



**Culture and Conflict Resolution:
When a Low-Context Culture and a High-Context Culture Collide, What Happens?**

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Abstract

The goal of this essay is to critically and deeply reflect on the most important themes, insights and questions on approaches to culture, conflict and conflict resolution. To achieve this goal, the essay explores answers to four relevant questions: What is the place of culture in conflict and conflict resolution? What are the various notions of culture in the conflict resolution literature, and how are they different or similar? What happens when a low-context culture and a high-context culture collide? In other words, how could the lessons learned from John Kerry's August 23, 2016 diplomatic visit to Nigeria shape our understanding of culture, conflict and conflict resolution? In the end, the essay recommends practical lessons for intercultural or cross-cultural negotiation, mediation and other forms of conflict resolution.

Keywords: culture, conflict, conflict resolution, diplomacy, mediation, negotiation, low-context culture, high-context culture, Nigeria

Introduction

On September 14, 2016, Melinda Burrell, Mariya Mironova (my colleagues at the Nova Southeastern University's Department of Conflict Resolution Studies) and I, Basil Ugorji, facilitated the culture and conflict class discussion on *Approaches to Culture and Conflict Resolution*. Drawing on chapters 3-5 of Augsburg's (1992) book, *Conflict Mediation across Cultures*, as well as Moore and Woodrow's (2004) article, *Mapping Cultures: Strategies for Effective Intercultural Negotiations*, our joint presentation explored and examined important aspects of culture and conflict resolution, particularly, the role that culture plays in conflict and conflict resolution, similarities and differences of the readings, literature review of the previous weeks' readings, and Brexit as a real life conflict. The presentation ended with an analysis of the readings, and a reflection on the lessons learned from John Kerry's August 23, 2016 diplomatic visit to Nigeria.

This essay, however, does not seek to repeat the above-mentioned aspects of our class presentation *ad verbum*, that is, word for word. Instead, the goal of the essay is to critically and deeply reflect on and analyze the most relevant themes, insights and questions that emerged from the readings and class discussions, and to re-examine one of the real-life conflict situations that was discussed during the presentation. In doing so, the essay seeks to explore the answers to the following four questions: What is the place of culture in conflict and conflict resolution? What are the various notions of culture in the conflict resolution literature, and how are they different or similar? What happens when a low-context culture and a high-context culture collide? In other words, how could the lessons learned from John Kerry's visit to Nigeria shape our understanding of culture, conflict and conflict resolution?

Finally, the essay concludes with a critical evaluation and a reflection on the lessons that conflict interveners could learn to enhance their intercultural competencies and communication.

First Consideration: On the Place of Culture in Conflict and Conflict Resolution

The understanding of culture and the role it plays in conflict and conflict resolution are the main preoccupations of Augsburg's (1992) book, *Conflict Mediation across Cultures*, as well as Moore and Woodrow's (2004) article, *Mapping Cultures: Strategies for Effective Intercultural Negotiations*. Personally, and most importantly, the understanding of culture and its relationship with identity, conflict, and conflict resolution are also at the heart and soul of my conflict analysis and resolution studies. During my studies in philosophy, unlike most of my colleagues, I debuted a critical analysis of "hermeneutics and interpretation of symbols in Igbo culture" (Ugorji, 2005) through the lenses of Paul Ricoeur's theory of hermeneutics. This study was conducted in the southeastern part of Nigeria where the Igbo people are located. At that time, I was fascinated by Ricoeur's philosophical writings on the science and art of interpretation and understanding of cultural elements, particularly cultural symbols. For this reason, I became his ardent and staunch disciple. I had the privilege of reading *The Symbolism of Evil* (Ricoeur, 1967), *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation* (Ricoeur, 1981), *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Ricoeur, 1974), *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (Ricoeur, 1966), *History and Truth* (Ricoeur, 1965), *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Ricoeur, 1977), and *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Ricoeur, 1976).

In addition to Paul Ricoeur's works, I developed interest in Ernst Cassirer's (1979) *Symbol, Myth and Culture* as well as the bestselling and widely read *Things Fall Apart*, a novel written by Chinua Achebe (1959) which narrates two seemingly distinct but interrelated stories about culture and conflict. The one is a conflict between a powerful individual named Okonkwo and his society. The other is a collision or clash of cultures between the European-western systems and practices and the Igbo-Nigerian traditional systems and practices. Put differently, and in the words of David Augsburg (1992), it is a clash between a low-context (individualistic) culture and a high-context (collectivistic) culture. As it is described in *Things Fall Apart*, and most importantly, in Augsburg's (1992) *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures*, this clash of culture is due to various reasons, ranging from ignorance of the "other", prejudices and biases, false assumptions, misinterpretations and misunderstandings resulting from a "conflict of interpretation" (Ricoeur, 1974), and most often attitudes and behaviors related to power, domination, and honor. These factors will be examined in the subsequent sections of this essay.

The underlying question that stands out for me is: how can conflicts that are due to cultural misunderstandings be resolved? What could have been done to mitigate for example the disastrous effects of the clash of culture that Achebe (1959) narrates in his *Things Fall Apart*? At a time, I was satisfied with two concepts that hermeneutic philosophers propose: *interpretation* and *understanding*. For Ricoeur (1974) and his followers, it is only through a careful, reflective interpretation that the hidden meaning of cultural elements, symbols, words, and practices could be uncovered, brought to light, deciphered, and understood. And for this reason, Ricoeur (as cited in Ito, 2010) defines interpretation "as the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning (p. 4). In addition to Ricoeur, other scholars within the field of hermeneutics place emphasis on "understanding other cultures" (Brown, 1963) as they are, which means to see the other's cultural systems and practices through their own eyes and not through our own eyes. This is because, many conflicts begin with a feeling of misunderstanding.

Although these texts on the hermeneutics of cultural symbols and elements provide theoretical framework to understanding culture and conflict, they fall short of practical steps to resolving culture-based conflicts. It is a good thing to postulate cultural arguments, especially from the hermeneutic perspective. Moreover, it is better to show both the cultural arguments and the practical steps through which conflicts with cultural elements could be resolved. Augsburg's (1992) *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures* and Moore and Woodrow's (2004) article, *Mapping Cultures: Strategies for Effective Intercultural Negotiations*, are very handy, relevant and important in that they not only lay out the theoretical principles underlying culture, they also outline practical ideas for resolving and mediating culture-based conflicts. These theories, and conflict resolution approaches to culture-based conflicts, will be carefully analyzed in the next section of this essay.

Rereading Achebe's (1959) *Things Fall Apart* through the lenses of Augsburg's (1992) distinction between a low-context (individualistic) culture and a high-context (collectivistic) culture sheds light on the symbolism, significance and signification of the personality of the powerful Okonkwo, as well as the Igbo traditional cultural system and the culture of the European colonizers. In *Things Fall Apart*, Augsburg's (1992) idea of a collectivistic culture could be denoted by the characteristics of the Igbo traditional cultural system while an individualistic culture could be generally interpreted as designating the cultural systems, practices and beliefs of the Western colonial countries. However, there is a third dimension: the individual culture of Okonkwo, a powerful man who was in conflict with his

own cultural group because of differences in viewpoints between him and the entire group. This factor raises a red flag on Augsburger's (1992) binary generalization and categorization of cultures in different regions of the world. As it shall be explained in the critical evaluation part of this essay, "every culture includes outliers - people who vary significantly from the norm. While still contained within the range for their culture, their views and behaviors differ significantly from that of their peers and may even look similar to other cultures" (Moore & Woodrow, 2004, Para. 7). The differences in viewpoints or worldviews and the disparities in patterns of behaviors within a group or between and among groups are caused by differences in interpretations and understanding of cultural realities and not necessarily because of institutional, structural or historical differences.

To be able to understand the various arguments associated with the development of a culture – that is, whether a culture is static and immutable, or whether cultural realities are mutable, that is, could be revised based on the individual members' interpretation and emerging understanding of the world around them, or even whether cultural understanding could be adaptive and situational, as well as the implications of these cultural orientations, conflict styles and resolution –, it is important to review and compare the various definitions of culture as they are proposed by selected authors under our review.

Second Consideration: On the Definitions of Culture

A careful reading of the social science literature on culture shows some recurrent themes utilized by different authors to define what culture is and distinguish it from what it is not. In most literature, the following themes are commonly employed: individual or personal, collective or group, value, system, tradition, institution, belief, cultivation, history, inheritance, structure, identity, rigidity, evolution, attitude, behavior, uniqueness, difference, society, etc. These themes have been used by many scholars in different ways and at different times and places to explain what culture is. To achieve the purpose of this essay, three definitions of culture will be examined and compared. The first is from Augsburger (1992); the second is a definition of culture by Moore and Woodrow (2004); and the third is a working definition of culture by Theodore Scharwitz (1992) which is adopted by Avruch (1998; 2013).

As I read Augsburger's (1992) *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures*, I wanted to discover not only the definition of culture, but most importantly, why culture matters in conflict and conflict resolution. It is revealed by Augsburger (1992) that:

cultures embody the authenticity and unique purposes of each community. Each culture seeks to express a people's values, sensitivity, and spirituality ... Continuity and congruence with their cultural history connect persons and groups to their own peculiar depths, their own unique wisdom, and their own particular configuration of human archetypes, religious symbols, and central values. (p. 7)

This definition shows how the individual is dependent on and derives meaning from the collective culture. In this situation, the codes of behavior and interaction are largely dependent on the meaning derived from one's affiliation to a community or group. To explain this dynamic, Augsburger (1992) argues that cultures:

create a 'pool of habits' for a society ... that induces the society's members into complementary, reciprocal habits. As these interlock, they create mutually fulfilling relationships. Each culture

invites a wide range of habits, personality styles, and behavioral patterns for use in times of calm or in situations of conflict; and each culture also prohibits and seeks to limit the exercise of what it considers undesirable or unacceptable behavior. (p. 22)

In a relatively similar way, and in agreement with Samovar and Porter (1972), Moore and Woodrow (2004) defines culture as:

the cumulative result of experience, values, religion, beliefs, attitudes, meanings, knowledge, social organizations, procedures, timing, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe and material objects and possessions acquired or created by groups of people, in the course of generations, through individual and group effort and interactions. Culture manifests itself in patterns of language, behavior and activities and provides models and norms for acceptable day-to-day interactions and styles of communication. Culture enables people to live together in a society within a given geographic environment, at a given state of technical development and at a particular moment in time. (para. 5)

Finally, and most importantly, culture is defined by Theodore Scharwtz (1992, as cited in Avruch, 2013) as consisting of “the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by individuals of a population, including those images or encodements and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves” (p. 10).

From a conceptual perspective, these three definitions of culture represent the various notions of culture in the conflict resolution literature. Although each definition is unique, it is easy to discover similarities and differences. Augsburg’s (1992) definition presents a static and immutable view of culture. Culture, according to this view, is not flexible. It defines a people, determines their way of life, and dictates their conflict and conflict resolution styles. Based on this, any attempt to revise cultural systems, values, beliefs and practices will be confronted by unwavering opposition from the custodians of that culture. Augsburg’s (1992) static view of culture is probably what led the author to postulate a categorization and generalization of people in different parts of the world as belonging either to a collectivistic, *high-context culture* or to an individualistic, *low-context culture* (pp. 8; 83-87). On the contrary, we see in Moore and Woodrow (2004) and Theodore Scharwtz (1992, as cited in Avruch, 2013) a view of culture that places emphasis not only on the collective experience and realities of a people transmitted from generation to generation, but also, on the personal creations, experiences, interpretations and meanings of individuals within the collectivity. This view of culture is fluid, not rigid, and shows that some aspects of a people’s culture could be immutable while some aspects could be mutable - that is, revisable - depending on the situation and people involved.

The three definitions combined share an important and common truth about individual and group identities and the way these identities are constructed and shaped. Whether cultures are inherited or created, they determine patterns of behaviors and interactions within the social sphere of a society. They provide the first hermeneutic schemas for making judgements about others, and serve as a mirror through which we see and attribute value to our place in the world. Because we are judging others based on our cultural schemas, we expect others to see what we are seeing, feel what we are feeling, know what we know, experience what we are experiencing and understand our realities the way we understand them. Any divergence from these expectations opens a long road to conflict, and the effects of the resulting

conflict may be more devastating in those societies with a static view of culture, that is, in “collectivistic, high-context cultures” (Augsburger, 1992, pp. 8; 83-87).

Third Consideration: On Collectivistic, High-Context Culture

In the conflict resolution literature that addresses culture, conflict and conflict resolution methods, the reader is confronted time and time again with a binary distinction between Westernized, North American methods of conflict resolution and traditional, non-Western methods of conflict resolution (Augsburger, 1992; Avruch, 2013; Lederach, 1997; 1995; Salem, 2007; Brenman, 2014). In addition, and as this essay reveals, there is a sharp categorization or distinction between individualistic, low-context culture generally ascribed to the West and collectivistic, high-context culture which characterizes most of the non-Western countries and traditional societies (Augsburger, 1992; Moore & Woodrow, 2004). One of the questions that this essay seeks to address is: what happens when a low-context culture and a high-context culture collide? To answer this question, the essay proposes to reflect on John Kerry’s August 23, 2016 visit to Nigeria, an official visit aimed at mitigating the violent religious conflict in the north of Nigeria. Unfortunately, Kerry’s West-inspired diplomatic and conflict resolution mission to Nigeria, a country with diverse collectivistic, high-context cultures, was flawed because of his display of intercultural incompetence. In order to understand this real-life conflict situation in a collectivistic, high-context culture, and the role of the U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, in reawakening old memories of division, hatred, mutual hostility and conflict between the Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, the essay proposes to examine the notion of collectivistic culture and the conflict dynamics that it is susceptible of generating.

The term *collectivistic culture* is used to characterize a society or group that attributes high importance to group identity and affiliation than to individual identity and autonomy. This means that the group members’ actions, behaviors, interactions, and attitudes are based on their collective identity and history, instead of their individual identities and choices. “Whereas *individualistic* culture has a dimension of development, evaluation, and therefore by definition evolutionary, *collectivistic* culture is rigid and tied to a history that could sometimes be opposed to the development of *individualistic* cultures” (Ugorji, 2012, p. 11).

The question that comes to mind at this point is: how then is conflict fermented within collectivistic cultures? There are different ways in which conflicts could manifest, and even escalate in collectivistic cultures. Among the various causes of conflict postulated in cross-cultural studies literature, the following three key areas are worth highlighting in this essay. Conflict is prone to manifest in collectivistic societies when the following conditions are present: internal revision, sideways threat, and external intervention.

Internal Revision

In collectivistic cultures – a concept often described by some scholars as “mono-culturalism” (Ugorji, 2012) –, efforts are constantly made to preserve and ensure the continuity of cultural systems, values, and practices, and to protect them not only from external influence but also from “internal dissidence” (Ugorji, 2012, p. 57). Conflict occurs in this situation when one or more individuals begin to revise or change that which is communally accepted and practiced as a norm – the status quo. Devoted group members and their leadership will radically oppose to any attempts by fellow members to modify their cultural values or their way of life which was handed over to them by their ancestors and which defines who they are. Committed group members will fight to safeguard the purity of their cultural

inheritance and identity against any internal revision. Often this conflict manifests as an intergenerational conflict between the young and the old, or as a conflict between the Western educated and non-Western educated.

The case of Brexit, a real-life conflict that Melinda Burrell (my colleague at the Nova Southeastern University's Department of Conflict Resolution Studies) discussed during our Culture and Conflict class presentation (on September 14, 2016) is a good example of an intergenerational conflict within a collectivistic, high-context culture. The UK vote on June 23, 2016 reveals an intergenerational disparity between the older people and the younger people in their desires to either leave the European Union (as voted by the older people) or remain in the European Union (as voted by the younger people). The decision to withdraw from the European Union was not only made because of the economic situation in Europe. Underneath the conversations and decision to leave was a fundamental desire to safeguard the British culture and identity. While identifying the English as a collectivistic, high-context culture, Augsburg (1992) affirms that "the Englishman, expressing the high-cultural demand and high-cultural restraint characteristics of his more hierarchical setting plays out the conflict by cultural scripts mastered long before" (p. 94). Remaining in Europe will be for most British people especially the older ones a continuation of the loss of the British culture – values, identity, language, and ways of life. To prevent this from continuing, or as Kymlicka (1995) argues in his landmark studies on multiculturalism, to place «internal restrictions... [on] the freedom of [group] members in the name of group solidarity» (pp. 35-36), the British leveraged on the power of their vote to leave Europe as a symbolic way of revitalizing the British consciousness and ending internal revision of their cultural values and norms.

In some collectivistic, high-context cultures, conflict could also manifest when those who have received or are receiving Western education attempt to internally revise or change certain practices and beliefs within their own cultures. Most often, such changes are confronted with strong and violent opposition from the conservatives or non-Western educated elites within the group. The Boko Haram case in the northeastern part of Nigeria is a vivid example of this form of conflict. Many people came to learn about Boko Haram for the first time on September 14, 2013 when the United States government through the office of the U.S. Secretary of State designated Boko Haram as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Unfortunately, only a small number of people know the historical development of the activities of Boko Haram, and that during its early beginnings, Boko Haram was not a violent religious sect. "Founded in 2002 in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, by Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf" (Ugorji, 2012, p. 134), Boko Haram began its operation as an Islamic religious sect just as any other religious sect, for example, the Branch Davidians, the Christian sect that developed in Waco, Texas, which was led by David Koresh (Docherty, 2001). From 2002 to 2009, the charismatic efforts of Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf were directed against internal revision of the Islamic religious values and practices as well as opposed any attempt to modify the Hausa-Fulani culture. During this time, Boko Haram's agenda was to preserve the purity of the cultural values and religious practices of the northern part of Nigeria by restricting the Muslims from adopting other ways of life. Like the Branch Davidians in the United States whose worldviews led them to reject a man-made constitution and earthly government to believing only in the Bible and God through their prophet, David Koresh, Boko Haram rejects everything that is imported from the West, especially the West-inspired democracy, constitution, education, dressing, and other Western values and practices, and enforces strict observance of the Sharia law, which, according to them, is revealed by Allah, as well as advocates for only the Islamic form of education.

What led to the escalation of the Boko Haram conflict is not only because it strictly restricts the

members of its cultural and religious group from modifying certain aspects of their inherited practices – for example, girls’ education, dressing, Sharia, and so on. What moved the conflict from its latent stage to the use of violence and terrorism is the violent confrontation that occurred between the Nigerian law enforcement and the Boko Haram movement “on July 30, 2009, [which] resulted in over 700 dead, including at least 300 Islamist militants” (Ugorji, 2012, p. 134) in addition to the killing of Mohamed Yusuf, the leader of Boko Haram.

The failure to recognize worldview differences between the Boko Haram sect and the law enforcement is the reason why this conflict became protractible and intractable. In the next section, the practical steps by which an intervener - whether the law enforcement, a negotiator or a mediator - could recognize cultural differences and resolve culture-based conflicts will be examined through the lenses of Augsburg’s (1992) *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures* and Moore and Woodrow’s (2004) article, *Mapping Cultures: Strategies for Effective Intercultural Negotiations*. But before we get there, it is important to note that conflicts emerging from internal revision of a group’s culture could escalate and develop into an intergroup conflict just as Boko Haram graduated from internal restriction of Muslims to attacking Christians, bombing their churches, and becoming a threat to all the ethno-religious groups in Nigeria and neighboring countries.

Sideways Threat

The term “sideways” is commonly used to refer to something in a “lateral direction,” meaning “of, at, toward, or from the side or sides” (Learner’s definition of sideways, n.d. In Merriam-Webster’s online learner’s dictionary). Synonymously, sidelong, a similar word which means “directed to or from one side” could be used to describe something or somebody in a sideways position. Multi-ethnic, multi-religious and by implication multicultural societies or countries are said to be highly diverse not just because they are made up of multiple ethnicities, religions and cultures, but because people from these different ethnicities and religions live side by side and sometimes in close proximity to one another while competing for scarce political, economic, or social benefits and resources at the center.

Pluralism or diversity in itself is not a sufficient condition for interethnic or interreligious hostility, conflict or violence. Many diverse societies have multiple ethnic and religious groups that live side by side in peace with one another. This was the case in Nigeria during the pre-amalgamation era, that is, before the “forced amalgamation” (Ugorji, 2016, p. 9-12) of 1914 by the British colonial government which coerced “the two Nigerian regions - the northern region with Islam as its main religion and the southern region with Christianity being its dominant religion” (Ugorji, 2016, p. 3) to unite under one nation. Before these different cultural groups were coerced to unite, the northerners and southerners, Muslims and Christians, as well as the traditional worshippers lived side by side in peace and tranquility, and during the times of dispute, they leveraged on their traditional systems of dispute resolution to mitigate their differences. Probably they enjoyed peace and security because they were remotely separated from one another, and were not constantly engaged in national politics and the distribution of economic resources.

Paradoxically, when people are remotely separated from one another, they think that the “others” think and behave like them. However, when they are in close proximity to one another, they begin to see their differences. With the advent of “forced amalgamation” [and the] “conquering tactic – divide and rule – by which the British colonial rulers ruled Nigeria during this period, in-group self-consciousness (or

self-awareness) and bonding, and out-group hostility and competition [were] awakened and reinforced” (Ugorji, 2016, pp. 9-12; p. 16). This marked the beginning of *sideways threat* in Nigeria, a threat that is being experienced by each ethnic and religious group regarding their territorial integrity, identity, values, religion, customs, traditions, language, survival, economic and political opportunity, and above all, inclusion in the decision-making process.

As I explained in my previous studies on *Ethno-Religious Conflict in Nigeria* (Ugorji, 2016), it is important to note that in addition to the manifest *sideways threat* that were experienced by different ethnic groups in Nigeria during the amalgamation era and shortly after, history shows that:

From 1967 to 1970, Nigeria was completely ravaged by a bloody civil war that occurred mainly between the Muslim north (commonly identified as the Hausa–Fulani people) and the Christian southeast (known as the Igbo people), causing the death of more than one million people including children and women (Ugorji, 2012, p. 102). The subsequent violent clashes that occurred in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s between these ethno-religious groups both in the north and south of the country, and the recent surge of the Boko Haram terrorist attacks have continued to reignite the old debate on what it means for Muslims and Christians, Igbos, Hausa/Fulanis, Yorubas and the ethnic minorities in the different regions to coexist and live together in harmony. (p. 3)

Even though Boko Haram’s goal at its early beginnings was primarily to prevent Muslims in the northern Nigeria from internally revising the tenets of Islamic beliefs and the core values within the Hausa-Fulani culture as well as to protect Muslims from external, Western influence, however, as the conflict intensified and escalated, Christians became their main targets in addition to the Muslims who openly oppose to the Boko Haram ideology.

As these feelings of threat persist, and even heighten, each ethno-religious group in Nigeria resorts to the conflict or communication styles inherent in their culture as an attempt to respond to, manage or resolve the conflict. Some authors within the field of conflict resolution have written about the *Two-dimensional model of conflict* (Blake & Mouton, 1971, as cited in Katz et al., 2011, pp. 83-84). Rahim (2011, as cited in Hocker & Wilmot, 2014) identifies different conflict styles. Put together, these conflict styles are: avoiding (which takes a leave-lose/win posture and is utilized when there are low goal and relationship orientations); accommodating or obliging (which takes a yield-lose/win posture and is employed when there is a low goal orientation and a high relationship orientation); dominating, competing or controlling (which takes a win/lose direction and is utilized when there is a high goal orientation and a low relationship orientation); compromising (which is a mini-win/mini-lose and is employed when the goal is negotiated and there is a relationship orientation); integrating or collaborating (which takes a win/win posture and is utilized when there are high goal and relationship orientations).

Given that all the ethno-religious groups in Nigeria have expressed high goals that should not be ignored but that ought to be carefully accorded equal consideration in order to ensure peace and harmony, and because these ethno-religious groups are all bound together under one nation through the 1914 amalgamation of the north and south as well as through the principles inscribed in the Nigerian Constitution, the integrating conflict and conflict resolution style also known as the “neither-nor approach” (Augsburger, 1992) is more appropriate to achieving the “final good desired” (Foster, 1967, as cited in Augsburger, 1992, p. 101) by all the groups. An example of the integrating conflict resolution style in Nigeria is “the Nigeria National Conference - a National Dialogue convened and inaugurated on March

17, 2014 by the past president of Nigeria, President Goodluck Jonathan - with a mandate to deliberate on all matters that militate against Nigerian's national unity and progress (Final Draft of Nigeria National Conference Report, 2014, as cited in Ugorji, 2016, p. 3). The "498 delegates" that participated in this National Dialogue "unanimously agreed that the new wave of religious violence and terrorism pose a serious threat to the 'secular character of the state, and the idea of one nation bound in freedom, peace and unity'" (Final Draft of Nigeria National Conference Report, 2014, as cited in Ugorji, 2016, p. 4).

Unlike in individualistic, low-context cultures where conflict resolution often focuses "on the individual issues and assumes personal and private ownership, [or where there is] direct, one-to-one encounter between the disputants, and the litigation process prevails, and mediation is used in extreme cases" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 8), conflict and conflict resolution in collectivistic, high-context cultures are communal in nature, and "conflict resolution [is] achieved in indirect, lateral, and systematic ways" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 8) often by a third party mediation that involves "the use of go-betweens" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 101), and above all, the integrating, *neither-nor* approach. As the Nigerian National Dialogue indicates, the *neither-nor* approach provides a platform and an opportunity "to achieve workable compromise that neither alienates one side nor excludes the other" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 100).

An important characteristic of the *neither-nor* approach is inclusion in the process, that is, a feeling of belonging and not of rejection. The best quotation that could be used to explain this process is the one from Darmaputera (1982, as cited in Augsburger, 1992) which states that:

A wise neither-nor decision is formulated in such a way that nobody will feel totally rejected, although nobody will feel that his/her idea is fully accepted either. But that is good enough to get a unanimous consensus. The wiser the leader, the more his/her decision will be characterized by the 'neither-nor' approach, which seeks what is 'suitable' for the immediate situation or condition. Not what is objectively good or right, but what is contextually or situationally or subjectively fitting. (p. 100)

External Intervention

It is in Augsburger's (1992) view that a wise and competent mediator or leader will use the *neither-nor* approach to manage or resolve conflicts in collectivistic, high-context cultures to avoid the exclusion of one group and the feeling of rejection in the process. This is because conflict styles in collectivistic cultures are based on each group's understanding of those cultural realities inherent in their cultures such as "power", "honor", "facework", "shame" or "humiliation" (Augsburger, 1992). These cultural realities highlight the important role culture plays in the escalation or suppression of conflicts.

A culturally incompetent mediator, diplomat or negotiator, who fails to adopt the integrating or *neither-nor* approach during his or her intervention in collectivistic cultures stands the risk of pouring fuel to the already inflamed fire burning in those societies. This describes exactly what happens when interveners from a low-context culture intervene in a high-context culture. An important example is John Kerry's August 23, 2016 visit to Nigeria, an official visit aimed at mitigating the violent religious conflict in the north of Nigeria, as well as the Boko Haram terrorism. Unfortunately, Kerry's West-inspired diplomatic and conflict resolution mission to Nigeria, a country with diverse collectivistic, high-context cultures, was flawed because of his display of intercultural incompetence leading to the reawakening of old memories of division, hatred, mutual hostility and conflict between the Christian south and Muslim north of Nigeria.

Fourth Consideration: When a Low-Context Culture and a High-Context Culture Collide, What Happens? The Case of John Kerry's Diplomatic Mission to Nigeria

On August 23, 2016, the United States Secretary of State, John Kerry, made an official diplomatic visit to the Palace of the Sultan of Sokoto where he had an official meeting with Alhaji Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar III, the Sultan of Sokoto and president-general of the Nigerian National Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs. The following day, Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to the Presidential Villa in Abuja for a state meeting with President Muhammadu Buhari (who is also from the north of Nigeria and a Muslim). More disturbing in the eyes of many critics, Secretary of State John Kerry had a meeting with the northern Nigerian states' governors and excluded the southern governors from participating in the meeting. Also, Kerry did not visit the prominent kings or traditional rulers in the southern part of Nigeria and the leadership of the Christian community. Because of this exclusionary and divisive diplomacy, Kerry's diplomatic mission to Nigeria which was aimed at discussing and finding a lasting solution to the Boko Haram terrorism was met with serious criticisms from the southern Nigeria and the Christian community.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) "accused the United States government of stoking ethnic and religious divisions in Nigeria" (Thisday, August 26, 2016). To stoke means to add coal or other solid fuel to a fire, furnace, or boiler. According to the Christian community, "Mr. Kerry's visit was discriminatory, personal and divisive, [and] it heightened fear and tension among Christians in Nigeria" (Premium Times, August 25, 2016). As reported in the news, the president of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Rev. Supo Ayokunle, believes that Secretary of State John Kerry "lacks ... respect for the heterogeneous nature of Nigeria [and] favors the northern Nigeria and Muslims to the detriment of the Christian community" (Thisday, August 26, 2016). For this reason, the Christian critics argue that "Kerry should stop interfering in the internal affairs of the country. If they cannot bring us together, they should not interfere in our affairs" (Premium Times, August 25, 2016).

Critical Reflection

I began this essay by discussing my study on the "hermeneutics and interpretation of symbols in Igbo culture" (Ugorji, 2005) through the lenses of Paul Ricoeur's theory of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics - the science and art of interpretation and understanding of cultural elements, particularly cultural symbols - is very relevant in understanding John Kerry's failed diplomatic mission to Nigeria and why he was furiously criticized by the southern leaders and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). Kerry's foreign policy failure in Nigeria and the criticisms it generated are due to a conflict of interpretation and cultural misunderstanding. This is what happens when diplomats or negotiators from a low-context, individualistic culture intervenes in a high-context, collectivistic culture. "The high-context culture is more prone to misunderstandings and conflicts when the culturally normative expectations of appropriate behavior are violated" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 94).

The arguments of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) could be understood from two perspectives: common sense perspective and cultural perspective. From a common-sense perspective, it should be noted that since Nigeria is made up of different ethno-religious groups who were amalgamated in 1914 to form one nation, and since both Christians and Muslims are equally victims of Boko Haram, efforts to find solutions to the Boko Haram terrorism and similar religious conflicts in Nigeria must

recognize the views of, and include, both Christians and Muslims as well as all Nigerians. From a cultural perspective, if the Christians and southern leaders feel publicly excluded, rejected, disrespected, disapproved, dishonored, and insulted by John Kerry's exclusionary meeting with only the northern leaders and Islamic community, then it means that the underlying issue is beyond the common *modus operandi* that characterizes the U.S. foreign policy and conflict intervention. The issue is cultural, and could be found within the customs and practices of collectivistic, high-context cultures of Nigeria, especially as they shape their understanding of "face" and "honor." Let us briefly explain how the notions of *face* and *honor* are inseparably linked to this conflict.

By honor, it means "one's worth, one's claim to pride ...and the acknowledgement of that claim [or] one's value in one's own eyes ...[and] in the eyes of one's society" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 102). What is salient in the concept of honor is that it is not just one's claim or value, the validation or acknowledgement of these values are more important. Augsburger (1992) captures this very well by saying that "honor is one's persona, one's social mask, and the mask is what is valued, what is real" (p. 107). In some high-context, collectivistic cultures like Nigeria, "the community exists within an all-embracing system of honor with particular obligations... Honor is the possession of idealized norms and a legitimization of defending those norms in retaliation" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 107). Dishonor, on the other hand, "is a loss of face in the community, a loss of self before the ideal of being human" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 107). By implication, the exclusion of the Christians and southern leaders by the Secretary of State John Kerry during his diplomatic meeting in Nigeria with the northern and Muslim leaders could be interpreted as an attempt to deprive the southerners and Christians "honor, reputation, and political status in the community" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 106). By this, the worth, importance and reputation of the southern and Christian leaders will be questioned not only by the northern and Muslim leaders, but also by the southern group members. Because the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) felt disapproved, excluded and humiliated in the eyes of the public by John Kerry's insensitivity to their sense of honor, they furiously affirmed that "Mr. Kerry's visit was discriminatory, personal and divisive, [and that] it heightened fear and tension among Christians in Nigeria" (Premium Times, August 25, 2016). Groups whose honor has been threatened or violated usually fight to restore it, and this makes an ethnic or religious conflict intractable.

Connected to the notion of honor is the concept of face. *By face*, it means "the public self-image that each person wants to claim for herself or himself" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 87). In other words, it is a state of being "understood, liked, included, and approved" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 88). No ethno-religious group in Nigeria would like to be excluded from an official diplomatic meeting about peace, security and development that is led by a foreign ally like the United States. This is why all the regions, states, ethnicities, and religions are represented at the Nigerian House of Assembly. If the United States wants to learn how it could support the security, peace and development efforts in Nigeria, then such information should be comprehensive, balanced and representative of all parties because the Boko Haram terrorism is not a threat to northern Nigeria or Muslims alone; it is a threat to all Nigerians both the south and the north, as well as Christians and Muslims alike. So, the isolation and exclusion of the southern and Christian leaders from John Kerry's diplomatic meeting with the northern and Muslim leaders is an attack on the public self-image of the Christians and the southern Nigeria. In other words, it is a threat to face which results in a loss of face. "When a conflict breaks out for a person in a more collectivistic setting, the threat to face comes from the possible loss of inclusion, approval, and association by others" (Augsburger,

1992, p. 93). Also, a loss of face could be defined as a threat to a group's "sense of competence or pride" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 84).

Unlike in individualistic, low-context cultures where *i-identity*, individual dignity and human rights are emphasized, and mechanical, formal and statist diplomacy could work without any group feeling excluded or disapproved, in collectivistic, high-context cultures where the emphasis is on *we-identity*, honor, and face, mechanical and statist diplomacy could heighten a sense of exclusion, public disapproval and loss of face as John Kerry's visit to Nigeria has shown. "The awareness of disapproval or rejection by the social context of significant peers can shape behavior, control choices, ...and conceal conflicts" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 82). Also, "a complete loss of face" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 95) could lead to an escalation and make the conflict intractable. A total avoidance of the conflict in order to save face could also make the conflict intractable and violent when it escalates. Therefore, speaking up against the exclusionary, "either-or" conflict intervention approach of the Secretary of State John Kerry is important to create an opportunity for a public discussion on the subject matter, help everyone know that "face must be honored, respected, preserved, and enhanced in all human relationships" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 84), and above all show that the integrating, *neither-nor* approach to conflict intervention is more appropriate in collectivistic, high-context cultures than the exclusionary, *either-or* approach.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned

This essay, the reader will agree, has succeeded in discussing the place of culture in conflict and conflict resolution, various notions of culture in the conflict resolution literature with their differences and similarities, and important issues about collectivistic cultures. The essay reveals that there are three ways by which conflict is fermented in collectivistic, high-context cultures. These are internal revision, sideways threat, and external intervention. In addition, the essay provides an answer to the question: what happens when a low-context culture and a high-context culture collide? It is revealed through the case of John Kerry's diplomatic mission to Nigeria that an intervener from an individualistic, low-context culture is highly susceptible to violate "the culturally normative expectations of appropriate behavior" (Augsburger, 1992, p. 94) in collectivistic, high-context cultures, and this violation could result in the loss of *face* and *honor*, making the conflict more intractable and protractable. To prevent such a negative outcome from occurring, the reader is hereby provided with three practical lessons for intercultural or cross-cultural negotiation, mediation or conflict resolution. These are bias awareness, intercultural education, and intercultural competency building.

Bias Awareness

In the term, *bias awareness*, we are presented with two familiar words, bias and awareness. While bias denotes our prejudices or intolerance tendencies against individuals or groups holding different views, values or beliefs from ours which often lead to bigotry, awareness is the knowledge, consciousness, recognition or realization of our own views and actions or the views and actions of others. Put together, bias awareness is a process by which we know, recognize, realize or become conscious of our biases. Often we may not know that our words, actions or policies are biased against people from other groups. To successfully intervene in other people's culture, it is important that the intervener (whether a mediator, negotiator, or diplomat) re-evaluates his or her own worldviews and biases by

undergoing a serious *desensitization* procedure. As Augsburger (1992) opines, “the desensitization of our common sense (cultural pool of assumptions) about conflict is necessary if we are to understand another culture’s process ... that is, if we are to perceive and experience another culture’s content and context from within while coming from without” (p. 8).

Intercultural Education

Another step to a successful intercultural conflict resolution is through education. The kind of education that is proposed here is not the formal education that is often associated with the term education. Well, if a conflict resolution intervener could receive intercultural education in the formal school system, then this will be highly recommended. However, by intercultural education, it means that “the sensitization of our ‘uncommon senses’ about conflict invites us to learn from another culture as well as respect it... Every culture can be our teacher in some respect, offering some new perspective from the surprising and amazing disequilibrium that occurs on the boundary” (Augsburger, 1992, p. 9). Learning or educating ourselves about other cultures could be achieved through different ways including, traveling, interactions with the diaspora or immigrant communities, reading novels or books or watching movies from other cultures, learning other languages and the meanings of folktales, proverbs, metaphors and symbols, as well as interacting with people from other cultures on social media. Whatever form of intercultural education that is possible, it is recommended that the intervener engages in a “detailed research and exploration regarding the other culture and its members; [and] gain greater understanding about the other culture and ... prepare for direct interactions” (Moore & Woodrow, 2004, para. 33).

Intercultural Competency Building

In addition to identifying appropriate medium for intercultural education, it is suggested that the intervener understands the content of intercultural education, that is, what to learn and which cross-cultural conflict resolution competencies are mostly needed. Studies on cultural competency suggest two sets of competencies that interveners working in the field of intercultural or cross-cultural conflict resolution should possess. The first is *cultural fluency* defined as “...familiarity and facility with cultural dynamics as they shape ways of seeing and behaving [and] an awareness of our own and others’ culturally shaped worldviews” (LeBaron 2014, pp. 582-587). The second is *cultural intelligence (CQ)* understood as “a person’s capability for successful adaptation to new cultural settings” (Earley & Ang, 2003, as cited in LeBaron 2014, p. 587). In addition to *cultural fluency* and *cultural intelligence*, this essay proposes seven practical skills that an intervener in intercultural conflict environment should acquire. These skills are inspired by the *Wheel of Culture Map* (Moore & Woodrow, 2004) which “identifies cultural factors that shape the ways members of societies bargain for their interests and respond to disputes” (para. 14).

1) Understand cultural orientations:

As this essay has emphasized, it is important that the intervener understands the cultural orientations of the parties, that is, whether they are from a low-context, individualistic culture or from a high-context, collectivistic culture. Individualistic cultures “value individual autonomy, initiative, creativity and authority in decision making” (Moore & Woodrow, 2004, para. 16). On the contrary, collectivistic cultures “value and emphasize group cohesion, harmony and decision making that involves either consultation with group members before deciding, or consideration of the well-being of the group

over that of the individual” (Moore & Woodrow, 2004, para. 16). Understanding the parties’ cultural orientations will help the intervener to “develop an awareness of how cultural differences influence problem solving and negotiation” (Moore & Woodrow, 2004, para. 14).

2) *Identify cultural similarities:*

Even though different cultural orientations exist as this essay has shown, there are similarities and outliers. The intervener should not be solely focused on a binary categorization of cultures. Instead, there is need to cautiously “learn how to identify cultural similarities, build upon them and develop strategies that will help to bridge the important differences” (Moore & Woodrow, 2004, para. 13).

3) *Parties’ definition of conflict situation and issues:*

According to Moore and Woodrow (2004), “an important element of preparation for any negotiation is to develop a clear understanding of how the other party defines the situation and the issues to be discussed” (para. 18). Providing an inclusive and equal opportunity for, and asking, each of the parties concerned to tell their story about what happened will allay fears of exclusion, favoritism and injustice.

4) *Assessment of core identity interests:*

Before any intervention in cross-cultural situations, it is important that the intervener assesses and understands what the parties’ core identity interests are. This is because when a “group feels that basic survival is threatened or fundamental identity is at risk, they may make rigid demands or intimidating statements” (Moore & Woodrow, 2004, para. 19).

5) *Identify Parties’ forms of power and levels of influence:*

In intercultural conflict resolution, the understanding of power dynamics and the ability to navigate through power imbalance are very important for a resolution to happen. As Mayer (2000, as cited in Moore & Woodrow, 2004) says, power is «the ability to act, to influence an outcome, to get something to happen (not to happen), or to overcome resistance” (para. 21). The task of the intervener in intercultural or cross-cultural conflict will be to “identify what forms of power and influence are most likely to be used by whom and in which situations” (Moore & Woodrow, 2004, para. 21).

6) *Understand the symbolism of external factors such as meeting points (place), history of the parties and the conflict,* as well as the meaning of specific events within the context of the conflict, and various structures and people that have contributed in shaping “the development of a specific group’s cultural approach to negotiations and conflict resolution” (Moore & Woodrow, 2004, para. 22). This essay recommends that interveners should ensure that the chosen meeting point (i.e., the place where the negotiation, mediation, or meeting will occur) is a neutral location and is decorated with common or shared symbols that each party or group will identify with.

7) *Develop a negotiation plan appropriate to the situation and build cross-cultural relationships:*

Lastly, and before the start of an official meeting in cross-cultural setting, the intervener should first and foremost develop an intervention plan that is suitable for the conflict, and this plan should

be developed in consultation with group representatives. Essential to this plan is a road map on “how you might initiate negotiations, and then respond as the situation evolves” (Moore & Woodrow, 2004, para. 38). Developing the intervention or negotiation plan in consultation with the group representatives will not only help in building cross-cultural relationship and alliance; it will also help in confidence building and making sure that the interveners “comply with their negotiation protocols in a way that is comfortable for all parties” (Moore & Woodrow, 2004, para. 39).

If the above seven practical areas of consideration and skills acquisition are implemented, I believe that the conflict resolution work of an intervener in cross-cultural conflict setting will yield fruits – fruits that will endure through time.

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