



Research Article

Volume-03|Issue-08|2022

Political Conflicts in Africa. A Search for National Unity in A Multi-Ethnic Society through the Cultural Dynamism of “The Joking Relationship”

Mourtala Dan Lamso

Literary Studies' Laboratory, University Abdou Moumouni Dioffo

Article History

Received: 05.08.2022

Accepted: 20.08.2022

Published: 30.08.2022

Citation

Lamso, M. D. (2022). Political Conflicts in Africa. A Search for National Unity in A Multi-Ethnic Society through the Cultural Dynamism of “The Joking Relationship”. *Indiana Journal of Arts & Literature*, 3(8), 10-15.

Abstract: The advent of the ongoing post independent political turmoil in Africa generally leads to the military intervention in politics. African politicians in their lust for power mostly use the ethno regional allegiances to come on power or secure their seat. The result is conflict between politicians which generates tensions all over the country. This paper depicts some factors that favor the political crises in Africa and suggests possible solutions to the phenomenon through the use of an African socio-cultural dynamism named “The Joking Relationship”. This remarkable practice plays a considerable role in the consolidation of the national unity and the promotion of the sociopolitical stability without which the development of Africa will remain a dream. Developing and institutionalizing this practice will undoubtedly be an important step forwards in preventing, managing and resolving the incessant conflicts in African states..

Keywords: Cultural Diversity, Ethno Regional Allegiances, Political Crises, Joking Relationship, Socio- Political Conflicts.

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INTRODUCTION

If human beings can provide themselves with all necessary means for their existence, their desire to live in harmony will be more successful with the creation of a social organization that will guarantee the welfare of every one. Traditional Africa in its daily quest for social welfare created mechanisms to overcome the ongoing socio-political conflicts in many African states. The Joking Relationship is one of these strategies created to promote social cohesion in a multi- ethnic society. This funny exchange between members of the same family or social groups is an old cultural practice found in most of African countries like Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroun, Gabon, Mali, Niger, Ivory Coast and Guinea. It aims at finding solutions to the existing socio-political crises caused by various factors. The article also shows the role played by the Joking Relationship in some African countries in general and Niger in particular.

METHODOLOGY

This paper helps to understand some factors leading to the recurrent political crises in African post independent states and presents some solutions from the indigenous cultural practice which favors the welfare of the population in a multilingual environment. The work will use both literary and non literary sources that deal with the issue.

THE ORIGINS OF THE POLITICAL CRISES IN AFRICA

The Colonial Heritage

The ongoing political instability in post independent Africa is a direct result of colonialism. In fact, before the arrival of the colonialists in Africa, Africans were governed by traditional leaders who have played a major role in the shaping of African history. Unfortunately, with the advent of colonialism, the colonial masters seized power from the traditional rulers who finally became simple collaborators of the colonialists. Jacob Gordon illustrates the view when he states that: “the role of traditional African leaders/rulers dramatically changed after the partition of Africa by the European colonialists at the Berlin conference, 1884-85.”(2015: viii). Gradually, in the 1960’s, African traditional leaders were left with fewer powers acting as the link between the indigenous population and the colonial administration. The latter used traditional African leaders to govern their colonies. Depending on the colonial policy, one of the main tasks of the indigenous African leaders consists in collecting taxes and promoting the trade and European values systems. They were sometimes rewarded with presents and were given various privileges. Unfortunately, even the new democracy in Africa reflects the same policies of accommodation and marginalization inherited from the former colonial masters. So as colonies became independent, the colonial masters delegated the educated natives to control the political machinery of their respective countries. The uneducated become the less fortunate classes rendered inadequate for positions of

authority within the new governments. Chief, Nanga one of the protagonists in *A Man of the People*, to borrow from Achebe's metaphorical analogy was one of the few African educated elites who had just come in from the rain and entered the only mansion left by the colonizers. This means that Chief Nanga was part of the lucky intellectuals who inherited power from the colonialists and tried to convince the masses of the necessity to build a nation. Unfortunately, Chief Nanga and his likes were not experienced enough to conduct the political affairs of the newly independent states. Tordoff William describes the political atmosphere in the early years of political independence in African states as follows:

The newly independent states had an unsettled political culture. Not only had the political leadership next to no experience of operating a governmental system on a national scale, but the institutions (such as parties, parliaments and civil services) through which they had to work were also relatively new and weak. (1984: 2).

In addition many citizens in Africa who are said to have been educated have limited levels of formal education and live in remote rural areas. Therefore, their low level of education does not allow them to better analyze, criticize and appreciate the essence of the political game. They instead constitute in their majority what Mutiso refers to as "the thug element in the party" (1974:45). These categories of people (young in their majority) are closely attached to the politician whose praises are sung. The politicians often use them as thugs in the fight against a rival party. Electoral violence in Africa mostly derives from the confrontation between thug elements from both the incumbent and opposition parties and degenerates into communal, ethnic, and religious conflicts. The lack of sufficient maturity of the new leaders in the independent states beyond doubt constitutes a big issue that partly justifies African states' vulnerability and susceptibility to political instability. But most of the post colonial tensions in African states result from the absolute lack of responsibility, and tolerance that characterize the post colonial leaders who, despite their western education, utterly fail to fulfill their role as competent leaders. Likewise, this situation favors corruption, injustice and mismanagement in all fields and finally the collapse of democracy.

The collapse of Democracy

Today in Africa and elsewhere in the world, democracy is the political system that is on the agenda of most of the governments. It is viewed by Phillips Shively (2014) as "government of the people" in which there is a sense that the full population of citizens will be actively engaged between elections in debate over alternative policies and in the work of setting the policies (Shively, 2014). So, the constitution of a democratic order internalizes the culture of popular participation and the democratization of the process of development. It also favors socio-economic transformation and equitable development by putting in place a transparent system of

governance. This shows that democratic principles if applied normally will undoubtedly promote the welfare of the society and lead to a conflict free African society. But it is sadly observable that the public participation in the political affairs is in most cases characterized by divisive struggles between ethnic groups to get to power so as to manage the public resources. The outcome is generally conflicts that lead to the general paralysis of productive political activity and the possible switch to authoritarian regimes. In such a climate, there is ineluctably the need for the creation of a legitimate institution capable of promoting a less unstable society.

Another important factor that favors political instability in Africa is the perpetual conflict between politicians. In fact, to gain power or maintain it and the privileges thereof, the new African elites use all means to achieve their objective. The first of them to taste power and luxury becomes addicted to them so that any criticism from the opposition (who is also waiting impatiently for it) is severely dealt with. In these instances opposition groups which have never governed perceive elections as a chance to ascend to power whereas the incumbent government views elections as means to legitimate its continued rule. One of the main tactics used by both sides is ethnic politics. For instance politicians use ethnic allegiances to win the elections or stay on power. In many African states, the politicization of communal or ethnic identities to win an election is a matter of survival in the eyes of the rest of political parties competing for power. Politicians from the winning parties therefore favor their kinsmen by engaging them in the most political position whether or not they can do the job. The rest of the helpless citizens are prevented from benefiting from any privilege. Achebe once more illustrates the point in the following statement. "I want you to come to the capital and take up a strategic post in the civil service. We shouldn't leave everything to the highland tribes. My secretary is from there; our people must have their share of the national cake" (1966: 12).

Part of the main problems that generate political conflicts in African states is the lack of legitimacy of African political leaders who in most cases come to power through fraudulent elections. These politicians generally achieve their position by corrupting the poor and ignorant citizens who sell their vote in exchange for money, cloth or sacs of cereals. In the same vein, Mutiso claims that "in the winning of elections, it is not the party that is of primary importance but the money to be gained" (1974: 43). Mutiso clearly shows the central role played by wealth during the elections in Africa. This also infers that once on power, leaders may use the public offices and assets for private aims because leaders elected in such conditions will not be accountable to the population. They will only care for their own interests and use public fund to maintain their position.

We can deduce from the above that African leaders lack political maturity which has favored tensions

and violence in the states. This climate generates tensions between politicians that lead the military intervention in politics and civil wars. Under this climate of fear and uncertainty that characterize African politics, a quest for sustainable solutions to these crises is more than necessary. One way of overcoming this problem is to view it from internal perspectives that favor tolerance, understanding and acceptance of one another. In this sense, the cultural dynamism of 'The Joking Relationship' helps to create good and sustainable relationships between people from different ethnic groups, religion and tribes.

The Role of Culture in a Society

The appreciation of the power of culture shows that development and culture are intertwined. This implies that one cannot bring the issue of development without a reference to culture. Kobina Nketsiav claims that: "every philosophy or concept of development is a cultural phenomenon" (2013: 195). So any cultural expression is a development expression and vice versa. As a result, development theory is itself a cultural construct. In its turn, development encompasses the entirety of the society or an individual and its material and multi-dimensional space. Yet another important thing to notice is that development is a phenomenon that involves both the politics and the economics of a people. In this case, culture is vital to development since it informs the politics and the economics. Nketsiav once more states that: "culture is the pot that brews economic and political thought" (2013: 196). This assumption shows that development is itself a cultural phenomenon so it requires the strengthening of the cultural sphere of a people. As a result, it can be assumed that for any indigenous people, development is synonymous of strengthening the cultural institutions. This implies that the multiple challenges that Africa is facing today result from the gradual lost of its cultural heritage to the detriment of alien cultures and traditions.

Cultural Imperialism

Colonialism has brought the cultural imperialism in African states. The cultural imperialism uses propaganda to induce a consumer phenomenon for the African dominated culture which in turn loses its creative ability. Consequently, the dominated culture simply imitates. Marimba Ani portrays cultural imperialism as a systemic imposition of an alien culture in the attempt to destroy the will of a politically dominated people. The mechanism of cultural imperialism causes a cultural insecurity and self-doubt within the dominated group. Separated from their ancestral legacy, people lose access to their source of political resistance (Nketsiav, 2013). To recover from the socio political and economic diseases, African states need to improve and sustain their cultural practices that have assured the wellbeing of the population. The Joking Relationship is one of the African cultural legacies that need to be institutionalized so as to find a true solution for African unity and development in all fields.

The Joking Relationship: Definition and Role

The Joking Relationship is viewed as part of African traditions and cultures that are becoming extinct. It is a social practice initiated by ancestors that aims at providing a peaceful interaction between people living in the same geographical area. The Joking Relationship took its roots in the family through teasing between grandfather and grandchildren. From the family it extended to the clan and finally to the whole community. According to Sani (2016), its origins started long time ago in the past. Some of its historical sources refer to the ancient Egypt during the reign of the Pharaoh when every clan has its joking partner (Sani, 2016). But other sources explain the origins of the Joking Relationship from the Mandingue Empire during the rule of Soundjata Keita in 1236. So, one can assume that the Joking Relationship is a very old practice in African states. It is important to mention that the Joking Relationship results from good relationships that are borne from a conflicting situation due to political demographic or economic motives. Kodjona (2015) classifies the relationships in two categories: the one that is related to blood relationships characterized by marriage between two groups or two families. This relationship allows teasing between grandparents and grandchildren. The second type of the Joking Relationship is a link between two groups, two families or two areas that is due the interaction between ancestors who have created a sacred friendly convention (Kodjona, 2015). The Joking Relationship exists in many African societies and plays a vital role in conflicts managements between different clans, tribes and communities. It is so important that it becomes the subject matter of further research by students and academics.

Nowadays, the Joking Relationship is becoming a more and more important cultural concept in many African countries (characterized by the coexistence of many languages and cultures). It constitutes one of the best ways of preventing and solving conflicts between different ethnic groups in African states. This cultural practice is still spreading in different African societies such as Togo, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso where it continues to be used to overcome internal conflicts between ethnic groups. In order to contribute to the consolidation of the national unity and to boost some local development plans, this paper shows the importance of the Joking Relationship in the political field so that African governments will view it as an African cultural legacy to be spread and used in national negotiations. Extending the Joking Relationship in the future should be part of the missions of anthropologists, historians and political scientists so as to give it new orientations taking into account the issue of peace and democracy.

The Joking Relationships as a Tool for Building Peace in African States

As mentioned earlier, political problems are very recurrent in African states. African politicians use

various techniques to come to power. But the most important and common technique used by politicians before and after elections consists in developing ethno-regional allegiances. As a result, the incumbent government uses it to secure its continuity while the opposition uses it as a means to contest the elections. But, the phenomenon of the Joking Relationship constitutes a good tool in conflict management all over Africa. Apart from preventing and solving conflicts, the Joking Relationship must be taken into account during the different mediations on ethnic conflicts. Kodjona suggests that instead of using the international mediators, the local Joking Relationship facilitators can conduct mediations in any conflict between tribes efficiently. Ogoutchina Dossou (2015) affirms that like people in Niger and Burkina Faso republics, the Mahi and Idatcha ethnic groups of Togo Republic have also come to social stability due to the practice of the Joking Relationship after a long period of rivalry (Dossou, 2015).

Political conflicts in a multicultural environment mostly lead to the involvement of the military forces who usually intervene to support a given candidate. In many African countries there exist coups and counter coups due to the misunderstanding between the military wings. This situation happens when a military wing from a specific ethnic group supports its fellow candidate. Like the case of civilian leaders mentioned above, these errors are the consequences of the lack of appropriate training and ethic in the military academy. Major Johnson confirms this view when he postulates “many armies in non- western world, especially Africa, are not disciplined or trained enough to know what it means to be a soldier” (1991: 25). Virginie, Oyongmen (2015) also asserts that some officers have a total misunderstanding of the ethic and this misunderstanding leads to a disorder within the military institution where unity is needed to better accomplish their missions. So in the same way education drives away barbarism, the lack of proper education leads to indiscipline.

From Oyongmen’s perspectives, the Joking Relationship has played a positive impact within the military barracks in Cameroun. It has been used as a good way to assure cohesion within the military camps in Cameroun. As a result, it allows soldiers to be able to say what they cannot say explicitly. In this sense, the Joking Relationship becomes an efficient weapon to fight against factionalism (division within the army). Thus, developing this practice within the military camp will prevent the greedy politicians from manipulating the army for their own interests. The Joking Relationship described as a social practice that contributes to mutual understanding between people from different ethnic groups can undoubtedly be used to appease political disputes that generally lead to military interventions and civil wars in many African states.

Moreover, the Joking Relationship can be used to avoid political disputes between civilian politicians. In an article entitled “Les Relations A Plaisanterie A L’Assemblée Nationale Du Cameroun Entre 1992 Et 2002 Vecteur de Division Ou Instrument De Decrispation ?”, Tegna Edith Mireille depicts the role played by the Joking Relationship in the national assembly in Cameroun. As mentioned earlier, the political game in Africa is characterized by misunderstanding and conflicts between politicians. Mireille describes the continuity of this conflict at the national assembly during the multiparty period in the national assembly in Cameroun Republic where the members of the parliament from the ruling party view the opposing groups as enemies rather than political opponents. This situation has created a climate of hostility within the parliament. Gradually, funny exchanges between the members of the parliament favored better exchanges. This has created a new climate of peace. In short, the misunderstanding within the national assembly in Cameroun was solved by a call for tolerance and acceptance of others using the principles of the Joking Relationship. Through teasing and laughing the deputies in the national assembly were able to convey messages that could lead to confusion if they were delivered in a normal way. The Joking Relationship has been adapted recurrently at the national assembly and has become a form of expression through which difficult messages are conveyed. It decreases the different tensions of the past which might have created bloody conflicts. The Joking Relationship has in fact played a vital role in the conduct of the new democracy at its early years of existence in the national assembly in Cameroun. The experience of Cameroun can be applied to any African country since the Joking Relationship is a spreading reality in almost all of the African states.

The Development of the Joking Relationship in Niger Republic

In the sixties, most of African states got their political independence. The majority of the newly independent states were composed of various ethnic and sub ethnic groups. This situation favors tribalism and ethno regional allegiances. These factors combined constitute a big challenge for the building of the national unity in Africa. As a result, the major concerns of the new post independent governments were the shaping of the African unity. In Niger the first independent authorities adopted many strategies to come to the point. Even though the Joking Relationship is an old practice in many African countries, efforts were done by the Niger authorities in its development. According to Moumouni Mahamane Sani (2016), the first authorities built many boarding schools at the secondary school levels that aim to create good friendships resulting from a melting pot within a multilingual context. The second strategy consisted in allocating young civil servants to serve in areas and regions that were not their own. This strategy has favored marriages between various ethnic groups. The third technique is the creation of the weekly cultural

activities that gathered the youth from all over the country. This youth organizations commonly called Samaria (youth) have also favored social cohesion and solidarity between people from different cultures and traditions. Yahaya Lawali (1991) describes the role given to this youth organization as he postulates that: "The Samaria was not only supposed to defend the ideology of the ruling junta but also to assume economic, political as well as socio-cultural responsibilities of rural communities" (1991: 216). Finally the next coming authorities continued with the struggle against clanism, bigotry, ethnocentrism and regionalism. They also succeeded to gather the Niger youth every year. This yearly gathering of youth named Niger Youth Festival rotates from one region to another. The above initiatives lead to the Nigerien melting pot and strengthen the Joking Relationship link which is one of the main pillars of national unity in Niger. In addition, Sani mentioned the important role played by Islamic religion in the process of peace building in Niger. Thus, the fact that 98% of the Niger populations are Muslims favors the mixed marriages which also contribute to cohesion in the society.

The Joking Relationship and the Shaping of National Unity in Niger

In Niger, the names that refer to the Joking Relationship in the two national languages that are Haoussa and Zarma are Tabastaka and Bassatareye respectively. The Niger population has been living in perfect harmony because the different ethnic groups are interrelated by the practice of the Joking Relationship. Nigeriens know that in case of attack against a given joking relationship partner, justice will prevail severely. This is why Dossou in his article "Alliance Inter-Ethnique Et Relation A Plaisanteries Entre Les Idatcha Et Les Mahi De La Region D'Atakpamé (Togo)", affirms that the population of Niger Republic has reached social stability due to the existence of the Joking Relationship. This assumption is a reality because, unlike many African states that have witnessed electoral tensions and civil wars due to ethno-regional allegiances, Niger has achieved stability from the set of political independence up to the advent of democracy. This is partly due to the solid link of the Joking Relationship that binds the different communities together. Therefore, it is a good tool for the African Union (AU) and many other international organizations in their struggle for relevant instruments for peace, democracy and credible elections in Africa. Knowing the undeniable role it plays in appeasing social tensions, Niger becomes the first African country to consider the Joking Relationship as part of the UNESCO heritage.

CONCLUSION

The ethno- regional allegiances has generated socio- political crises in post-colonial African states. This situation has impacted negatively on democracy in Africa. Nevertheless, the cultural practice of the Joking Relationship has been used as an efficient tool to assure

sustainable peace in Africa. National and International mediation in African crises will give better results if they involve local facilitators who will use this tool during the negotiation. Teaching and institutionalizing the practice of the Joking Relationship will help to better spread it all over Africa. Moreover, regional youth festivals on the same issue will also help to spread it. Unfortunately the Joking Relationship is ignored by many African leaders. The question to be asked here is: What motivates politicians to ignore such an important cultural practice? Do they view it as a sophisticated weapon for the poor masses to unite themselves?

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