

BOOK REVIEW: Settling Disputes in Africa: Traditional Bases for Conflict Resolution

By Isaac Njoh Endeley, PhD, JD (Endeley@aol.com)

George Ngwane. (1996). *Settling Disputes in Africa: Traditional Bases for Conflict Resolution*. Buma Kor House Publishers Ltd., B.P. 727 Yaoundé, Cameroon. 236 pages.

[Forward by Dr. Jean-Emmanuel Pondi, International Relations Institute of Cameroon (IRIC)]

As the title suggests, the purpose of this book is to explore traditional African methods of resolving the continent's many conflicts. The author, Mr. George Ngwane, displays an uncanny familiarity with his subject matter in this well-written essay. From Algeria to Zimbabwe, he examines virtually all of the festering crisis situations in Africa and recommends different ways of resolving them peacefully. The work is neatly divided into seven chapters, each one of them dealing with a specific aspect of conflict resolution. At the outset the author establishes a clear distinction between “intrastate conflict” and “interstate conflict” in Africa. The former, he contends, “involves conflict over governance and conflict over structures of democracy” while the latter “involves conflict over territorial sovereignty and frontiers” (p.7).

Settling Disputes in Africa is an ambitious work that rejects Western models of resolving disputes and boldly aims instead at bringing to the fore traditional African ways of solving problems. The first three chapters, which deal with intrastate conflicts, examine the different strategies that could be employed to defuse potentially deadly political crises within African nations. The author advances many different hypotheses for conflict resolution including: constitutional talks, power-sharing mechanisms, use of the media, street parliaments, non-governmental organisations, and the Church, among others. He points in particular to the traditional African “palaver” wherein differences are discussed by all the parties concerned and in full view of the public until a consensus

is reached. He also highlights the role celebrities (including artists, writers, scholars, musicians, sports figures) can play in bringing peace to troubled lands, since, as he puts it, “[t]he advantage of being non-partisan makes them comfortable across the political divide, and their celebrity gives them access to those wielding power” (p.68).

Perhaps one of the most original contributions of this book lies in the very prominent role the author suggests women should play in conflict mediation. Mr. Ngwane's work is informed by various aspects of African history as he attempts to underscore the political importance of traditional women's associations. He takes account of the work women have done in bringing about a peaceful settlement of African political disputes in the past and indicates ways that this can be duplicated in the future. He makes the inevitable link between peace and development, and adds that “[w]hile the issue of female subjugation is important, the very status of the woman will be uplifted if she got involved in issues that break the paralysing chains of human dominance” (p.78).

Chapters Four and Five deal with interstate conflicts and cover the problems arising from colonial boundaries, regional co-operation, economic solidarity, general security, international organisations, and African unity. The author identifies colonialism and its legacy as the root causes of armed conflicts between African States, particularly between States sharing a common border. He glides effortlessly from one country to the next to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of the continent's international boundaries and to propose models for resolving each individual conflict. He singles out the effectiveness of multilateral (as opposed to bilateral) avenues to conflict resolution and advances a number of recommendations designed to render the Organisation of African Unity (now the African Union) and other international organisations more potent in settling international disputes.

Mr. Ngwane returns in Chapter Six (captioned “Old Values: New Models”) to traditional African conceptual models for conflict resolution. He examines the methods used to settle disputes in pre-colonial Africa and draws from them to formulate possible solutions for the post-colonial era. The African “palaver” based on a broad consensus is

given a prominent position in the various models proposed. But the author also castigates contemporary African statesmen for their “lacklustre leadership” and for their excessive subservience to non-African interests. Opposition parties (which he terms “alternative parties”) are not spared his criticism either. He proposes a conciliatory model of multiparty politics that would see an alternation between the different political forces in controlling the governmental apparatus. In the final chapter, the author addresses the broader question of “African Unionism” which he ultimately recommends as the best model for the continent to adopt in the future.

This is a very interesting work that aims to provide concrete African solutions to the continent's political problems. It is innovative in its approach to conflict resolution and Mr. Ngwane deserves to be congratulated for taking bold strides in this direction. But by the same token, this may also be one of the weaknesses of his work, for the author fails to consider much of the research that has previously been undertaken in this field. This essay is not sufficiently grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of “traditional” Peace Studies and it often appears rather unfocused and eclectic. The reader ends up with the impression that there are many more issues that could have been explored. But then, Mr. Ngwane is not a Political Scientist. He writes from the perspective of a concerned and well-informed African, and he does a very good job of it. Indeed, as Professor Pondi notes in the Foreword, “[t]he insight contained in this analysis by George Ngwane is a brilliant testimony to the fact that political analysis is too serious a subject to be left safely in the hands of Political Scientists alone” (p. v).

Another shortcoming of the work, however, is the fact that it is very scantily documented. The author quotes too many people without providing adequate, verifiable references. There is a Bibliography and an Index at the end of the essay, but they are hardly sufficient for a work of this importance. One more problem is that, in spite of Mr. Ngwane's excellent mastery of the English language, the text contains too many typographical and orthographical errors. To be sure, they are minor ones, but they tend to interrupt his smooth, flowing prose. The work could have benefited enormously from proper editing by Buma Kor before publication.

Settling Disputes in Africa is a very important essay and should be recommended reading for all those working in the field of conflict resolution in Africa, whether they be politicians, diplomats, academics, or international civil servants. The author has taken a major initiative with this innovative approach to Peace Studies and he deserves to be praised for looking inwards rather than outwards for solutions to Africa's political problems. It is to be hoped that Mr. Ngwane's work will set the trend for other researchers to explore the wealth of traditional African models for conflict resolution.

I.N.E.