Mediation as Conflict Resolution in Traditional Ndebele Society

Sam bulo Ndlovu and Lindiwe Ndlovu

Key Terms:
Ndebele people
Nguni group of people in Zimbabwe closely related to the Zulu of South Africa
Traditional Ndebele society
The Ndebele society outside the influence of colonialism
Mediation
The process of minimizing/stopping conflict or potential conflict

Introduction

Traditional Ndebele society operated as a state before the advent of colonialism in Zimbabwe. There were political institutions that started with the family and the village, up to the king. In all these institutions conflict was part of life and it had to be resolved an amicable fashion, often by means of mediation. Some institutions of mediation are still found in present day Ndebele society. Mediation in Ndebele is not employed when conflicts occur. However it is an institution in anticipation and mediators for various types of conflicts are known and are in place to resolve any conflict that may occur.

A mediator is respected and cannot be part of the conflict. Mediators are found in all forums of conflict in Ndebele. When two people are in conflict there is always a third person ready to go between them to stop and resolve the conflict. Interests, marriage, generation gap, families, power and resources are sources of conflict in Ndebele society; in all these instances mediation can be employed as a means to resolve existing conflicts.
The Concept of Mediation in Ndebele Society

Ndebele society has social, political, and religious systems where people have conflicts with each other and with the gods. In anticipation of conflict, the society has developed institutions of mediation in all sectors of life. There are people who are best suited to mediate in certain conflict situations, which make the mediation effort effective and respected by both parties.

Contemporary African politics employs mediation as a strategy in conflict resolution, however peace is seldom achieved, as the mediation process is not based on African traditional mediation as found in Ndebele society. Sometimes conflict entails physical confrontation that can result in a fight or even war. There can also be conflicts of interest, or differences of opinion or principle. In a physical fight, the mediator physically intervenes to stop the fighting, by getting between the warring parties strategically so as not to take sides. People can offend each other and engage in a war of words and even insult each other. In such conflicts the mediator is expected to use language to calm them down and resolve their differences. Conflict and its resolution have always been crucial to Ndebele society.

Doing wrong, conflict and offending each other originated with men. However conflicts are related to a people’s way of life. Therefore the types of offences and their resolution are based on the way of life of the people.

Cultural borrowing has introduced problems that are alien to the Ndebele way of life, making it difficult for the traditional mediation strategies to cope. Mediation in Ndebele society develops with the intensity of the conflict. It develops because it is always there even before the conflict. A conflict and a crisis are perceived through experiences of a community.

A crisis is a critical time, the decisive moment or turning point in a situation. Your perception of a crisis situation is influenced by all your past experiences (Westlake and Westlake (eds), 1992: 444).

Mediation in Ndebele society is part of life. It occurs in two forms: passive and active mediation. To every potential conflict, there is a passive mediator or passive mediation. Ndebele social, political and religious structure includes a mediator in all possible points of conflict. The Ndebele use oratory to train people from early age, on how to be good and peaceful citizens. Such knowledge becomes inert and acts as a form of passive mediation between adversaries. If the conflict is not deterred by passive mediation, an active mediator steps in usually using diplomacy and oratory to resolve the conflict.

The Ndebele perform verbal genres to avoid or to resolve conflict; these genres are partly designed to ‘save faces.’ Most mediators are born in Ndebele culture and they establish relations that are best suited for their job of mediation. Political leaders are arbitrators and mediators, heirs to the throne are trained and conditioned for the task of mediation. The imbongi (praise poet) is also born and trained from youth as a mediator between the people and the king. Royal paternal aunts and the king’s wives also become mediators, while on the social front mothers, aunts, uncles and friends mediate many conflicts. Conflicts are also prevalent in the religious
realm where spirit mediums, ancestral sprits and rain makers are mediators in Ndebele traditional society.

Mediation is not a preserve of Ndebele society only, but a phenomenon common to most African societies.

Intermediaries in African cultures employ linguistic codes such as metaphors, proverbs and circumlocutions to address literal or delicate issues. The linguistic codes are used artistically and as a face saving strategy in dealing with delicate matters in the culture.

Western cultures have their ways of solving problems that are culture specific; however Western strategies have been applied to African conflicts yielding no results or, at times, even exacerbating the conflict. Fig 1 is a model of how Westerners often perceive conflict and its resolution.

Ndebele traditional crisis resolution and phases follow more or less the same developments, conflict is precipitated by a conflict of interest, if one party to the conflict challenges and the other resists a conflict or crisis ensue. The intensity of the challenge and counter resistance can raise the conflict to confrontation; active mediation is employed by the Ndebele at this stage to avoid fighting.
Institutionalization of mediation in Ndebele traditional society derives a slightly different model from the one on fig 1. Mediation, be it passive or active follows the conflict development from the precipitant to the resolution stage. Ndebele society has mediation in peace and conflict time as in the model in fig 2:
FIG 2
Traditional Ndebele Crisis Model

Peace time is monitored to prevent conflicts; all people in Ndebele society are trained from an early age through orature and religion to avoid conflict. All conflict situations have a known mediator who advises them even during peace time, the education and the presence of a known mediator forms passive mediation in the
above model. When tensions rise to confrontational levels the mediator actively steps in to resolve the conflict, when resolved the situation goes back to passive mediation.

**Political Mediation in Ndebele Traditional Society**

Ndebele traditional society has lost some of its political systems, like the king and his armies, the *imbongi* culture is now known as oral art, not an arm of government. This paper looks at mediation as it obtained in past political systems and in present ones. Conflict was prevalent between the king and his people, and between individuals in the kingdom, all this called for passive and active mediation to resolve the conflicts and maintain peace. The *imbongi* is now known as the praise poet which is not proper as the *imbongi* was more of a critic and advisor to the king and the people through poetry.

In Ndebele traditional society the *imbongi* was a known mediator between the king and the people, the duty of the *imbongi* was to advise both the king and the people to iron out differences. The *imbongi* created praise poetry that people could recite and through these poems he would advise the people on how to avoid conflicts with the king, and in turn advise the king on how to avoid conflict with the people. He was not biased but rather balanced issues diplomatically so as to remain a trusted mediator. The Ndebele *imbongi* was not employed by the king as in other cultures.

*Phakathi kwezinye izizwe, ikakhulu ezentshonalanga yeAfrica imbongi yayinjengesisebenzi ngoba yayiholiswa inzuzo ekupheleni kwenyanga loba umnyaka. Kakukhanyi ukuthi kwakunjalo phakathi kwabeNguni labesuthu* (Ndhlukula 1980: 83)
Among other nations especially in West Africa it is said the *imbongi* was a servant of the king, because he was given a salary at the end of the month or year. It appears that was not the case among the Nguni and the Sotho.

The fact that the Ndebele *imbongis* were not employed by the king made them trusted mediators; they were respected people that were born *imbongis*. There was a family of *imbongis*, it was passed from father to son, which meant that the *imbongi* was trained from birth to be a good mediator between the people and the king; he was given all the skills for passive and active mediation. The Ndebele believe that a king is a king on account of the people (*inkosi yinkosi ngabantu*). The people had institutionalized ways of approaching, and admonishing the king through the *imbongi* to avoid or resolve conflict.

The *imbongi* enjoyed diplomatic immunity so as to handle fairly the conflicts of interests between the king and the people. Conflicts were maintained below the crisis threshold by the mediating *imbongi*, when confrontation ensued he would actively engage the king and people to resolve the conflict. Praise poetry is not an appropriate name for the *imbongi*’s recitations as they are not praises only but admonishes too. The *imbongi* did his poetry in front of the king and the people, the poetry was mediation, telling people and the king where and how to compromise and capitulate to save face or restore peace. The people would agree to mediation by responding to points of agreement with a shout ‘*mu.....tsho!*’ or *yi.....tsho!* (say his praises), these words were said to affirm compromise or resolution.

Conflict between the king and the people resulted in assassinations and at times the break up of kingdoms. The *imbongi* then was an important mediator to avoid this catastrophe. King Lobengula Khumalo who ruled after the death of his father Mzilikazi, the founder of the Ndebele state, conflicted with the people by killing
his brothers to ascend to the throne. The *imbongi* stepped in to mediate the conflict and told the king to compromise and stop the purge so that the conflict to be resolved. At the time, the Ndebele poet enjoyed immunity from royal retribution during his recital. When king Lobengula was referred to as *Ngqungqulu emadol’ abomvu / Ngokugq’ engazini zabafowenu*! (Eagle with bloodied knees, Through kneeling on the blood of thine brothers). (Here Lobhengula) was not being praised; his attention was being drawn to his excesses which were worrying a lot of people (Nyathi, 2000: 27).

After the death of Mzilikazi people were divided over Lobengula and Nkulumane, there was a conflict of interest. The *imbongi* praised Lobengula to persuade the people into accepting him and at the same time admonishing his excesses to strike a mediation balance.

Conflict resolution between the king and his people went beyond the *imbongi*, there were other mediators in Ndebele traditional society. Ndebele society had *umndlunkulu* culture, this was a situation whereby the king had a wife in all villages of his kingdom. The wives of the king in all villages were called *umndlunkulu*, these were also mediators between the king and the people. The *umndlunkulu* would have a soft spot for the king to make him compromise in mediation and was also trusted by the village as she was their daughter. Some of the villages where Mzilikazi had *umndlunkulu* are *koGodlwayo, emaKhandeni, eNqameni* and *eMzinyathini*.

*Umndlunkulu* was a meeting point for the king and peoples interests. Where there was a conflict of interest the *umndlunkulu* fitted best for the task of mediation to resolve the conflict. The *umndlunkulu* had a duty beyond being wife to the king:
Ummsebenzi womndlunkulu okusigaba sine ngasinye wawungowokuhlanganisa isizwe usisondeze eduze kwenkosi (Ndlovu et al 1995: 124-125). The job of the umndlunkulu in each village was to unite the nation and draw it closer to the king.

Unity in the kingdom could only be achieved through management of conflict and its resolution; the umndlunkulu had the national duty of mediation to achieve this unity.

The umndlumkulu were not the only female mediators between the king and the people, the royal paternal aunts also played the role of mediators. The aunts were particularly important mediators within the royal family because conflict within the royal family could split or even destroy the nation. Most Nguni kings had sisters who were very influential in their reign, by way of resolving conflicts within and without the royal family. Women by their compassionate nature were used as mediators in political conflict in Ndebele traditional society to achieve conflict resolution.

Ndebele traditional stratum was made up of village heads, chiefs and then the king. Conflicts of interests among individuals and families were resolved by these political leaders who doubled up as arbitrators too. The leaders had to be fair to both parties to resolve and not worsen the conflict.

The central problem of statesmanship is how to achieve an optimum blend of coercion and accommodation in one’s strategy, a blend that would both avoid war and maximize one’s gains or minimize one’s losses (Snyder and Diesing, 1977: 10)

A good mediator in Ndebele is one who can keep secrets, the people are not supposed to know about the matter. Contemporary
mediation borrows from this strategy and the media are sometimes barred from covering the mediation talks, but the fact that people know that there are talks, works against the strategy of secrecy in mediation. In a situation whereby the conflict is known by conflicting parties and the mediator only, it is easy to save face and compromise to resolve a conflict as people do not know about the capitulation which could embarrass a party to the conflict and make them more confrontational. Secrecy limited the influence of other people on the resolution of the conflict; people can side with one party and influence the mediator to be subjective, which is not good mediation.

Ndebele chiefs had about ten villages under them and each village had a headman, and the chiefs were under the king. When conflict ensued between two people they were supposed to use passive mediation and talk to each other. When ukuxoliswa (reconciliation) was not achieved at this stage the matter was taken to the village headmen who had two or three elders to help him mediate fairly. The intended goal of the headman’s mediation is for the two to do what is called ukugezelana induma (to wash each other’s scars) this is to forgive and live together again.

The village headman sometimes failed to resolve the conflict; it was at this stage that the conflict was referred to the chief for further mediation. All parties to the mediation went to the chief who had his elders as well. The use of elders to help a mediator is also used today in international crisis resolution, where former heads of states and icons are drafted into mediation teams as elders. The chief demanded that conflicting parties both bring a goat that is to be eaten by the mediators; this was a sign of neutrality.

Kukuleli ibanga lapho amadoda la alengqxabano azakhutshiswa khonaldhubzi ezizadiwa ngamadoda nxa eseqede ukulingisa

It is at this stage that the conflicting men paid each a goat that was eaten by them and the mediating team after resolving the conflict. There were no other payments except these goats.

The chiefs were the last part of mediation in such conflicts; this is why he had the power to separate the two if he was not satisfied with the resolution. It was believed that if they live apart they will forget and forgive each other. In such a case the chief would have employed separation as a resolution strategy.

Religious Mediation in Ndebele Traditional Society

Ndebele traditional society is a monotheistic society believing in uNkulunkulu (God), the conduct of religious life is through mediums. There are conflicts between people and the gods while some conflicts between individuals are religious in nature. Resolution of such conflicts is done through mediation that can be passive or active like social and political conflicts. In religious conflicts mediation is done mostly by religious practitioners and the spirits.

Traditional Ndebele society believes in the duality of life; that is in the physical world and the spiritual world. Certain physical conditions are caused by the spirit world. Confrontation between the people and the spirit can cause misfortune and resolution of the conflict is the resolution of the misfortune. Rain is the source of life in Ndebele society. The falling of rain or lack of it indicates a relationship between the people and the spiritual world. When there is conflict between the people and the spirits, the spirits can cause
drought, this situation calls for immediate mediation to resolve the conflict and bring back the rain.

When normal rains did not materialize the people interpreted this to mean that god or the living dead were angry. Here was a case of the citizens in the physical world conducting themselves in a manner that angers the citizens of the spirit world (Nyathi, 2000: 86).

There is a mediator specifically for the conflict between the gods and the people that results in drought. The *iwosana* (rain maker) mediates between the people and spirit world to bring about a resolution that would see the rain falling again. The king also acted as part of spiritual mediation for rainfall alongside the *iwosana*. *Iwosana lidlozi eligidela izulu* (the *wosana* is a spirit that dances and makes the rain) (Ndlovu et al, 1995: 160). The mediation of the *iwosana* entails appeasing the gods and admonishing the people to strike a balance that brings rain back to the land.

While the *iwosana* mediates between the people and the gods to bring the rain, there are other religious practitioners in Ndebele tradition that use religious mediation to resolve civil conflicts. The *isangoma* and *isanusi* are spiritual diviners that mediate conflicts by using information they get from the gods. It is easier for these diviners to settle conflicts because they are religiously respected by both parties and use the spirits to see what an ordinary mediator cannot see. People in conflicts go to these mediators who advise them on what the gods want as resolution to the conflict, such cases are usually successful as everyone knows that one cannot go against the gods. Spiritual mediation thrives through the fear of the unknown, it is in this type of mediation that:

Diplomacy becomes more actively coercive and the emotional climate shifts toward greater hostility and fear.
Aims center on winning the conflict rather than realizing common interests (Snyder and Diesing, 1977: 10)

Mediation that involves the spirits does not need to balance interests, as the gods cannot be wrong, it is more of enticing the wrong to repent to resolve the conflict.

The *inyanga* (medicine man) is a very important spiritual mediator in Ndebele, mediating over conflicts that draw in even evil spirits. When people have a conflict they can use witchcraft on the confrontation phase of the conflict, when conflict gets to this stage it is only the *inyanga* who can mediate and the resolution entails wadding off the witchcraft.

*Nxa ubuthakathi sebungenile ekhaya sekumele kubizwe inyanga izoxotshana labo ize ibukhuphe ngemithi* (Ndhlukula, 1980: 155).

When witchcraft has entered the home, an *inyanga* is called to fight it until he removes it with his medicine.

The *inyanga* mediates between the witch and the bewitched to resolve the conflict and enable them to live together without fear or suspicion. The medicine of an *inyanga* removes the misfortune brought about by the witchcraft while at the same time helping the witch to leave witchcraft. Mediation in witchcraft conflict can only be spiritual; this is so because for a conflict to be resolved there should be confidence that the mediator can resolve the conflict. Anyone who tries to mediate in witchcraft conflict without the spiritual power is in danger of being a victim of witchcraft.

Ndebele spiritual practitioners are not ordinary people, they are spirit mediums, a spirit possesses them and it is the spirit that talks to god not them. The spirits that possess the living are spirits of
the dead, to talk to these spirits people organize mediation ceremonies like *ukubuyisa* (bringing the spirit of the dead home) and *ukuthethela* (appeasing the spirits). When the mediation ceremonies are performed, the spirits take their place as mediators between the people and *Unkulunkulu* (God). Ndebele traditional mediation in spiritual conflicts includes mediation ceremonies that are performed to resolve conflicts with God because people cannot speak to God directly.

Ndebele religion posits that God never speaks to men of flesh. God, who is spiritual, speaks to the spiritual, the living dead. The living dead who once lived can speak to men and vice versa. The philosophy tallies well with biblical teachings. God wanted to communicate with man, he sent Jesus Christ, who had a material component, to the world. By assuming the composite nature, Jesus stands as the bridge, the way and the truth between man and god (Nyathi, 2000: 134).

The spirits are also passive and active mediators in social conflicts. Spiritual mediation is mostly damage mitigation because the gods are powerful and cannot be confronted by man. Spiritual mediation therefore balances appeasement and repentance to resolve conflicts.

**Social Mediation in Ndebele Traditional Society**

A culture of a people can be an agent in the resolution of conflict. Culture is the philosophy of life of a people, their beliefs, shared values and norms. It is these shared values within a society that govern social relationships. The basic unit of a society is the family. The Ndebele traditional society was organized around an extended
family and the extended family in Ndebele had mechanisms for conflict resolution. Marriage which is a highly respected institution among the Ndebele was not a contract between two individuals but a contract involving many relatives who had a role to play in that marriage. In almost all families there are strains and tensions which sometimes affect its existence. As the family is the basic unit of a society, anything that threatens the well-being of a family also threatens the stability of that society.

In Ndebele society there were individuals within the family whose responsibility was to mediate between members of the family to resolve conflicts. In traditional Ndebele society there are values which are applied to different members of a family and such values go with duties and obligations which individuals are expected to fulfill in various social circumstances. In contemporary society some of these duties have been taken over by various institutions like the school, the church, health institutions and welfare organizations. These institutions have to a greater extent taken over the responsibility and role of the family in conflict resolution. However the effectiveness of such institutions in solving conflicts is still questionable.

Problems within our society which include among others, a high divorce rate, increase in suicide cases, domestic violence, abortion, baby dumping and gruesome murder cases resulting from family quarrels all seem to confirm the failure or ineffectiveness of these western institutions in resolving conflicts. The process of conflict resolution that does not take into account the culture of a people is not likely to be successful. Conflict resolution should not be an alienating process. The so called professional counselors are often isolated or cut off from the community. As such it is difficult for them to establish the source of the problem; they can only deal with the symptoms of the problem without addressing the cause. Such conflict resolutions tend
to be artificial and the motivation behind is often materialistic. A mediator should possess certain qualities necessary for the process of mediation. Such qualities include among others, honesty, reliability, prudence responsibility as well as confidentiality.

A society that fails to resolve its conflicts cannot develop because development can only be successful in a peaceful and orderly environment. Development cannot take place in an atmosphere marred with conflicts. In every society there are morals which govern the welfare of its members. Such morals in Ndebele are contained in orature which forms passive mediation in Ndebele society. Entrenched in folklore are the rules and laws which give meaning to a society and govern human conduct. Human conduct has two dimensions, the personal and social conduct. Mbiti (1975: 179) notes that most African societies put emphasis on the social conduct. For an individual to avoid being in conflict with the society, he or she must follow that society’s rules and customs. The Ndebele were aware that it was eminent that some people would violate the rules of society and knew that infringement of the social norms would sometimes result in conflict. It was therefore the duty of the mediator to resolve such conflict.

Mediators play a vital role in every society and without them there will be chaos and confusion. Mediators protect family and society as a whole from disintegration. Among the Ndebele people who held the office of mediators within the family include among others, *ugogo* or *umakhulu* (grandmother), *ubabakazi* (paternal aunt) *umalume* (maternal uncle), *ubabamkhulu* (grandfather), *umkhongi* (marriage go between), and *umzukulu* (nephew). Kinship positions that these members found themselves in made them qualify as mediators. It was because of the appreciation of the status of these mediators that Ndebele society was successful in resolving its conflicts.
Among the mediators is the paternal aunt *ubabakazi*. The paternal aunt holds a respectable position within the family. She is the sister of the father of the family; literally she is a ‘female father’. *Ubabakazi* is highly valued and holds a powerful position within the extended family. She is involved in passive as well as active mediation, passive mediation by way of advising her brother’s daughters and prepares them for marital life. She is responsible for the socialization of girls in the family into adult life. It is at puberty stage that the girls need support as they experience interpersonal conflicts and also conflict with the society. Puberty presents traumatic experiences to adolescents and without proper guidance the youth cannot cope with the challenges.

In Ndebele culture individual freedom is not supposed to clash with the interests and welfare of the society. The paternal aunt prepared the girls to cope with household chores and difficulties in marriage. In a way *ubabakazi* mediates between her brother’s daughters and the family and even society at large. If some conflict arose between the parents and the daughter, it was the duty of *ubabakazi* to resolve the conflict. Conflicts within the family that arose out of sensitive or emotive issues were resolved by *ubabakazi*. Most problems in marriage often stem from sensitive issues that cannot be discussed with some members of the family. Issues to do with the subject of sex and sexuality can only be effectively handled by *ubabakazi* without causing embarrassment or discomfort to the people involved.

A lot of married people have a wide range of sexual problems which they encounter. What tends to make problems of this nature difficult to resolve is that they are considered to be private and confidential. Such problems can range from sexual dissatisfaction or deprivation to sexual frustration. *Ubabakazi* because of her position is at liberty to discuss uncomfortable issues. She is also thought to be
prudent and cautious with such issues. Most conflicts which occur outside the bedroom often result in conflicts in the bedroom. Conflict is common in all marriages; the difference is how to handle the conflict.

One can also argue that conflict is like dynamite, it can be positive or negative depending on how it is dealt with. If handled properly conflict can result in strengthening of the relationship of the affected people, but if handled wrongly it has devastating effects. Nowadays most marital conflicts are destructive because they are not handled well. Some mediators because of lack of the qualities essential for mediation often fail or take long to resolve a conflict. Prolonged conflict can have destructive effects. Most suicide cases are a result of such prolonged conflicts.

Occupying almost the same position as the parental aunt is umalume (maternal uncle). Literally this is a ‘male mother’ to the head of the family, who is the father. Umalume is the most trusted and reliable person. It is given that he cannot disappoint or mislead his sister’s sons because he is like a mother to them. A mother’s love is supreme, it is not conditional. Whenever a conflict arises in the family, the father of the house consults his maternal uncle who mediates to resolve the conflict. Problems arising from issues such as impotence, adultery and other problems in marriage can best be handled by umalume.

In Ndebele society like other African societies wisdom comes with age. In African families there is a hierarchy based on age. Mbiti notes that the oldest members of the family have higher status than the youngest (1975:178). One quality necessary for mediation in Ndebele is maturity. Mature people often have the ability and capability to handle complicated cases. In Ndebele society old members of the community automatically qualify to be mediators by
virtue of their age. As such there are duties and responsibilities expected from such members.

*Ubabamkhulu* (grandfather) often acts as a mediator within the family. In the African worldview, the idea of a family includes the departed. In Ndebele it is the oldest members of the family who are thought to be closer to the ancestors. It is this aspect that makes mediation by old people very effective and fruitful. *Ubabamkhulu* is the one who presides over the custom of *ukuthethela* (appeasing of the ancestors in times of trouble) and in this position he also acts as a mediator. The success of mediation by *ubabamkhulu* can be explained on the experience he has as an old member of the family and also the respect he commands in the family. Going against the decision of *ubabamkhulu* is taboo and is tantamount to disobeying the ancestors, an action that can bring *umnyama* (bad luck) to the person concerned.

*Ubabamkhulu* is the backbone of the family (*insika yomuizi*). He is the primary adviser and occupies a privileged position in the family as he is the most respected member of the family. He mediates in conflicts that threaten the well-being of the family. *Ubabamkhulu* also mediates in serious matters where for instance members of the family cannot see each other eye to eye. These would have gone through the process known as *ukufungelana ijoyi* (an oath of enemity) which often calls for the performance of some rituals to reconcile the affected members. The ritual is known as *ukukhumisana umlotha* (licking of ashes). After partaking in such a ritual the members affected are considered to have forgiven each other.

The grandmother also holds a respectable position at home. Her role is to ensure that proper tradition is followed. She is often consulted by children on delicate matters affecting their lives. When children clash with parents, it is the role of the grandmother to settle the disputes. She has soft spot for all members of the family, and she
is often patient and fully aware of the strengths and weaknesses of every member. She can also keep secrets hence is trustworthy and reliable. *Ugogo* also presided over *induduzelo*, girls’ puberty rites and it is here that she, together with other elderly women mediated passively as they prepared the girls for womanhood.

The girl was given lessons on a number of issues including how to become a good wife, how to care for children, acceptable behavior towards men, sex education, home economics and the regulation of one’s sexual desires (Nyathi, 2000: 100).

Premarital sex among the Ndebele was despised. The grandmother also partakes in marriage counseling which was seen as the cornerstone of all stable marriages. This is an element of passive mediation as the girl is counseled on how to handle conflict in her marriage.

*Umzukulu* (nephew) is another family member who often mediates in social conflicts. *Umzukulu* is the son to the sister of the head of the family. He has a special position and is expected to fulfill a number of duties and responsibilities. Death was sometimes the source of conflict between members in the family. It is during the death of his uncle that *umzukulu* often acted as a mediator. *Umzukulu* is supposed to take care of his uncles property and family before the custom of *ukubuyisa* (bringing home ceremony. He is also actively involved in the distribution of the deceased’s estate. He has a very close relationship with his uncle and because of this he somehow knows his uncle’s secrets and wishes. It is because of this familiarity that *umzukulu* is entrusted with all the above responsibilities. *umzukulu* has a soft spot for his uncle, as such he sometimes mediates over minor quarrels affecting the family.
Ndebele marriage is not contact between two individuals; it is a contract between two families. Sometimes conflict arose between two families and it was the responsibility of umkhongi (marriage go between) to mediate and resolve such conflict. Marriage is never easy and conflict between two families is inevitable. In Ndebele marriage is not an event but a long process stretching from courtship to death. Throughout the whole process umkhongi acts as a link between two families. Umkhongi is appointed by the elders of the family after considering a lot of issues. He had to be part of that community as well as an elder. He had to be a person familiar with the culture of the people, intelligent, courageous and trustworthy. The two families are introduced to each other in a process known as ukuvela.

Abakwabo kajaha bathuma indoda eyingcwethi ukuba iyevelela ijaha eselikhonjiwe. Indoda leyo (umkhongi) ifika njengomuntu wenzini (Sibanda, 2002: 88). The family of the bridegroom send an intelligent and knowledgeable man to go and introduce them to the family of the bride the man goes there as a visitor.

Umkhongi had to be skillful and possess linguistic skill to win consent of the bride’s family. He also had to be creative and brave because the bride’s family could use intimidation as a strategy to test the seriousness of the groom and umkhongi represents the groom. Umkhongi also mediates during the payment of lobola (bride price). The payment of lobola could sometimes be a source of conflict especially if there are disagreements on the number of cattle to be paid for lobola. Other issues in which umkhongi helped the two families resolve conflict included inheritance disputes, alleged witchcraft, domestic violence and other issues which affected the two families.

It is clear therefore that the Ndebele social system had effective mechanisms for conflict resolution. The problem with the
contemporary society is that of borrowing western models of resolving conflict which do not fit well into our setting, and these have impacted negatively on peace building qualities necessary for mediation. There is need therefore to learn from our indigenous knowledge systems. This does not mean that we have to abandon the modern systems of mediation and go back to the past. Principles behind conflict resolution processes should emanate from within the culture. It is the philosophy or ethos behind the traditional concept of mediation that is important and that should form the basis for mediation. For the process of conflict resolution to be relevant, it should be linked to the culture of the people concerned. This is not to imply that culture should be static. Every culture is subject to change and changes in a people’s culture become positive if they come from within.

Failure to realize that cultural change is only meaningful when the source of such change is within, led to the imposition of foreign cultures on indigenous African cultures (Maphosa in Chiwome and Gambahaya (eds), 1998: 95).

African societies therefore have a challenge to revisit their conflict resolution strategies and make them relevant to the people. That can be done by including the values enshrined in the cultures of the people concerned.

Conclusion

The structure of Ndebele traditional society is sensitive to conflict; everyone is taught oral literature and values that compliment mediation in conflict resolution. All people are educated on how to avoid or resolve conflicts; this education forms part of passive
mediation in Ndebele traditional society. All conflict situations and types are always anticipated. When the conflict becomes confrontational, the society knows that there is a mediator who should take care of it before it reaches war or fighting levels. The passive mediator harnesses passive mediation education and active mediation as a way of resolving the conflict and restoring peace. There is a passive mediator to every potential conflict. There are social, political and religious mediators because Ndebele traditional life is socio-political and religious. The purpose of mediation in Ndebele society is to restore peace and not to win conflicts because the society is a communal one where people need each other. Separation is a strategy of last resort in social and political mediation in traditional Ndebele society. It is believed that when parties to a conflict are separated they will forget and ultimately forgive, leading to the resolution of the conflict.

References


