

MAHATMA GANDHI'S PERSPECTIVE OF DISCIPLINE: AN UNDERSTANDING OF AFRICAN PROVERBS ON PEACE

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Mahatma Gandhi's perspective of discipline, which is also the basis of respect for the self and others comprises of truth (Satya), non-violence (ahimsa), self-control (brahmacharya) non-stealing (asteya) and non-possession (aparigraha). To these major characteristics of discipline, he adds fearlessness, removal of untouchability, bread labour, tolerance, humility and silence. Many Africans have proverbs, which describe these virtues of discipline.

The Basoga, for example, have the following proverbs;

‘Aghava akwita, naghava akulabula’

(Where the conspiracy to kill you comes from; is where your warning to take care also comes) which means that the truth does not hide itself.

‘Akanaafa tikawulira ngombe’

(Strength is bad; it leads to being sent away from the village).

Warns against senseless use of one's strength because it would lead to their displacement from their position in the village or clan. It advocates non-violence.

‘Tifugibwa musaadha; abuna malya’

(I cannot be ruled by a man; has many marriages)

is said of a woman who has no self-control. Such intolerance will lead her from marriage into another.

‘Obutika amatama nga mwene ghaka ali kwiba’

(You buy the cheeks like a home owner stealing)

is a chastisement for thieves or those who behave like thieves by never speaking their mind boldly?

‘Amagezi tigaba ga mulala’

(Wisdom is never for one person)

‘Yebadhireegera tiyedhivugira’

(Where drums are made is not where they are played)

has the sense of non- possessiveness. These two proverbs instruct the listener to regard themselves as part of the whole. As long as the individual realizes and respects his relative position in any community he finds himself in, there would be possibilities for peace.

Gandhi also says that; ‘not to believe in the possibility of permanent peace is to believe in the godliness (essential goodness) of human nature?’

I will use Isidore Okpewho’s definition of a proverb as:-

A piece of folk wisdom expressed with terseness and charm. The ‘terseness’ implies a certain economy in the choice of words and a sharpness of focus, while the ‘charm’ conveys the touch of literary or poetic beauty in the expression.’
(1992: 226)

The Lusoga proverb, ‘*Omufuge alyoti ngabo; akaali kugigemanu, naagisuuta obugheghere*’ translated into English as: ‘The ruled is like a shield; the one who has not held it praises its lightness.’ (*Kodh’eyo* Vol.2 Namusebuko 1987:9) is an example of African folk wisdom that attempts to describe the relationship between leader and subject. The subject is likened to a shield that is believed to be the tool and symbol of power, peace and security. The leader holds the shield to protect the people that they may become like him (nga bo). A person holding a position of responsibility at whatever level in society is taken as a leadership role and as such, the leader wields power is an icon of peace and social welfare among his people. This seemingly light duty of carrying the shield is the moral expressed by the above proverb, which ideally calls for experience and responsibility as the only realistic measures in good leadership:

In the above proverb, the characteristics of ‘terseness’ and ‘charm’ are very clear. The key words: ‘ruled’, ‘shield’, ‘hold’ and ‘lightness’ convey deeper meanings which can be interpreted in various ways in different contexts and circumstances. It is a universal statement about a ruler’s life experience;

Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten.

(Achebe, 1956:10)

The above set of proverbs by Okoye in *Things Fall Apart* used to describe the role of proverbs in an Ibo society is significant for the rest of Africa. ‘The art of conversation is regarded very highly’ because it is the main means by which people interact. The metaphorical expression, ‘proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten’ shows and describes the nature of speech and conversation which results from the use of proverbs; it is smooth, palatable, nourishing, easy to maneuver etc. Proverbs therefore, become the engine-oil necessary for productive conversation.

In his essay entitled ‘what is culture?’ in *Artists, the Ruler: essays on Art, culture and values*. Okot p’Bitek quotes John Dewey as saying that:

The only passport that commands entrance into being, Reality, Nature ... is the passport that is filled out, signed and countersigned, and stamped by public experience (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya; 1986:13).

Public experience for that matter, which informs the message and construct of proverbs, has a central role to play in the mission of peace in any African society. Like Okoye in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* says, ‘The art of conversation’ derives its power from the usage of proverbs.

Speech alone is regarded by several scholars as the only characteristic which distinguishes human beings from the rest of the animals like the hominids. Speech should therefore be well developed and used to promote peace among the people of any given society.

Okot p'Bitek goes on to say that;

Human beings do not behave like dry leaves, smoke or clouds, which are blown here and thereby the wind. Men live in organizations called institutions: the family and clan, a chief dom or kingdom or an age-set system. They have a religion, an army, legal and other institutions. And all these institutions are informed by, and in fact built around the central ideas people have developed, ideas about what life is all about; that is, their social philosophy, their 'world view' (13)

It is these 'central ideas people have developed' thus forming their 'world view' which dominate the proverbs, riddles, songs, stories, tales and such orature created by them. Proverbs stand out as an outstanding form because it is used in all the other forms to enhance message and meaning of those forms.

The Kisoga proverb:

'Omulamu ngoma; evugira baligho'

Translated as: 'The alive person is a drum; it sounds for those present' (*Kodh'eyo* 1997:9)
Can be used to explain this apparent fact that once one has life, they can be heard.

In another essay: 'African Aesthetics – The Acholi Example' Okot p'Bitek describes the fact that every individual is an artistic participant in the handling of the affairs of the family, clan, tribe, or nation, in such a way, there is no threat of personal or societal disintegration because by this participation alone, life is made meaningful.

The greatest and commonest proverb used to promote this philosophy is the greeting performed by every individual person.

Kop ango?	What is the news?
Kop pe!	No new!
Itye nining?	You are how?
Atye maber !	I am good!

(Okot p'Bitek, 1986)

Among the Acholi, these terse statements ask about the state of things: health, self, family, clan, domestic animals, crops, marriages, pregnancies, births, economic, political and the military situation. By so doing, the individual, as part of that society is encouraged to perform his ascribed role to the best of his ability. If anything is wrong or bad (rac), it is sorted out immediately and in most cases there are proverbial establishments to offer a solution (p...)

The Swahili greeting:

Habali

Muzuri

Pole

Salama peace

Or the Kiganda greeting;

Eladde is it peaceful

Nyoge

Mamu

Mirembe ... peace

Or the Kisoga version;

Elaire is it peaceful

Elaire is it peaceful

Kodhieyo may be there

Tuli eyo. We are there.

Bring out this societal yearning for peace in everything thus affirming Kinhide mushakoji's contention that 'peace and security are matters of life and death for the whole of humanity' the goodness in man's speech is what distinguished him from beasts. Otherwise, violence may upset this privileged position in nature.

In Okwudiba noli's essay, 'realizing peace, development and regional security in Africa. A plan of Action' (Hansen, 1987), it is said that:

Peace is an important human value. And it has been so ever since the history of humanity begun... it is so basic a value that it is a pre-requisite for the attainment of other values (215)

The Baganda have the following proverbs in affirmation of this concept of human value:

1. 'Abataka abaagalana: be balina akambugu' (7)
(Its friendly classmates who cultivate couch grass)
2. 'Akyaliisa ebijanjaalo empiso'
(Eats one bean by one, no hurry because of peace) (32)
3. 'Kili mulaala' : Teyekolera luggi' (211)
(It is peaceful: does not make a door for his house)
4. 'Omugenyi akyala waladde' (367)
(A visitor visits in a peaceful home/place)

The above proverbs show how peace is a basic prerequisite for community work (1), individual habits (2), family behaviour (3) and interaction among the people (4). There are very many proverbs in use, which instruct, chastise, warn and remind the people about their role in upholding this human value. By mentioning 'friendliness' (1) as an important factor in fighting the troublesome 'couch grass' which is danger to productive farming, the community is being instructed to promote friendship or else they stand the risk of suffering from famine which will destabilize their peace at all levels.

Similarly, for want of visitors (4) the member of that home or family would be compelled to eliminate conflicts in their midst.

The Basoga sing that:

Mwene ghaka bw'asangala: n'omugeni asangala' (when the owner of the home is happy; the visitor is happy).

This proverb turned into song is an instruction to owners of homes to show happiness during hospitality. Happiness is the cure of a sad heart and it brightens up sore hearts. It can liberate human beings from conflict within themselves or with other communities the result of which would be peace within and beyond the individual or community that suffered the conflict figure.

The Kiganda proverb:

‘Tuli byomana byuma: akamba ta kasale mpiso’ (458)

(We are both tools/metals: a knife does not cut a needle) is used to call for peace among relatives and people (human beings) in general. In spite of human ethnic or class differences, we are basically the same human beings who should not ‘cut’ each other the way a knife does not cut a needle.

The Baganda also know that:

‘Abali awamu tabelema kuyomba’ (3)

(Those who are together cannot fail to quarrel) and that;

‘anatera okuyomba: tabula njogera ye’ (46)

(The one who is about to quarrel: will habitually have a start)

But the cure is;

‘Ekimalampaka; kisirika’ (120)

(Silence finishes the argument).

The ‘Kimalampaka’ is a large flowered shrub with highly poisonous seeds used in sorcery. The best way to avoid its poison is to avoid it completely, by not even touching its flowers, which are the source of the poisonous seed.

According to Emmanuel Hansen,

The African perspective on peace ... is that which makes it possible for the majority of the people on this planet to enjoy physical security, a modicum of material prosperity, the satisfaction of the basic needs of human existence, emotional well beings, political efficacy and psychic harmony...

In this perspective the mass of men and women in the world should be enabled to develop their potentialities and consequently themselves as full and autonomous human beings. Thus enabling them to develop not as means to other ends but as ends in themselves.

There are so many lessons to be got from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* in expressing the role of proverbs in promoting the peace in Hansen's 'African perspective'.

The older Nwakibi's prayer for the younger Okonkwo on the event of Okonkwo's visit to his home to borrow seed yams for planting signifies these peoples desire for peaceful co-existence between the rich and the poor, the elderly and the young, the powerless and strong:

We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite Perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other. Let his wing break.
(22)

The proverbial 'kite' and 'eagle' refer to the differences in social status. Naturally, the kite and eagle are not friends but the Igbo use this expression to show that it is possible to live in harmony even when you have differences and disagreements. 'Respect', Okonkwo adds, is an important factor in any such a relationship;

'A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness' (22)

This particular society demonstrates its commitment to peace by the philosophy that;

If a child washes his hands, he could eat with kings (12)

Meaning that, in spite of age, a young person like Okonkwo who had achieved heroic recognitions, in the economic, social and political patterns of life would be duly recognized as a leader. People like Okonkwo can hold position of responsibility in their society because of their experiences, heroic participation in building their people's

culture and as such wielders of the shield for society with 'washed' and clean hands of might.

That is how Okonkwo came to be elected as an emissary to Mbaino, the neighboring village whose kinsman had killed a daughter of Umuofia. What is remarkable with the people of Umuofia is that they never fought a 'war of blame' (6). They had to try a peaceful settlement first. Hence, Okonkwo was sent to discuss with the people of Mbaino between a peaceful settlements of war. 'He was treated with great honor and respect' and instead of war, the fifteen year old land Ikemefuma and a young virgin were given in exchange for the murdered wife of Ogbefi Udo. 'Honour' and 'respect' are vital in peace building and negotiations.

This incidence contrasts with the one in *Arrow of God* where Akukalia and two companions sent to Okperi to settle a land dispute ended up starting a bloody war, which resulted into several deaths and destruction of property. Apart from the lack of tactic in the way Akukalia and the people of Okperi handled the conversation, there were customary considerations which had not been put into consideration, that is, the day being a market day and as if that was not enough conflicts, the chief negotiator, Akukelia, was personally affected by the rebuking statement by Ebo that;

'If you want to shout like a castrated bull you must wait until you return to Umuaro. I have told you this place is Okperi'. (24)

Being an important man himself, Akukalia takes personal offence and yet he is an emissary sent by the tribe. Such personal interferences are addressed by the kiganda proverbs;

'Omusigire tamala byona'

(a messenger does not accomplish everything or a messenger does not solve what spoils /damages). This ideology is similar to the Igbo proverb that;

'A messenger does not choose what message to take back to his master' and that'
A messenger is not reprimanded for his message'

This shows that a messenger can only do what they have been delegated to do and no more. Essentially, the hurt that causes rifts among people is deep seated among the individuals making it difficult for a second or third party to resolve the problem. If one dislikes the message, they should not abuse or punish the messenger but the one who sent him to bring the message across. Of course the message too must be tactical in delivering the message for a person carrying live coals in his mouth cannot forget to open his mouth to take in some fresh air.

In Akukalia's case, the proverb which warns the people about similar incidents is that;

‘An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb’ (23). If Ebo had known that Akukalia was impotent, he would not have talked about ‘the castrated bull’ for the sake of peace. But impotence is not like age, which can be seen by the eyes.

The Basoga say that;

‘Mwino kyakusinza tokyenta mpalama’

(What another man has more than yourself, don't call it hydro cells)

This means respect of each other to avoid conflicts like that between Akukalia and Ebo. The result of violence is violence and eventually, the entire community is affected; as Umuofia goes to war with Okperi.

The Gikuyu proverb, ‘nothing good was ever been of perfect conditions’ used by Ngugi wa Thiongo's in *Devil on the Cross* is one way of giving hope to the depressed and oppressed Gikuyu in his novel. Others proverbs which tally with Gandhi's philosophy on peace and indeed, that of Hansen include;

‘Too much greed may prompt one to sell oneself cheaply’ (63)

‘A borrowed necklace will soon make one loose her own’

‘The oil of the household is not for rubbing in the skins of foreigners’ (3)

‘Do not look down a drop of rain’ (71)

In these four proverbs the morality of self-control, self-respect, non-possession, self-preservation can be deduced.

Other proverbs like;

‘Too much haste splits the yam’ (75)

‘A composer needs peace in his heart’ (73)

‘A fire that blazes fiercely may destroy the meat whose fat made it jump into flame’ (97)

Are used in *Devil on the Cross* and in real life experiences to reflect society’s yearning for peaceful co-existence.

The idea of ‘split’, ‘peace’ or ‘destroy’ in each respective one of them comprise a unit of ideology which is peace. When you ‘split’ or ‘destroy’ you affect ‘peace’. For society to be well composed i.e. at heart; there must be peace. It is for this reason that the Igbo recognized a ‘week of peace’ before any planting season. They believed that the absence of peace would destroy their relationship with the earth goddess and the result would be famine. When Okonkwo breaks the week of peace he is considered disrespectful and he is fined heavily. (32)

In the past, Ogbœfi Ezeudu days, ‘a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died’, (33). This was done as a deterrent to anybody who would dare to do it. That is violence meant to;

‘To bate the water while it is only ankle deep’ (187) so that all the people are not drowned by it. Such controls are necessary to promote and protect the peace at hand

The values, ideals and social order of a people determine what direction the peace initiatives will drive them. The struggle for social and democratic rights and human dignity are inseparable. That is why the Basoga have a proverb, which says;

‘Nantagalagirwa, yaja n’eizi ku ntumbugulu’

(One who cannot heed advice went with excrement on the leg).

There must be mutual respect and understanding between people who are pursuing a common goal. To ignore advice from each other is to go away with 'badness' as opposed to 'goodness' which promotes conflict on one hand and peace on the other.

The Acholi might simply say; 'La yom cwing lugero ki nyayo' (The generous one gets gonorrhoea) which directly refers to people who abuse the weakness of generosity by giving away their bodies to sex, they might get diseased in the process. Not all good things bear good fruits (Okot p'Bitek 1986:36) but be generous all the same;

'omulungi tabulaku kamogo'

(A beautiful one is not without bad mark), the Basoga will advise their people. In the same way, bearing in mind the Hobbesian concept that;

Man is naturally selfish and aggressive an animal to be restrained only by the fear of death and terror;

Instead of creating fear and terror by using nuclear arms, atomic bombs and such lethal weaponry, the African construct of proverbs is rich in the area of non-violent restraint.

The Baganda have the following proverbs restraining people in various ways;

'Oyita ewala; n'otuuka emirembe'

(Go round the long way; and arrive safely). This is similar to the English saying that; 'Patience pays.' Both yield for the individual a peaceful and even though its through the harder way.

'Bakubanja n'otabba'

(It is better to be a debtor than a thief) restrains people from stealing as a way of satisfying their basic needs because there is a better way of achieving and that is borrowing.

'Mirembe ngalo; buli oguddewo gukwa gunayiwo' (The times are like the fingers, each subsequent one is better different). People should not expect things to be the same all the time.

‘Mirembe gye giseguza’

(Times bring changes). Get prepared.

‘Awakula ennune; tewakula emu’

(Where a strong bull grows; it is not just one).

‘Ekibimba kye kikka; ensejjere tetuuka ku ggulu’

(What rises, falls deep; the white ant does not reach heaven)

These two proverbs address power and call for self control because there is always a possibility that the strong one is not always the stronger of all. There will always be another one for stronger than the forms.

Another one addressing tyrants, dictators and despises

‘Abasajja nsolo; ezimu zirya zinaazo’

(Men are like wild animals; some eat their own kind)

The insensitivity about peace reflected in the last proverb was experienced recently in the Rwanda genocide. Such senseless killing could be avoided if the people concerned paid heed to the admonitions and pedagogy of their oral literature particularly the proverbs and sayings.

The African peace problematic must respond not only to peaceful resolution of conflict of the removal of conflict in the main theatres of Europe, but also respond to the developmental needs of people at both the national and international levels.

The problems of dictatorships, refugees, accumulation of wealth at the centre, massive retrenchment of labour, trade liberalization, and massive devaluation of local currencies, political violence, pressures of capitalism and all those other causes of conflict in Africa have stimulated the folks into constructing proverbs which appropriately address them thus making them tolerable facts of their lives.

Conflicts of secession ethnicity, nationalism and self-determination are widespread in African states. Development if handled properly would eliminate the causes of tensions and conflicts. It is widely known that inter-personal and intergroup social conflicts are common in times of economic depletion.

Proverbs like;

‘Okuzaala kukira okwita ente’

(Producing is better than killing a cow or bull) is used by the Basoga and Baganda to encourage productivity because the one who produces more is happier than the one who kills and celebrates only once and it is finished.

‘Akange kakira kaiffe’

(Mine is better than ours) also drives the individual into self-determination to produce as much for himself is necessary instead of relying on others or on the general coffers where he has no say.

It is this independence and abundant production or lack of it, which brings about conflicts and tensions thereby destroying peace.

‘Buli gagwa nswa?’

(Is it white ants whenever it rains?) Is a rebuke to those who always expect good things? It prepares them for disaster when disaster strikes.

The other factors of peace namely; tribalism, religion and personality are equally handled by the common proverbs existing in each society. Wicked and corrupt leaders would be threatened by the Kiganda proverbs;

‘Akamaga enjoru; kankano wa?’

(What throws an elephant; how big is it?). This proverb can become an inspiration to the masses to overthrow a dictatorial regime.

The saying:

‘Better to be on our feet

Than to live on our knees' used by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his statements on resistance against neo-colonialism and imperialism are complemented by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the winner of the Nobel peace prize in 1984 when he says that;

The indomitable with of the people... (will inexorably (make the African peoples to) travel the path to victory'

Peace, security and development are closely related. It is therefore not logical to isolate proverbs addressing these three aspects separately especially because most of them are constructed to address the people's cultural pursuits.

Economic welfare, political and social autonomy and the political status of a group are randomly addressed. That is why Noli concludes that 'peace is the value upon which all other values are based'. Increased skills and capacity to produce, greater freedom, self confidence, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well being as already discussed make up the total package called peace, the protection of which is what security entails. It guarantees people's existence, happiness and liberation.

Chinua Achebe in *Arrow of God* uses several proverbs through the mouth of Ogbazulozodo to express the fact of life that peace in society is a matter of good relationships, good discipline and proper understanding of the dynamics of society. This run by Ogbazulobodo through all the paths of the village in such a record time only to recover from it as a dead man emphasizes how heavy the 'shield' of power usually is.

In Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* the Bale Baroka tells the Belle Sidi that;

a monkey sweats my daughter

A monkey sweats,

It is only the hairs on its back

That deceives the world...

Although proverbs appear to be silent about the arms race and the nuclear war, it is quite clear that they attempt to address the most salient issues, which affect the masses. The most likely causes of nuclear or atomic wars are kept at bay by the efforts of these words of wisdom.

The boy who persists in asking what happened to his father before he has enough strength to avenge him is asking for his fathers fate... when death wants to take a little dog it prevents it from smelling even excrement...

If a rat cannot flee fast enough
Let him make way for the tortoise

Proverbs such as these are time tested truths that lend authority and credence to the speaker. They are used in settling disputes between people, rendering sacrifices to the gods and the Almighty. They are widely used in marriage ceremonies and other rites of passage. Their main advantages include their provision of 'a certain pointedness and clarity of focus to speech; their entertainment value which gives them a sense of beauty that appeals to the ears and to the imagination of the audience. Above all, they are the considered artistic storehouses of the wisdom of society. (Okpewho, 1992:235)

Conclusions

Society's high regard for proverbs should be exploited to use them for the furtherance of peace, security and development. Their economy of expression, metaphorical quality, sound effect both tonal and rhythmic led, the proverb more gravity and path as well as ensuring a more effective performance before the audience (Okpewho, 1992:239). If applied during peace talks and during the day to day interactions between people in homes, clans, villages, political parties, parliaments, government boards and cabinets, national and multi-national organizations, their would certainly be an impact hence making our race more human than it is under the current world order.

The Basoga say, *Ndi mugezi, n'omukobere* (I am wise, is the advised one), and if you shun good advise, you have only yourself to blame if you reap trouble for good. Africans should invest much more in this 'African peace perspective.' The increased use of African folk wisdom which is sensitive to African philosophy of life is key to peace in Africa.

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