in Africa and elsewhere. The focus is on articles addressing interpersonal conflict between Africans in African countries from 1980 to 2010. The study reveals a distinctively African approach to interpersonal conflict that is important to articulate both because it may be disappearing due to the spread of western ideologies and also because it provides new insights to improve western ways of working through conflict. The manuscript describes traditional African practices of managing interpersonal conflict by summarizing the literature that investigates preventative practices, reviews typical procedures for working through conflict and discusses the end goal and purpose of the conflict resolution process. An additional section explores literature examining worldviews and practices related to traditional African dispute resolution and a final section discusses what the literature reveals about traditional African interpersonal conflict management as it relates to western ways of addressing interpersonal conflict management. The conclusion proposes several important opportunities for future research.

Keywords: interpersonal conflict, African conflict, literature review, conflict management, cross cultural communication

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"No Monkey Destroys his Forest." Ugandan Proverb

The Ugandan proverb above hints at the value of interpersonal relationships. The gist of the proverb is that one should maintain relationships and take care of friendships because everyone needs other people. To maintain friendships is to address interpersonal conflicts in a way that leads to further interaction and restores errant individuals to the community. This review of literature concerning interpersonal conflict on the continent of Africa provides evidence of unique ways of addressing interpersonal conflict that result in long term, ongoing relationships.

The motivation for this review began with an interest in cultural differences in conflict management as well as direct experience investigating interpersonal conflict in Karamoja, Uganda. The purpose of this manuscript is to identify and categorize the research concerning interpersonal conflict on the continent of Africa in order to clarify what has been studied to date and to provide a foundation for further study. In addition, the paper provides a perspective on interpersonal conflict management that contrasts sharply with western ways of thinking about interpersonal conflict. Ting-Toomey (Ting-Toomey,1988) and others (Tsai & Chi, 2009) have illuminated the uniqueness of a western perspective concerning interpersonal conflict by explicating a Chinese view. Similarly, an understanding and familiarity with an African perspective on interpersonal conflict management is also likely to enrich the dominant western perspective found in much of academia.

This kind of review is valuable to Africans because it provides a record of convictions and practices that have become less common and may be fading away. It is valuable to westerners because it helps them to see themselves and their taken-for-granted beliefs about interpersonal conflict more clearly and it is valuable to both groups because it may help them in their communication with each other.

The continent of Africa covers a vast amount of territory (over 11 million square miles), includes a diverse set of ethnic groups (over 1000 distinct cultures), is home to over 650 million people and encompasses a variety of cultural perspectives (Nwoye, 2006b). Yet, even though 15% of the world's population resides in Africa, little research has addressed African cultural approaches to conflict. What little research does exist is concerned with intergroup, interethnic and interstate conflict. Interpersonal conflict has rarely been the subject of academic inquiry.

For purposes of this review, interpersonal conflict is defined as conflict between parties comprised of a single individual. Interpersonal conflict occurs when two individuals perceive their interests or goals as being incompatible or perceive themselves to be in competition for scarce resources. This definition rules out conflicting mental states within a single individual (intrapersonal conflict) and also rules out conflict in which parties are composed of more than one person (intergroup conflict).

Given the collectivist nature of most African communities, one might suggest that no conflict is truly interpersonal (between two individuals), but is always intergroup because of the responsibilities and obligations of the individual to the group (family, clan, village) of which he or she is a part. While the actions of an individual may have ramifications for the group of which they are a member, there is a qualitative and quantitative difference between conflict between individuals and conflict in which groups of individuals attempt to right a perceived injustice through collective action.

1. Methods

The search covered social science, communication and psychology databases as well as general databases such as Academic Search Premier, Research Library Complete, ABI/INFORM etc. (technical databases for engineering and science were excluded to reduce search time). Key words "interpersonal conflict" and "Africa" yielded some articles; however, the majority of manuscripts were found using individual country names and "interpersonal conflict." Fifty four countries in Africa were included in the search though many countries such as Angola, Benin, Cameroon etc. received no hits from the search. The search was completed in August, 2010.

Once an initial corpus of articles was collected, further articles were identified by reviewing the reference lists of all articles and flagging manuscript titles related to interpersonal conflict. Other manuscripts were located by searching on each author to discover whether they had written other articles on interpersonal conflict.   The purpose of the present manuscript is to offer a *current* snapshot of the study of interpersonal conflict in Africa. Therefore the literature review has been limited to works published since 1980. The majority of articles included in the current study were published between 1990 and 2010[i].

In brief, there were four criteria for article selection. Articles were included for review if:

1. They were published between 1980 and 2010
2. The research was conducted in Africa
3. The topic of study was conflict between Africans (nationality of the author was not a criterion)
4. Interpersonal conflict management was discussed in some detail[ii]

A total of sixty eight articles were carefully read and summarized with detailed notes[iii]. For ease of reading, "interpersonal conflict management" will be referred to as IPCM.

2. Results

In terms of geographic location, an overview of the articles reveals that they are spread across the continent with several articles each in West Africa, East Africa and the southern region of Africa. Fifteen different countries were represented in the literature review with no single country having more than four different authors. See Table 1 for a list of the countries represented in the review along with the corresponding authors.

Table 1: Countries Represented in Literature Review

Region	Country	Authors
West Africa	Mali Gambia Niger Burkina Faso Ghana Togo Nigeria	Madhaven (2001) Davidheiser (2005, 2006) Wilson-Fall (2000) Lund (1999) Obeng (1999) Fred-Mensah (2000) Adomi (2006) Olorunsola (1997)
East Africa	Sudan Ethiopia Somalia Uganda Kenya	Deng (2000) Bouh and Mammo (2000) Edossa et al. (2005) Tuso (2000) Menkhaus (2000) Kaye et al. (2005) Jabs (2005, 2010) Pkalya et al. (2004)
Southern Region	Malawi Botswana South Africa	Peters (2002) Adeyemi (2000) Mccall et al. (1997) Greef (2000) Masina (2000) Nwoye (2004, 2006)
Etic perspective	Numerous countries	Bennett (1980) Faure (2000) Nwoye (2000a, 2000b) Zartman (2000)

The majority of articles were written from an emic perspective, describing IPCM in a particular region. Yet some of the themes evident in these descriptions were found across multiple countries on the continent. The greatest number of articles discussed various aspects of "traditional" African approaches to managing and resolving interpersonal conflict[iv].

2.1 Definition of "Traditional"

Many of the articles included in this review, use the term "traditional" as though there is a common understanding of what is traditional in Africa. It is worth defining the term, however, because, given colonialism and the domination of foreign powers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some scholars (Ekeh, 1994) deny the survival of any purely "traditional" social structures in Africa. Others (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) discuss the "invention" of tradition and how Africans create "traditions" through talking about perceptions of the past. For this review, the understanding of tradition in relation to IPCM is well summarized by Osaghae (2000) who writes "the search for traditional strategies of conflict management then looks for the past in present-day social formations that can be applied to modern conflicts, and stresses the *indigenous* content" (p. 204, emphasis in original). An understanding of "traditional" responses to interpersonal conflict requires a focus on what Africans themselves perceive to be their responses to interpersonal conflict as opposed to responses drawn from, modeled after or otherwise influenced by external influences such as Islam, Christianity, capitalism, or other western ideas.

2.2 Traditional African Interpersonal Conflict Management

Most of the literature reviewed for this article described traditional or indigenous ways of responding to interpersonal conflicts. Although they are diverse in their focus, authorship, and geographic location, these articles showed surprising consistency in their description of traditional African approaches to interpersonal conflict. Three key concepts provide a framework for discussing this literature: prevention, process and purpose. (See Table 2 for an overview of traditional African IPCM summarizing these three concepts and the related ideas.)

Table 2: Traditional African Interpersonal Conflict Management

I.   Prevention of Interpersonal Conflict
       a. Children are socialized to harmony and self control
       b. Deterrents to interpersonal conflict include:
              i. Severe penalties to be paid individually or collectively
              ii. Witchcraft or the threat of divine displeasure and the resulting
                  negative consequences
II.   Process of Interpersonal Conflict Management
       a. Accepted authorities exist in every situation to serve as arbiters to an
           interpersonal dispute. The authority might be:
              i.   Extended family
              ii. Neighbors
              iii. Members of one's age set
              iv. Elders
       b. An open meeting is held where everyone is heard.
       c. Compensation is required as part of justice so that the errant
           community member has paid the price, can be forgiven and can be
           welcomed back into the community.
       d. A ritual of some sort is often performed to signify that the individual
           is restored to the community
III.   Purpose of Interpersonal Conflict Management is reconciliation so that
       the individual is fully integrated back into the community.

2.2.1 Prevention

The literature consistently points out that traditional African IPCM does not go into effect at the point of incompatible goals and frustrated desires. Instead, African conflict management begins at home from the time a child first learns cultural norms for appropriate behavior. The literature points to harmony as a fundamental value for many African communities and this commitment to harmony prevents many interpersonal conflicts before they begin.

The emphasis on harmony appears to be greater within African tribes than in western worldviews. Several authors ascribe this orientation to elders who recognize that long-term peaceful relationships within the tribe are crucial to the continued existence of the group. Bouh & Mammo (2008) describe how, among pastoralists, internal disputes can disrupt the mobility of the tribe which in turn reduces access to the rangeland resources essential to their survival.

The Buems of Ghana and Togo provide another example. According to Fred-Mensah (2000) the overriding concern of the Buem's "normative order is to sustain social harmony"(p. 35). Not only do the Buem elders view social harmony as essential to their wellbeing as a tribe, they also "hold the view that a failure to comply with the rules of social control undermines the social order and is tantamount to an assault on the community as a whole" (Fred-Mensah, 2000, p. 34). Therefore the "inculcation of the ideology of social harmony . . . is . . . an integral part of the Buem socialization process" (Fred-Mensah, 2000, p. 35).

This emphasis on the value of harmony and social order is clearly articulated among other tribes as well. Pkayla et al. (2004) note that, among the Turkana in Kenya, children learn conflict prevention through mock fights and mock dance that "inculcate a sense of societal harmony and unity" (p. 48) and prevent the development of anti social behaviors. If a person disregards the social norm of harmony, emissaries are sent to the family to bring that member back into compliance with the societal norms.

Wilson-Falls (2000) elaborates on these societal norms in her description of the concept known as *pulaaku* in Niger, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Chad or as *hersa* in Mali, Senegal, The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. *Pulaaku* is best described in English as discretion, self-control and reserve. According to Wilson-Falls (2000), it "is a significant behavioral factor on every level of Fulbe society" (p. 62). *Pulaaku* is part of the education and socialization of children and leads to the cultural norm of stoic self-control in the face of severe provocation. While western communities may teach their children to use words versus violence to solve minor interpersonal squabbles, they do not usually ingrain harmony as a fundamental social value as many African communities do.

It is worth noting that this socialization process usually applies only within the tribe or local group and not across ethnic boundaries. Among the Turkana, for example, it is a serious crime for a Turkana to kill another Turkana, but killing non-Turkana "enemies" is not only acceptable but honorable. Turkana warriors typically receive a tattoo for each "enemy" they kill, and those with many tattoos are highly respected for their bravery (Pkayla et al., 2004: 54).

A second way in which traditional African IPCM prevents conflict is through deterrence. Among many tribes, the penalties for acts of aggression are well known in the community.   For example, among the Turkana, every crime requires a corresponding compensation: for killing a man, 30 cows must be given to the family of the slain man, for killing an unmarried woman, the compensation is 60 cows, for a married woman, 40 cows etc. (Pkayla et al., 2004: 49). Among the Issa clan, killing another Issa for whatever reason, even in self-defense, requires the killer to pay 100 female camels to the family of the deceased (Bouh & Mammo, 2008: 118). Even among groups in which there is no established penalty for specific crimes, knowing that a serious penalty will be imposed serves as a significant deterrent for interpersonal crimes (Pkayla et al., 2004: 24).

Among the Somali, social norms combine with collective responsibility for compensation to create an especially strong deterrent.   Menkhaus (2000: 185) describes the "*diya*-paying group" which consists of several hundred to several thousand "close relatives" who are bound to "collectively pay or receive blood compensation, or *diya*, if one of their members commits or is a victim of a crime". Among the Pokot of Kenya and Uganda, collective compensation for an individual's crime, known as *lapay,* allows the family and clan members of the deceased to take all the property not only of the murderer but also of his clansmen (Pkayla et al., 2004: 31,2). Because the clansmen carry the collective cost of compensation, peer pressure to abide by the social norms is high and serves as a significant deterrent for interpersonal conflict or crime.   Western communities may use the threat of imprisonment or fines as a means of deterrence, but individualistic values require that only the person committing the crime be required to pay the penalty precluding the potential benefits of socially enforced deterrence.

Another form of deterrence common to many groups involves witchcraft. Pkalya, Adan & Masinde (2004), describe *muma*, an act of witchcraft performed if no one confesses to a theft within a Pokot community. *Muma* involves a steer being ceremonially killed. After the meat is roasted and eaten, the remains, including bones and skin, are burned and then buried or thrown into a river. The Pokot believe that, after a time, the members of the thief's family will start dying one by one. Then the family members will call for a *kokwo* (council of elders) and will plead to be allowed to pay back whatever was reported stolen. The Pokot claim that, after a cleansing ritual is performed, the deaths will stop. Among many groups witchcraft corresponds with a belief that the gods will be displeased by a lack of harmony and will punish the community. This belief alone serves as a significant deterrent to interpersonal conflict.

2.2.2 Process

Respect for social harmony and fear of consequences are effective in preventing some forms of interpersonal conflict, but when conflict does arise, there is a surprisingly consistent   process for managing it. The literature concerning IPCM in traditional African communities describes four characteristics inherent to the conflict management process: (1) consensus concerning the mediating authorities, (2) an open meeting where everyone is heard, (3) compensation for the loss created by the conflict and (4) a cleansing ritual which serves to integrate the errant member back into the community.

First, the literature confirms that there is usually a shared understanding within African communities concerning who is qualified and trusted to arbitrate an interpersonal dispute. The authorities differ depending on the level of the dispute. Interpersonal conflicts within the family (between co-wives, between the couple, etc.) are often managed within the family or extended family. Interpersonal conflicts between families within the same living community may be arbitrated by neighbors. In tribes where Gada age-sets[v] are common, members of the age set may mediate the dispute. For higher level conflicts, the male elders of the community are assumed to be the arbitrating authorities. Although the specific authority may differ in different circumstances, what is striking is the universal acceptance of a mutually agreed upon authority.

The elders in a community are the most common authority for African interpersonal dispute resolution. Under most circumstances, a council of elders will be made up of "respected, wise old men who are knowledgeable in community affairs and history" (Pkalya, Adan, & Masinde, 2004, p. 48). The groups of men who gather to hear disputes are known by different names such as the "Kokwo" among the Pokot or the "Tree of Men" among the Turkana. In rare cases, the elders may be chosen. For example, Tuso (2000) describes a murder case among the Oromo of Somalia where two elders were chosen from the family of the killer, two from the family of the deceased and two from the Gada age-grade institution.

One thing that distinguishes elders is a reputation, earned over a lifetime, as "effective negotiators, trusted mediators, moving orators, or wise and pious men" (Menkhaus, 2000, p. 186).   The key concept, as Faure (2000) explains it, is that "the elders have a status, based on age and experience equated with wisdom, that provides them with enough authority to be the final decision makers in a conflict solved through arbitration" (p. 157).

Two key aspects of authority are noted by Zartman (2000). First, in traditional African practice, the authority figure virtually never acts alone, but always makes decisions as part of a council of elders, a group of neighbors etc. This contrasts with western IPCM in which individuals often serve as arbitrators. Second, the elders' authority derives from a network of relationships in which people have participated since childhood. As Zartman (2000) puts it "African traditional conflict management techniques depend to a large extent on the existence of a community of relationships . . . that provide the context for their operations" (p. 224). Traditional African IPCM functions well because there is agreement within the community concerning who has the authority to arbitrate interpersonal disputes.   While western communities may have formally appointed judges, they do not usually have consensus among the informal community of people close at hand as to which individuals or small group are qualified to arbitrate an interpersonal dispute.

A second aspect of traditional African IPCM is an open meeting where all community members have the opportunity to present their perspectives on the conflict situation. Pkayla et al., (2004) describe this meeting as a process of "consensus building based on open discussions to exchange information and clarify issues" (p 4).

Among the Somali, traditional clan assemblies known as *shir* are lengthy and open to the public (Menkhaus, 2000). All present are given the opportunity to express their views, resulting in a consensus that leads to agreements with significant binding power and legitimacy. All of the articles addressing traditional African IPCM processes consistently described meetings that were open to the entire community with the single exception of Tuso (2000) who described elders meeting separately with conflicting parties. As Jabs (2010) notes, one of the key functions of open meetings is to allow the truth, an essential component of interpersonal dispute resolution, to emerge.

Compensation for loss caused by the interpersonal conflict is the third key element of a traditional African IPCM process. In addition to serving as a powerful deterrent to interpersonal conflict, as described above, compensation is an important part of conflict resolution as discussed by most of the authors addressing traditional African IPCM. When one party is at fault in a conflict, compensation serves primarily as a means of justice, allowing the errant community member to right the wrong so he or she can be forgiven and welcomed back as a full member of the community. This differs from western cultures in which a fine imposed after a crime is regarded as punishment and, perhaps deterrence. Zartman (2000) describes the African approach succinctly:

In the African mediations, the sentence is nested within an integrative set of payoffs concerning the reinsertion of the offender back into the community and its values. Justice is very much part of the exercise, but as a compensation for loss, not as a retribution for offense. (p. 221,2)

Faure (2000) also notes the contrast between Africa and the west, observing that in Africa "restitution is necessary to restore harmony, whereas in the Western world, punishment remains the prevailing concept" (p. 159). Jabs (2010) and Pkalya, Adan, & Masinde (2004) point out that compensation is significant even when it is more symbolic than material because it shows participants that justice has been served. Without perceived payment for past wrongs, it is difficult for community to be restored.

Finally, a fourth aspect of traditional African IPCM is a ritual that follows pronouncement of the verdict and restitution to the wronged party.

Most authors discussing traditional African IPCM described some sort of a cleansing ritual to bring closure to the interpersonal conflict. These rituals varied significantly from sharing a meal (Nwoye, 2006) to smearing the contents of a goat's intestines on a guilty party (Pkalya, Adan, & Masinde, 2004). The purpose of the ritual, however, was consistent. It served both to indicate an end to the conflict process and to indicate a restoration and reintegration of the individual into the community. In addition, as Faure (2000) points out, "ritual affirmation is a symbolic action to ensure that everyone shares what has been decided" (p. 160). The ritual serves as punctuation, marking both the end of the conflict and the ratification of the agreement.

2.2.3 Purpose

As this discussion of process suggests, traditional African IPCM has a definite purpose: restoring the errant party as a fully functioning, forgiven member of the community. This goal reinforces the value of social harmony within the group. Just as children are socialized to value the harmony of the group, the traditional African IPCM process works to restore that harmony to the group.

This principle differs significantly from a western approach to interpersonal conflict where the goal is to determine who is right and to enforce that person's rights regardless of the impact on interpersonal relationships. As early as the 1950s, Elias (1956) noted this distinction between the traditional African legal system and the European system. He observed that the goal of a European court was to hand out a judgment that enforced the legal rights of one party without concern about how the judgment would impact social equilibrium. In contrast, the African legal system worked toward "an agreement intended to restore and preserve the social balance" (Elias 1956, p. 268). See Table 2 for a summary of traditional African IPCM.

2.3 Worldviews and Practices Related to Traditional African IPCM

Some articles considered in this review focused specifically on African worldviews or practices which support traditional African IPCM. Several authors have written in depth about "Ubuntu" of South Africa, "reaching out" of Sudan and the use of proverbial dog names to indirectly address conflict, all practices that affirm traditional African IPCM.

Ubuntu, a philosophy of life common to tribes in South Africa, is not easily translated. Masina (2000) states that it literally means "collective personhood" or the "art or virtue of being human" (p. 170).   Basic characteristics of ubuntu include "caring, compassion, unity, tolerance, respect, closeness, generosity, genuineness, empathy, consultation, compromise, and hospitality". Mbigi (1995) says ubuntu is "an expression of our collective personhood, and invokes images of group support, acceptance, co-operation, care, sharing and solidarity" (p. 57).   Ubuntu is a specific and highly developed form of the social harmony which characterizes traditional African IPCM.

As a way of life, ubuntu, functions both as a conflict prevention mechanism and a conflict resolution process. Breaking ubuntu incurs sanctions that vary from fines to isolation. These penalties are rarely necessary, however, because family and social bonds are taught and communicated from the time a child is born and, as a result, ubuntu is rarely breached. When conflict does occur, it is more quickly resolved because of the ubuntu belief that one can be a person only through others. This idea is expressed succinctly in the Nguni proverb "I am because we are" (Masina, 2000, p. 170). Ubuntu emphasizes working together to solve problems, so members of the community are responsive to the idea of cooperating with extended family, elders, chiefs and headmen to work through concerns in a way that results in the reconciliation of all members of the community.   As described by Masina (2000), ubuntu condenses all aspects of traditional African IPCM--prevention, process and purpose--into one term.

A second practice consistent with traditional African IPCM is the Dinka understanding of "reaching out" that is observed in Sudan (Deng, 2000).   In "reaching out," leaders deliberately take the perspective of the person who is farthest away from them or least like them when they listen to and adjudicate conflicts. For example, if the conflict is between a relative and a stranger, the leader will look for ways to favor the stranger and emphasize the wrong of the relative. This approach has benefits for both sides. First, the indignation of the wronged person is mitigated when the judge sides with them at the expense of the judge's relative. Second, by condemning the relative, the judge actually serves the relative because that attitude often encourages the court to rule in their favor.

Deng (2000) explains this counter-intuitive effect: "Reaching out is intended as a bridging function that benefits not only the more distant party, but in fact is intended primarily as a means of protecting the party closest to the leader" (p. 96). By "reaching out," Dinka leaders are able to resolve interpersonal disputes and also gain the favor of non-Dinka individuals which results in future benefits for the Dinka.

Third, proverbial dog naming, a practice found in Ghana and Benin, is also consistent with traditional African interpersonal conflict management. Obeng (1999) describes how people embroiled in a dispute will buy a dog and name it in response to a conflict situation. Then, when the other party to the conflict is around, the person can address the dog by name and indirectly say things that would certainly cause conflict if spoken directly.

As Obeng (1999) explains it, one reason for keeping a pet among the Akan of Ghana is "to create a communicative situation in which the 'unspeakable' may be spoken" (p. 86). The title of his article, "In future if I buy a dog, I"ll call it 'Okyeman-is-ungrateful,'" describes a situation in which someone feels Okyeman behaved poorly. Various social norms prevent the speaker from directly confronting Okyeman, so the speaker buys a dog and names it "Okyeman is ungrateful." Then whenever Okyeman is in earshot, the speaker calls the dog. If Okyeman is offended, the speaker protests that he was simply calling his pet. Schottman (1993) describes a similar practice among the Baatombu in Benin. In each case, the speaker gains a sense of power by being able to speak his/her grievances indirectly. At the same time, by addressing a face threatening act to a pet, the person avoids the potential consequences of direct confrontation[vi]. This fascinating response to interpersonal conflict both derives from and maintains the social harmony that underlies traditional African IPCM.

Only one article described a value and practice that was clearly inconsistent with traditional African IPCM. The Fulbe of Burkina Faso value a man's honor or reputation among his peers, in a way that leads to more interpersonal conflict. According to Lund (1999), the legal system is co-opted by power brokers who manipulate the idea of honor to make money for themselves. When two men dispute over a piece of land, the power broker tells one side that his honor is at stake. The broker has the connections to make sure the legal system decides the case in the man's favor and offers to help for a fee.

If the man agrees, the power broker then goes to the second man and makes the same proposition. In the end, the money spent to enlist the power broker's support far exceeds the value of the property in question. Honor comes, in this case, from getting one's way so the bully who prevails is the one with honor while the person who is bullied is seen as weak. In this situation, desiring the "honor" associated with winning not only prolongs the conflict, but also impels the disputants to persist despite great personal cost.

2.4   Concurrent Systems of Dispute Resolution: Traditional African IPCM and Modern Practices

When Europeans came to Africa to colonize, they brought with them the idea of an impersonal and impartial judge being the appropriate person to resolve disputes. In several parts of Africa today, the government run court of law (modeled after western approaches) is operating simultaneously with traditional African IPCM as two concurrent options for resolving interpersonal disputes. The following section summarizes scholar's work addressing the juxtaposition of traditional methods versus modern western methods to resolve interpersonal differences.

Some scholars hold that the integration of traditional African and modern court methods of interpersonal dispute resolution is not always possible, necessitating a choice between the two approaches. Bennet (1980) recommends using "the interpersonal conflict of laws" (p. 128) approach to determine whether a conflict should be handled by the court system or the traditional African process. If the lifestyle of the disputants is more western and modern, the modern court system, what Bennet (1980) refers to as the "European rule of law" (p. 129) would apply whereas, if the disputants are living a traditional African lifestyle, the case would be handled by customary African practices.

Uwazie (2000) addresses this same choice in more depth, describing four factors that contribute to the decision to resolve disputes using a formal court model (judge or police as arbitrators) versus a traditional African model (village level with elders and family members as arbitrators). According to Uwazie (2000), one key factor is the relationship between the disputing parties.

For example, 98% of the Igbo of Nigeria say they would use traditional conflict resolution practices for a conflict with a family member and only 54% say they would use the traditional system with a stranger. Socioeconomic status of participants is also a factor; Uwazie found that more educated and wealthier people tend to use the courts. Previous experience with courts also influences the decision. Not surprisingly, people who have had favorable experiences with one system tend to turn to it again. Finally, the nature of the dispute may lead people to choose one venue over another or combine them. A land dispute that was resolved through a traditional village IPCM process might be filed with the court so that the court would enforce the decision.

A shift in residence combined with education also seems to contribute to changed attitudes toward conflict resolution. Jabs (2005) documents this change in an article comparing the IPCM process of pre-literate Karamojong living in villages to the dispute resolution process of literate Karamojong living in boarding schools. The conflict resolution process in the villages closely follows traditional African IPCM including open meetings presided over by an arbitrating group with unquestioned authority as well as a process of restitution that reintegrates the party deemed to be in the wrong back into the community. As people moved away from the village and into boarding schools, there was a shift away from traditional African IPCM. Instead of depending upon known third parties such as family members and neighbors, people in boarding schools became comfortable with having disputes resolved by more public, less personal third parties such as members of the local council, administrators, and political leaders. In addition to literacy, Jabs (2005) notes that factors such as living away from well known family members and forming less personal relationships with people of various ethnicities may have contributed to the shift away from traditional African IPCM to more public approaches toward IPCM.

Nwoye (2000a, 2000b, 2005, 2006) believes that it is not only possible, but highly desirable to integrate elements of traditional African IPCM into modern methods of family therapy and counseling. In marriage therapy, for example, each member of the couple has the opportunity to share his/her story with the therapist in full just they would in a traditional meeting held to hear disputes. In addition, Nwoye (2000a) points out that the therapist can take on the role that the elders play in traditional African IPCM. In his practice, Nwoye, abandons the western notion that the therapist must remain neutral and should not "take sides."

Instead, he offers his assessment of who is in the wrong and what needs to change to result in a peaceful relationship. This mirrors the traditional African IPCM process in which the mediator is a trusted friend or family member who is expected to offer advice and pronounce a judgment versus remain a neutral third party who facilitates the process but offers no advice as in western mediation (Davidheiser, 2005). Nwoye (2000) also follows cultural norms in carrying out rituals of reconciliation. For example, Nwoye describes a reconciliation ritual where both members of a couple sip palm wine from a shared cup. Usually, the wife kneels before her husband to present the wine, indicating a deferential attitude toward him in keeping with traditional role relationships. Nwoye (2006) encourages the practice of articulating how traditional African methods of interpersonal conflict management may be incorporated into family therapy so that western practitioners might be more culturally sensitive and appropriate when working with Africans.

3. Conclusion

The present article has attempted to collect and summarize literature that advances the understanding of a traditional African approach to IPCM and to frame that understanding within the literature addressing interpersonal conflict in Africa. A systematic examination of what has been studied to date provides a foundation for continued exploration of IPCM and conflict resolution in Africa and elsewhere. The article also provides what Avruch and Black (1991) refer to as a "thicker" conception of culture and conflict resolution by summarizing traditional "common sense" about IPCM in Africa.

The current literature reveals a consistent pattern of traditional African IPCM that is practiced in villages all over the African continent. The consistent pattern is grounded in purpose: conflict can truly be resolved only when errant members of the community are integrated back into the community. The pattern also includes prevention of interpersonal conflict through various forms of deterrence and an emphasis on social harmony that begins in childhood. The heart of the pattern is a process that involves four elements: 1) an agreed upon authority has the power to arbitrate disputes through 2) open meetings where the truth comes out and 3) restitution is seen followed by 4) a cleansing ritual that signifies full reconciliation.

These IPCM procedures are highly effective, yet there seems to be consensus that traditional African IPCM is practiced less as people move away from the villages and toward urban centers.

This trend suggests opportunities for future research. First, there is an urgent need to document traditional African IPCM practices. The literature included in this review is a start but some gaps remain. As Faure (2000) puts it "there lies a whole human heritage of empirical know-how that should be collected before it vanishes and its memory fades" (p. 153). Second, research should investigate how traditional practices of IPCM can be applied effectively in modern settings. Nwoye's efforts in the area of family therapy point the way for this type of research. What other fields might benefit from integrating methods of traditional African IPCM?

Finally, the traditional African commitment to resolve conflict by reintegrating errant community members back into the community requires serious investigation. The western practice of isolating errant members to punish them for their contribution to conflict often seems to create as many problems as it solves. The idea of restoring the social fabric through restitution and reconciliation is a powerful approach to conflict resolution that deserves more attention from scholars.

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[i] It is worth noting that much of the earliest data on interpersonal conflict was collected by anthropologists. For example, Tuden (1966) describes leadership among the Ila and Swat Pathans of

Zambia and Dyson-Hudson (1966) explores politics among the Karamojong of Uganda. In these cases, interpersonal conflict is sometimes mentioned and briefly described, but it is rarely discussed in depth. The exception has been anthropologists focusing on law or court systems in various African countries. For example, Bohannan"s Justice and Judgment among the Tiv, first published in 1957 and based on data collected between 1949 and 1952, describes the legal system of the Tiv including interpersonal disputes between spouses as well as conflicts between neighbors over land. Bohannan"s interest is really the court system versus the conflict resolution process, but he describes numerous examples of the resolution process. Likewise, Gluckman (1955) describes the court and judicial system of the Bartose of Northern Rhodesia (currently Zimbabwe) and, in the process, reports on many interpersonal disputes as they are brought to the courts of law. Epstein (1967), Holleman (1974) and Turner (1966) have also contributed relevant works. In the 1980"s, much of the research seems to have shifted away from anthropological and historical treatises describing whole people groups and their way of life toward individual articles addressing various topics including interpersonal conflict.

[ii] In many articles, interpersonal conflict was a byproduct of other problems such as inequality (Pfeiffer, 2002), uncertainty resulting from unemployment (Kaye, Mirembe, Ekstrom, Bantebya & Johansson, 2005), scarcity of land (Peters, 2002; Rose, 1992), etc. Articles which focused primarily on the issue of interest without describing the process or resolution of interpersonal conflict were excluded. Regrettably, this choice meant excluding articles from Oppong"s (1983), "Female and Male in West Africa." Several fascinating articles in this work (Abu, 1983; Hagan, 1983; Okali, 1983; Vellenga, 1983; Vercruijsse, 1983) indirectly address interpersonal conflict in Ghana. Because these articles primarily focus on the relationship between men and women, there was not enough information on the conflict resolution process to include them in the current literature review.

[iii] Not all of these articles are cited in the manuscript because some of them, on closer inspection, dealt more with intergroup or interethnic conflict than with interpersonal conflict. Others did not contain detailed information on the conflict resolution process.

[iv] Of the articles that did not address traditional African interpersonal conflict management, a few used survey type instruments to assess interpersonal conflict issues in Nigerian libraries (Adomi, 2006; Olorunsola, 1997). Another (Madhavan, 2001) considered the impact of cooperative (Bamanan tribe) versus conflictual (Fulbe tribe) relationships among women on the survival rate of children. Madhavan found, to his surprise, that the conflicting relationships among the Fulbe produced greater survival rates than the cooperative relationships of the Bamanan. One article (Greef & de Gruyne, 2000) employed Western methods to investigate conflict management style on the marital satisfaction of African couples in Stellenbosch, South Africa. They found that marital satisfaction seemed to be greatest among couples who use a collaborative style: marital satisfaction was also found to be higher among couples that used the same style (both husband and wife used a collaborative style or both husband and wife used a compromising style). Another study in South Africa used a technique referred to as "ethnosemantic domain definition" to map community beliefs about interpersonal conflict in a black township outside of Johannesburg. McCall et al. (1997) view their mapping of who disputes about what in which contexts as a framework for making comparisons between communities.

[v] In the Gada age-grade system, all males are grouped along two sets of five categories. The first set designates a chronological age with specific activities related to each different age. For example, the first age-grade is called the Iti Maka grade and the duties include looking after livestock and running errands. After 8 years in this grade, the men will move to the next age-grade, Daballe, where they will be responsible for herding, caring for livestock and looking for new trade opportunities. When the father graduates the last age grade, then all of his sons will enter the first age grade together. The second set designates something similar to a political party called gogessa. The father and all of his sons will belong to the same gogessa. Each age-set forms a cohesive unit and members respect the group as an authority in reconciling interpersonal disputes. See Edossa et al. (2005) and Tuso (2000) for more information.

vi Another example of an indirect conflict response is singing one"s complaints in Zimbabwe. If, for example, a daughter in law is frustrated by her mother in law, she can compose and sing a song about how irritating a mother in law can be. Because singing is a common activity, in most cases, the content of the song will not be questioned. Should her mother in law or others hear and question her, she can reply that she was simply singing and no offense should be taken (Nyaradzo Mvududu, personal communication, 4 October 2010). livestock and running errands. After 8 years in this grade, the men will move to the next age-grade, Daballe, where they will be responsible for herding, caring for livestock and looking for new trade opportunities. When the father graduates the last age grade, then all of his sons will enter the first age grade together. The second set designates something similar to a political party called gogessa. The father and all of his sons will belong to the same gogessa. Each age-set forms a cohesive unit and members respect the group as an authority in reconciling interpersonal disputes. See Edossa et al. (2005) and Tuso (2000) for more information.

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