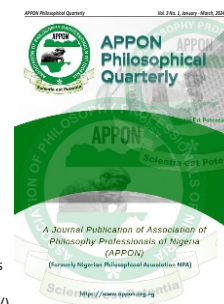


**LANGUAGE AND CONFLICT PREVENTION
MECHANISMS IN TRADITIONAL YORUBA
PRAGMATIC ETHICS**



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Abstract

Language plays a crucial role in conflict scenarios and peace processes all over the world. The use of language is both functional and dysfunctional in all social contexts. Language is therefore a double-edged sword and its ambivalence nature is reflected in its capacity and usage to either cause/prevent conflict or restore/maintain peace. This paper adopted critical-analytical method to examine the dynamic role of language in the promotion of peace through conflict prevention strategies among the indigenous Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria. The article assessed the interconnectivity between language and the perception of conflict as a reality in the light of Sapir-Whorf relativity hypothesis. It further explored the value-laden mechanisms for conflict prevention, which is dependent on the mastery of indigenous language, and hinged it on the pre-eminence of the Yoruba ethical concept of *iwa re-re* (*good character*) that exudes other moral values for virtuous living, conflict prevention and social harmony in Yoruba religio-philosophical thoughts. The article concluded that there is an urgent need for cultural renaissance and revitalization of our ethical values for possible experience and enjoyment of pre-colonial social order in morally chaotic contemporary Yoruba societies.

Keywords: Conflict, Conflict Prevention, Ethics, Language, Pragmatism.

Introduction

Language as a social phenomenon is a distinctive feature and indispensable possession of humankind. This is because there is no society, regardless of the crudeness of its civilization, which lacks the fundamental human legacy of a meaningful language that is often described as a truly symbolic channel of communication.¹ Among humans, the most potent means of passing messages that can be decoded across to others in the course of daily activities, interactions and dealings is language.² However, poor communication between parties or groups arising from sloppy usage of language has frequently resulted to relationship breakdown, conflicts and violent hostilities among humans in different climes.³ The fact that language is a double edged sword in Yoruba philosophical thought led to the aphorism: “*oro lon yo obi lapo, oro naa nlo yo ida ninu apo*”, which means that appropriate use of language is a catalyst for promoting peace while most of the conflicts between individuals or groups arise from the misuse of language.

The indigenous language of a people represents a vital depository of their rationality and sound judgments. Other components of symbolic meaning that distinguish societies include religious

systems, cultural beliefs, and nonverbal behaviour. Part of the most crucial socio-cultural practices in a community is conflict prevention and management. This is because the quest for survival, socio-political stability and development of any given society lies in the ability to manage dissension and preclude violence. Hence, the issues of conflict prevention, management and resolution have attracted scholars across the globe and currently occupied a prominent place in both local and international discourses. The reality that language forms a society's collective stockpile of meaning is a justification for the position that the study of language is capable of providing an effective gateway for a comprehensive examination of the perception of a group of people as regards the concept of conflict and how to prevent or manage it whenever it arises.⁴

Although some renowned linguists attempted to define the concept of language⁵, Elugbe, like many other scholars, upholds that the concept of *language* defies a single and comprehensive definition that attracts no criticism.⁶ Nevertheless, language can be regarded as a medium of communication and as a speech type that is equally incomprehensible with another speech type.⁷ According to Gamble and Gamble⁸, language is a cohesive system of

¹ J. H. Greenberg, “Language, Culture and Communication.” J. H. Greenberg, *Essays* (Stanford University Press, 1971).

² G. Ekeh, “Language Implication for Peace or War: How the Use of Language Led to War between Umuaro and Okperi in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* in the Light of Ludwig Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language.” *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*. 9, Issue 4, (2020), 101.

³ N. P. Swanstrom and M. S. Weissmann. *Conflict, Conflict Prevention, Conflict Management and Beyond: A Conceptual Exploration*, A Publication of Central Asian Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Studies Programme, (2005).

⁴ R. Cohen, “Language and Conflict Resolution: The Limits of English.” *International Studies Review* 3, vol.1, (2001), 25-51.

⁵ N. Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1957); R. A. Hall, *An Essay on Language* (New York: Chilton Books, 1968); V. Fromkin and R. Rodman, *An Introduction to Language*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974); R. A. Robin, *General Linguistics: An Introduction* (London: Longman, 1964).

⁶ B. Elugbe, “Language and Culture.” In Lloyd Thompson, et al., eds., *Culture and Civilization* (Ibadan: Afrika-Link Books, 1991).

⁷ A. U. Iwara, The Linguistic Situation in Nigeria and its Implications for Sustainable Development, *An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Ibadan*, (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 2008).

⁸ T. K. Gamble and M. Gamble, *Communication Works* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

symbols traditionally accepted by a group of people for meaning sharing. It is essentially an agreed system of communication primarily intended to either transmit and receive information or conceal it. However, the linguistic meaning of language in this context is referring absolutely to human language, which is different from other varieties of language that can only convey meaning in a restricted sense.⁹

The crucial role of verbal communication in interpersonal relationships in any human society made language to be referred to as a cohesive system of symbols typically accepted by a group of people to allow a sharing of meaning. Human languages are dynamic because they are capable of considerable extension and modification in accordance with the varying needs and circumstances of the users.¹⁰ However, the utilization of language by people both as an open vehicle for ideas and as a hidden expression of membership and identity has visibly shown its significant roles in occurrences of human conflicts.¹¹ In traditional African societies, the power of oration through a skilful employment of verbal arts is essential in achieving peaceful co-existence, as it imbues elders with clarity of vision and conviction as well as courage for persuasion in the process of conflict prevention and resolution.¹² Although most linguists concur that language is human beings' most effective and most persuasive means of communication, it is generally acceptable

that language is important to the actualization of a people's culture. Therefore, the quest for identification and in-depth understanding of a people's cultural beliefs and ethical values require a good knowledge of their language.¹³ It is to be noted that the modern global society is experiencing a multicultural growth and the perception of issues with different cultural lenses may sometimes degenerate to conflicts, which can pose a serious threat to peaceful co-existence. Hence, an appropriate use of language is pivotal for an effective promotion of mutual understanding and exchange of ideas in the universe of cultural and ethnic diversity with a view to achieving peaceful and secure world for the accomplishment of human advancement.¹⁴

Language and Perception of Conflict as a Reality: The Relevance of Sapir-Whorf Relativity Hypothesis

A critical analysis of the interconnectivity between language and the perception of reality (such as conflict and peace) necessitates a reflection on the relativity hypothesis advocated by Sapir Edward and Whorf Benjamin Lee.¹⁵ This school of thought maintains that language shapes our cognitive structure and therefore significantly influences our perception of reality.¹⁶ That is, language determines an individual's thought and how he or she sees the world.¹⁷ It is noteworthy that perception has been regarded as a crucial factor in conflict situations because it contributes

⁹ Iwara, 'The Linguistic Situation'.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ A. C. Cargile, H. Giles, and R. Clement, *Language, Conflict and Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory*, 1995 https://www.academia.edu/21621310/language_conflict_and_ethnolinguistic_identity_theory.

¹² O. B. Olaoba, *An Introduction to African Legal Culture* (Ibadan: Hope Publishers Limited, 2002)

¹³ N. Oladeji, Proverbs as Language Signposts in Yoruba Pragmatic Ethics. *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy. Special Issue: Ethics and African Societies*. vol. 1 no 2, 1990.

¹⁴ I. O. Oloyede, *Cultural Pluralism as a Challenge to Effectiveness of University Education in Fostering the Culture of Dialogue and Understanding* (Lebanon: Notre Dame University, 1999).

¹⁵ E. Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York: 1921).

¹⁶ J. B. Carroll, "Language, Thought and Reality." *Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, (New York: MIT and John Wiley and Sons, 1956).

¹⁷ M. B. Frothingham, Simply Psychology: *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis)*, 2023, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/sapir-whorf-hypothesis.html>.

considerably to conflict progression and dynamics.¹⁸ The theory posits that man's perception of reality is determined by language, which means that the universe is a linguistic construct. In other words, the hypothesis emphasizes the dominance of language in human perception and expression of reality. The duo avowed that language is the driving force of culture because virtually every part of a cultural system is influenced by language.¹⁹

However, the critique of this hypothesis shows that there are components of culture that are not dependent on language despite its influence on them. Some of the primary symbols of culture such as dance, art, miming, ritual and some religious practices are independent of language. The argument is that culture is not only wider than language but also influences it. Besides, the fact that an individual's linguistic expressions could be modelled in accordance with his or her traditional societal norms and belief systems debunks the idea that being acquainted with language will structure an individual's worldview. It is only at the point that the acculturated person is stimulated to study and understand the language to the extent that he or she utilizes it as a guide to reality that language may seem to be a determining factor. Nevertheless, it is not apt to posit that language is above and controls the culture in which the language is just a component.²⁰

In defence of this thesis, its advocates counter argued that language is essential in

order to convey complex ideas without any misinterpretation, and that every part of culture is influenced by language because the major medium or instrument of expressing socio-cultural beliefs is language. They therefore conclude that since language is an indispensable cultural instrument that differentiates human beings from animals and is employed to express the difference between groups of people, then language has the capacity to influence the perception of reality.²¹ This insight probably stimulated some philosophers of language and ethno-linguists to argue for the explorative and utilitarian use of language with a view to achieving a viable social relationship that will ultimately leads to societal peace and development.²²

Although the relativity hypothesis that emphasizes the pervading influence of language in all human experience has been seriously challenged, it is pertinent to uphold that language, thought expression and experience are interconnected in a way that the distinctive attributes of language play out in the process and expression of thought and experience from time to time.²³ Hence, language and thought are inevitably connected in the sense that language occupies a very significant position in thinking process and thought expression as difficult ideas cannot be articulated without the channels of verbal and written speech. Since there is a significant relationship between language, thought and reality of human experiences, and the perception of

¹⁸ T. Olaifa, B. Sotiloye, I. I. Dare, "Management of Ethno-Linguistic Conflict: A Comparative Analysis of Belgian and Nigerian Models." *Journal of Humanities, Social Science and Creative Arts* 12, (2017), 13-27.

¹⁹ P. C. Gregory, "The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: Examples, Definition, Criticisms." 2023 <https://helpfulprofessor.com/sapir-whorf-hypothesis-examples/>

²⁰ A. U. Iwara, "The Linguistic Situation in Nigeria and its Implication on Sustainable Development." *An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Ibadan*, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 2008).

²¹ Ibid.

²² A. Ogunsiji, "Utilitarian Dimension of Language in Nigeria." In Herbert Igboanusi, ed., *Language Attitude and Language Conflict in West Africa* (Ibadan: University Press, 2001); A. J. Ademowo, and N. O. Balogun, "Proverbs and Conflict Management in Africa: A Study of Selected Yoruba Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions." *International Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics* 1 (1), (2014), 39-44.

²³ Iwara, 'The Linguistic Situation'.

conflict as well as its dynamics is a reality of human experience, it means that language has an essential role to play in the prevention and management of conflicts or maintenance of peace between individuals and different linguistic communities.²⁴

Language and Conflict Prevention among the Yoruba

The importance of establishing a linkage between language and conflict prevention strategies in Africa rests on the belief that the notion of communalism encourages a strong interpersonal relationship, which is based on communication principles and conventions among the inhabitants of a community.²⁵ Conflict prevention emphasizes the importance of internalization of values, good conduct and communication skills, which are functional fulcrums of social engineering that enhances peace, harmony and order in African societies. Conflict prevention is a collective responsibility because it promotes mutual relationship through appropriate use of language, which is the matrix of articulating African cultural values.²⁶

In the pre-colonial period, the Yoruba people of south-western Nigeria esteemed peace and their mechanisms of social control and conflict prevention hinged on oral traditions. That is, they derived their sources of conflict prevention from the astuteness and conventional knowledge of their ancestors.²⁷ They constantly made use of language phenomena such as songs,

poems, puns, simile, metaphors and proverbs to indicate their beliefs and verdicts on ethical issues. They condemned whatever was considered as unethical and what was taken to be an ethical behaviour was usually eulogized and recommended verbally for the acceptance and adoption by all and sundry.²⁸ Among the Yoruba, the pervading influence of the supernatural often prevented many conflicts as there was a belief in the Supreme God (*Olodumare*) being regarded as the most powerful. There were also lesser gods (*Orisas*) who had the power of punishment and reward. This belief made them to have solace in the maxim "*Fija folorun ja ko fowo leran*" (let God fight for you; don't attempt to avenge yourself). Yoruba people were guided by the consciousness that every action, either good or bad, attracts inevitable consequences. This awareness assisted them in the sustenance of peaceful relationships and deterred them from engaging in activities that may result in the breach of peace and thereby offending the gods.²⁹

Among the Yoruba, the existence of social institutions of conflict resolution/prevention, which included family, palace, market, secret societies, age grades and professional associations (such as the guild of hunters), were germane to conflict prevention in traditional African societies and were seen as machineries to pre-empt conflict and douse tension. These institutions consisted of mature, wise, knowledgeable and just individuals who

²⁴ A. U. Iwara, "Language and Communication in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building." In I. O. Albert, ed., *Perspective in Peace and Conflict in Africa* (Ibadan: John Archers Publishers Ltd, 2005).

²⁵ R. L. Nwanfo Nwanko and C. G. Nzelibe, "Communication and Conflict Management." *African Development. Journal of Black Studies*, 20 (3), (1990), 253-266.

²⁶ O. B. Olaoba, *An Introduction to African Legal Culture*, (Ibadan: Hope Publishers Limited, 2002).

²⁷ N. Yusuf and R. Shittu, "African Traditional Religion, Conflict Resolution and Peaceful Societal Co-existence." In I. S. Aderibigbe and T. Falola, eds, *The Palgrave Handbook of African Traditional Religion* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

²⁸ N. Oladeji, "Proverbs as Language Signposts in Yoruba Pragmatic Ethics." *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy. Special Issue: Ethics and African Societies*, vol. 1, no 2, (1990).

²⁹ N. Olarinde, "Traditional Beliefs and Practices in the Sustenance of Peace." In I.O. Albert and I.O. Oloyede, eds., *Dynamics of Peace Processes*, (Ilorin: Publication of Centre for Peace and Strategies Studies, University of Ilorin, (2010), 301-312.

were very good at handling conflicts or dissonance arising from interpersonal, intra or inter group relationships, by employing indigenous ethical principles and laid down procedures for peaceful settlement. These oral principles and traditions were transmitted from one generation to another in the pre-colonial period. One of the major obligations of the institutions was to prevent conflict and violence in the society not only for the avoidance of breakdown of relationships but also for the safety of lives and material goods.³⁰

The elders in the traditional Yoruba societies were the force behind social order and decorum through their maturity, mental alertness, wisdom, objectivity and truthfulness, patience and endurance, which helped them in any discourse meant for the prevention or resolution of conflicts. The Yoruba believed that intelligence and intellectualism were associated with adept use of verbal arts and the power of remembrance. The traditions were committed to memory and transmitted verbally from generation to generation as a simple process of preserving and promoting their cultural heritage.³¹ The Yoruba elders adopted and invested heavily in preventive diplomacy in order to forestall minor disagreements that could escalate into vicious conflicts.³² The concept of proverb is possibly the most widely used of language phenomena among the Yoruba for judicial proceedings.³³ Language is therefore considered as an indication of a pragmatic

approach to issues, concepts and ideas that the Yoruba people encountered in their daily lives.³⁴ The Yoruba were good at handling conflicts in a well-coordinated and non-violent way through effective communication. This is because of their understanding that what someone says or fails to say matters a lot in conflict situation.³⁵ Other cultural values expressed through language and communication include; love, humility, honesty, fulfilment of covenant, contentment, tolerance, forgiveness, respect, cooperation and self-control.³⁶

Although the traditional Yoruba people devised unwritten rules and regulations for harmonious living and maintenance of social equilibrium and violation of these rules attracts sanctions, conflict was not totally preventable owing to its intrinsic nature of inevitability in human social milieu as often exemplified by the *tongue-and-mouth* discord in Yoruba thought.³⁷ Besides, the existence of supernatural forces controlling the physical world (e.g. witches, wizards and sorcerers) and the presence of magicians and medicine men testing the potency of their charms justify its unavoidability. However, the innate human power of discernment (*ifunra*) and the recognition of and taking appropriate action regarding early warning signs through prompt consultation of traditional priests used to help in preventing conflicts that could emanate from the supernatural forces by strict compliance to specified sacrifices

³⁰ M. Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959).

³¹ O. B. Olaoba, *Sourcing Data for the Reconstructing of Yoruba Legal Tradition* (Ibadan: Cannan Publishing Company, 2001).

³² I. O. Albert, *Mainstreaming Positive Leadership in Conflict Transformation in Nigeria*. (Lagos: Centre for Social Science Research and Development, 2003).

³³ W. A. Oyedokun-Alli, A Jurilinguistic Analysis of Proverbs as a Concept of Justice among the Yoruba. *Journal of Language, Teaching and Research*. vol. 12, no 8, 2021.

³⁴ Oladeji, 'Proverbs'

³⁵ Albert, 'Mainstreaming'

³⁶ J. K. Ayantayo, "Ethics of the Interreligious Dialogue" *Dynamics of Peace Process*, eds., I.O. Albert and I.O. Oloyede (Ilorin: Publication of Centre for Peace and Strategies Studies, University of Ilorin, 2010) 75-86.

³⁷ K. A. Bakare, Conflict and Conflict Management in Nigerian Universities: A Study of Roger Makanjuola's 'Water Must Flow Uphill: Adventure in University Administration. *European Journal of Education Studies*. vol. 8, Issue 6, 2021.

of appeasement as revealed and communicated by *ifa* oracle.

Mechanisms for Conflict Prevention in Pre-Colonial Yoruba Society

The channels or mechanisms of preventing conflict in traditional Yoruba communities were value-laden. These values were conveyed orally with indigenous language. The art of storytelling, value orientation and peace education were very important features of conflict prevention in Yoruba communities. A very diverse traditional art of storytelling may be in form of *oriki* (panegyrics), *alo* (folktales) *itan* (story or history) and *aroba* (recollections). Besides, someone who was versed in the traditional culture could easily pacify an angry man or woman through the recitation of his or her *oriki*. This practice relied solely on language for its possibility and efficacy.³⁸

Oral traditions were the cultural mechanisms that were not only instrumental to conflict prevention among communities but also serve as language-based means of preserving and transmitting fragments of ancestral philosophical reflections, ideas and worldview instrumental to conflict prevention. These channels were wise saying, proverbs, legends, myths, storytelling, maxims, religious doctrines and practices, praise poems, witty remarks and eulogy.³⁹ The Yoruba were known for having an almost mystical belief in the power of the spoken word, a belief illustrated by their popular proverb “*ejo laa nko, a i ko 'ja*” (it is more worthwhile to learn how to state your case well, than to

learn how to fight).⁴⁰ Some other traditional strategies for preventing conflict and preserving peace which cannot be possible and efficacious without the use of language include; art of diplomacy, traditional etiquette, oath taking (*ibura*) and covenant (*adehun*), early warning signs, apology, art of persuasion and presentation of gifts.

In Yoruba communities, the language-based informal peace education was a deliberate way by which elders inculcate peace values to the future generation. Peace education is the conscious effort to ensure that every member of the communities is acquainted with the dynamics of conflict and peace initiatives within the families, in the communities and among peers through socialization means.⁴¹ Hence, conflict prevention presupposes good use of language by the people as the idea of conflict prevention or resolution is highly depended on the mastery of language in Yoruba traditional culture. This is evident in the saying “*bi a ba ran ni nise eru a fi t'omo je*” (if you are asked to deliver a message with the crudity of a slave, you ought to refine it for delivery like a virtuous child).

The pragmatism in Yoruba ethics is viewed in the context of Yoruba cultural, political and social history. The record of Yoruba history shows that they fought wars with external enemies, engaged in civil wars or fought each other politically or economically.⁴² The placing of this situation on a culture that is polygamous, group based and communal in nature made Yoruba society to develop strategies to prevent conflict as much as possible. The reality of a

³⁸ N. Olarinde, “Traditional Beliefs and Practices in the Sustenance of Peace.” In I.O. Albert and I.O. Oloyede, eds., *Dynamics of Peace Processes* (Ilorin: Publication of Centre for Peace and Strategies Studies, University of Ilorin, 2010), 301-312.

³⁹ O. B. Olaoba, *An Introduction to African Legal Culture* (Ibadan: Hope Publishers Limited, 2002).

⁴⁰ N. Oladeji, “Proverbs as Language Signposts in Yoruba Pragmatic Ethics.” *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy. Special Issue: Ethics and African Societies*, vol. 1, no 2, (1990).

⁴¹ B. Ayodele, “Curriculumising Peace Education as a Strategy for Conflict Management in Africa.” I.O. Albert and I.O. Oloyede, eds., *Dynamics of Peace Processes* (Ilorin: Publication of Centre for Peace and Strategies Studies, University of Ilorin), 82

⁴² Oladeji, *ibid*.

wide range of complex blood and ancestral relationships necessitated the placement of high premium on conflict prevention among them. The Yoruba, therefore, devised oral traditions for concepts and occasions and used their language to emphasize the need to embrace ethical principles and to convey invaluable moral lessons, warnings, pieces of advice and proper attitude to life based on past experiences with a view to preventing conflicts. The idea of developing proverbs for their experiences seems to be a language variant of these strategies.⁴³

However, contemporary Yoruba societies have been riddled with so much bastardization of cultural values. The traditional mechanisms of preventing conflict and ensuring social harmony, which were cherished by all and sundry in the pre-colonial days, because of their potency in the peace processes in Yoruba communities, have been rendered inconsequential by the pervading influence of British system of administration through colonialism, adoption of alien religious beliefs and culture, materialism, greed and corruption. The pervasiveness of Western system of social control and conflict management techniques, which are adversarial in nature, has worsened the situation. The present realities are moral decadence, rebuff of cultural values, rise in antisocial activities, disrespect for elders and the prevalence of conflicts and violence, most of which were effectively prevented in pre-colonial Yoruba communities owing to a solid structure for social control.⁴⁴

The Primacy of *Iwa* in Conflict Prevention and Social Harmony

The ethical system of the Yoruba is a divine

one that is founded on a transcendental moral order. That is, in Yoruba ethics, morality is not the creation of the society, but rather the expression of a moral order, which transcends and obliges both the society and an individual because God (*Olodumare*) establishes them. Both virtues and vices are central to the ethics of the Yoruba people and language plays a very significant role in their exhibition. Goodness of character implies the rejection of vices, which manifest in certain ways of behaviour that can harm others or provoke conflicts, and adoption of certain ways of behaviour that demonstrate virtues. The vices that are conflict catalysts include envy, murder, theft, infidelity, contempt of elders, falsehood, pride, defamation of character etc. Goodness of character not only entails avoidance of these conflict prone vices but also has to do with positive cultivation and demonstration of virtues or ethical principles such as benevolence, humility, generosity, hospitality, moderation, justice, equity, respect for elders, honesty etc. which are agents of peace and social harmony.⁴⁵

Based on the foregoing, the pivotal concept or cardinal virtue in Yoruba ethical system is '*Iwa*' because it is fundamental to human existence and social relations.⁴⁶ Apart from its epistemological, religio-cultural and ethical significance, it also has a pragmatic dimension in Yoruba philosophical discourse. *Iwa* in its primary and most comprehensive sense means "beingness" or "existence". The perfect ideal of *iwa* is *aiku* (immortality). Hence the saying "*aiku pari iwa*" (immortality completes or perfects existence). Derivatively, it means the nature or character of a thing-its essence. This means

⁴³ Oladeji, 'proverbs'

⁴⁴ K. S. Adebisi, "Moral Decadence among Nigerian Youths as Future Leaders: A Socio- Cultural Regeneration." *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journals* 5(2), (2018), 190-199.

⁴⁵ E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman Limited, 1962); J. I Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy: A General Introduction* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 2002).

⁴⁶ W. A. O. Egbetakin, *Iwa as a Cardinal Virtue of Being in Yoruba Religious Philosophy*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Ibadan, 2010.

that *iwa* (character) is the essence of being and that a man's character is what can be used to evaluate his life from an ethical perspective. Therefore, good beingness or ideal existence or good character (*iwa rere*) is the most valuable thing among other things in the Yoruba ethical system. This is evident in the saying “*iwa lewa omo eniyan*”, that is, “character is the beauty of a person” A person of good character strives to keep all the ethical principles with a view to preventing conflict in interpersonal relationships and maintaining peaceful co-existence.

In the context of Yoruba ethical system, the benefits for being moral are not ephemeral, contingent and perishable in nature. The infallible and impartial supernatural forces would ensure that everyone gets what he or she deserved and that moral persons would not lose their rewards of complying with the ideals of total harmonious existence.⁴⁷ Apart from the earthly contentment of a moral life, the Yoruba acknowledged the importance of posterity as a factor that is strong enough to persuade a person to be moral. According to Yoruba moral belief, one does goods in order to have a good end because neither the good nor the bad conduct of each individual will perish or forgotten. Hence, anyone who desires to have a good end would be moral. This is the basis of the belief that “the death of a man is not his end and the end of man is not his death. To live and die is a fact of human existence, but living for death is not the essence for human life”.⁴⁸ In addition, the life of a man does not expire or terminate at his physical death, it continues in a more permanent mode of being. It is therefore in

the interest of a man to live a moral life on earth so that he may fully realize himself as would benefit him in the non-physical sense of existence.⁴⁹

The Yoruba believed that to be morally upright is one of the aims of human existence. Every member is persuaded to be moral in order to be able to live a good life in a cultural environment controlled by supernatural forces and a social formation managed by a hierarchy of authorities.⁵⁰ In Yoruba ethics, morality liberates man from the oppressive and hierarchical structure of the universe and provides him with ethical values for the regulation of his life with a view to preventing conflict with the supernatural forces and other humans. Therefore, in speech and deeds, the moral person is at peace with the natural world, the invisible world and lives in harmony with the powers that control the world by always preventing circumstances that could warrant him to have a clash with both humans and supernatural forces.⁵¹

Conclusion

The use of language among the Yoruba is both functional and dysfunctional and this is the same experience in all human contexts. Language is therefore a double-edged sword and its ambivalence nature is reflected in its capacity and usage to either cause conflict or promote peace. Thus, language plays a crucial role in conflict situations and peace processes. Although the fact that conflict is inevitable in social interactions is deep-seated in their sub consciousness, the influence of the Yoruba's religious and ethical beliefs on the people made them to devise many language-based

⁴⁷ M. Oke, “Self-Interest as the Ground for Moral Obligation.” *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy. Special Issue: Ethics and African Societies*, vol. 1, No 2, (1990).

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ W. Abimbola, “Iwapele: The Concept of Good Character in Ifa Literary Corpus.” In W. Abimbola, ed., *Yoruba Oral Literature* (Ibadan: University Press Limited, 1975), 395-417.

⁵¹ Ibid.

mechanisms driven by oral traditions for conflict prevention and sustainability of social harmony in the traditional Yoruba societies. Effective teaching and transmission of moral values as well as other indigenous beliefs through informal education mode by the social institutions also depended on language.

The concept of good character (*iwa rere*) and other virtues in Yoruba culture and pragmatic ethics were taught and inculcated through informal education and the practice of all its associated ethical principles are geared towards conflict prevention, maintenance of peace and social equilibrium. However, vices and conflict catalysts such as dishonesty, cruelty, greed, callousness and lack of respect for elders as well as misuse of language are now in vogue at the expense of Yoruba cultural and ethical values. The factors responsible for the neglect of the virtue of good character are westernization, materialism, cultural disorientation and lack of adequate moral education. The results of this unbecoming experience are social disorder, prevalence of conflicts and violence as well as manifestation of diverse forms of criminality today.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for cultural resurgence and resuscitation of our ethical values for possible experience and enjoyment of pre-colonial social harmony in morally chaotic contemporary Yoruba societies.

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