Asclepius

The Sound Never Echoed Again: An Aftermath of Protracted Armed Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a perspective on the current state of things in a particular region plagued by conflict in Nigeria. The advent of conflict has created a disconnect in the social fabrics of many societies, and the survivor, who seems to be in distress is left with the puzzle of connecting now, with yesterday, and what tomorrow holds. This paper provides a mixture of opinions and views from the writer, while supporting such views with other related and cross-cutting views. War has created a lot in the minds of many and the sooner we get to underscore the nexus between this war and our state of psychological well-being, the better for us.

Key words: Conflict, Psychological distress, Psychological well-being

INTRODUCTION

Toward the end of the past year (2017), I was able to bring up an article titled; "After the Barrel Stops Sounding, What will be Next," aim at enlightening the general populace and policymakers alike on the effects of war and the trouble/loss it creates/brings to people and properties. Conflict is inevitable; however, from each conflict, lessons should be learned and used to avert future occurrences and the pains it comes with.

Nostalgic moments about my childhood days are probably one of the best moments I have always enjoyed, anytime I would take a psychologically walk. This thought defines in clear terms, successive events that show I enjoyed childhood to the fullest. Gratitude is what I have for a peaceful and serene environment that offers liberty for me to grow naturally. Peace then was almost a birthright so that we shiver at the sight of a soldier that we often run home in fear (to report to parents) because we have seen strange fellows in town with guns (something we only see in movies then). Today, the narrative has changed both in content and context as the military personnel has become part of us in our communities. We live with them, we practically are glued to one another so that the feeling of strangeness has been replaced with the feeling of availability. However, these military personnels have been shown to be dominantly involved in combating civil unrest in our societies. As these personnels are so involved in restoring sanity, they are also likely to be faced with new challenges, especially ones related to their mental health.

Consequently, while the military is seen likely to be in distress, the civilians are not left out, as more often than not, some of them will have to be rescued from the frontline, where the action has been more visible. While others are better able to cope and live normal lives despite the challenges faced, others are unable to live and function effectively as they previously were. Furthermore, it will be mere speculation to assume that everyone that passed through some sort of traumatic life experiences will be traumatized. This may not be so because of different factors such as the resilient factor, perception, and intensity. Some behaviors may be interpreted wrongly or rightly, but further search will give room for more understanding. To this end, I am categorically explaining an experience I came in contact with; I may be right or wrong, but then this is strictly my own perspective, keeping in mind that the parameters for

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this have been the consistency of a particular behavior over place and time. Let me share my experiences thus.

RECOUNTING MY EXPERIENCES AS THEY OCCURRED

First experience
On December 12, 2017, my colleague and I were driving to a destination for an official assignment. Immediately, we successfully negotiated a bend, there before us were some little children playing by the main road (occupying larger part of the road). After several attempts to clear them off the road with the car horn failed, we decided to stop the vehicle, alight, and walk to them. While my colleague had the intention to punish them, I rushed to interfere and decided to inquire instead. In my brief interrogation of these boys, two confessed hearing the sound of the horn of our vehicle, but in their words, the sound was not loud and scary enough (as they thought it was just a normal sound and not a threat).

Second experience
On January 15, 2018, slightly different incident happened on our way with some colleagues to another official assignment, around 11:00 am (Nigerian time). In this case, it was a whole family of seven (six children and the mother) trying to cross the road while we approach. The sound of the horn from our car (loud and clear) did not deter them from crossing the road, even when our car was obvious to anyone at the scenario. They were comfortably crossing the road so that we had to slow down (pressing emergency break) to allow them pass. To my great amazement, they claimed not to hear the sound of the car horn nor saw it approaching.

Third experience
On February 17, 2018, at about 4 pm, I was coming back from a training organized by my department. Close to a bend, I sighted some boys on their bicycles riding, though ahead of me with a distance, I soon covered the space between us because my means of transport is faster than theirs. Haven occupied the road as the ride, I began to horn, signaling them to give way or better still, get down to the shoulder, but as if the sound was just in my car. As if in a car race with them, these boys maintained their lanes and continue to ride. I had to slow down because it is obvious they are carried away in the excitement of whatever they are into. To quench my curiosity, I came close to one of them to ask if they were in a bicycle race or something that they did not respond to my alarm to give way. The respondent looked at me casually and said they are not. He continued that they did not hear the sound of my horn nor my call to give way.

Fourth experience
On February 27, 2018, this same scenario came to play. We had to signal and wait for the boy to move away before we moved. And looking at the ages of most of these boys, one would discover they are teenagers.

Fifth experience
Another incident happened on April 16, 2018, when I was coming back from a training again. I will have to go back to the office before going home; so on my way to the office, a boy of about 19 nearly got knocked down by a moving vehicle. He continued to walk majestically while crossing the road that the taxi driver had no option than to slow than to allow him cross, after series of horn to scare him away proof abortive.

However, in trying to understand these behaviors in a more in-depth manner, I had to summon the courage to discuss these concerns with some natives within the environment where I stay.

Respondent one
The first respondent was asked asked why people of different age (with emphasis on children and adolescents) do not tend to respond swiftly to sounds of passing vehicles and would mostly prefer that the driver stops and allow them move at their pace. The first participant responded thus; "naturally, the people of this community have no respect for other people and so a child is trained not to respect other people outside his/her home; hence, the behavior taken outside the home, including working and playing around the roadside," "I was shocked, but I needed the response so I didn't speak further."

Respondent two
When asked the same question, responded by saying that, "the drivers mostly don't drive with care and so the drivers will have to learn to respect the people and keep their speed so low." I also could not utter a word as what they said whether right or wrong was strictly their subjective opinions.

However, I would like to see it from a more macro level of thinking. The generalization may not point out to a direction but rather going so in depth may issue out a pointer in a way. I tend to see this from the perspective of war and armed conflict. I may be right or wrong, but then this is my position about the likelihood that lacks of threshold for sound at different points in time, especially with mostly people of the same ages (youths and adolescents given birth to during or after the insurgency).

For the older, I have come in contact with some in this situation and one would be tempted to ascribe the role of aging, trauma, peritrauma factors, and even dementia among some of these persons; but for a child/youth, there could be many or more reasons looking at the consistency of a behavior pattern and how these persons behave. I come to understand that war has a long-term effect on its victims. Look at Burundi and Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, North and South Sudan, Somalia, etc.,

all shattered by unrest and more to this is that as at now, only Rwanda has made significant progress in the area of leadership and citizenry as speculated by pundits. The act of war has likely led to this situation. Children have no fear for a couple of things; they have no fear for authority figures, have no fear for danger, and can they interpret a real threat. More often, we speak of the impact of combat exposure on military personnel forgetting our civilian groups but with more robust understanding now it seems as if children, men, and women who have experienced crisis are likely to be living in distress.

PRESUMED CAUSES OF PROTRACTED AFRICAN CONFLICTS

Broadly, African societies are collectivist, in that people define their identity in terms of their social relations and place the collective good above that of individuals.[1]

Mass displacement, attacks on civilian populations, mass losses of homes and belongings, amputations, child soldiering, and rape have been seen to be visible in most African societies plagued by war; these countries include Liberia (the civil war that lasted for years), Sierra Leone, Nigeria (primarily the insurgency in the North East Nigeria), Libya (power struggle and resource control), Sudan, South Sudan (resource control dispute), Somalia, Mozambique, Angola, Rwanda (Rwandan Genocide), Burundi, South Africa (struggle over control of gold mines and apartheid), Zimbabwe, and Egypt (Power struggle).

Six factors are likely to account for the emergence and nature of conflict in most African societies, which should be considered in any psychosocial support assessment and intervention.[2]

First, many of the conflicts are protracted, making it questionable to refer to psychosocial afflictions as acute reactions or pathologies or to talk of a "post-traumatic environment." Chronic conflict, with its repeated, accumulating stresses, and the lack of a breathing space in which to unpack one's issues have been the norm in war zones throughout Africa. Even following the signing of a ceasefire, the environment often remains highly violent due to the rise of banditry and crime, and this insecurity undermines the sense of security that is a prerequisite for psychosocial well-being. Because the protracted nature of the conflict badly damages or destroys basic support systems such as those in the health, education, and economic sectors, it is crucial to think of building peace and development as a long-term task extending over many years.[2]

Second, many African conflicts arise in no small part out of structural violence such as inequalities and political oppression. If this pattern was most visible in South Africa during the Apartheid era, it was also conspicuous in countries such as Rwanda and Sierra Leone. In Rwanda, for example, the history of colonialism and the privileging of Tutsi over Hutus helped to set the stage for Hutus turning the tables and using violence as a means of cementing their power and control over precious resources such as land.[3] In Sierra Leone, the political and economic disenfranchisement of large numbers of youth and other people enabled their participation in the armed conflict. Most armed conflicts in Africa have significant international and regional dimensions, many of which reflect international and regional forms of structural violence such as wealth and power asymmetries.[2] These international dimensions underscore the importance of regional and systems approaches to peace building and development.

Third, many African conflicts are grounded in a volatile mixture of poverty, weak governance, and fragile political and economic systems. Whereas outsiders tend to focus on traumatic experiences such as attack and exposure to life-threatening events, many Africans report that their greatest suffering arises from the less visible, every day and chronic ravages of poverty, hunger, not being able to fulfill roles such as mother or father, and uncertainty about the future. Although poverty itself does not cause armed conflict, it offers a potent stimulus to conflict when it is coupled with a weak or corrupt government that offers few supports or jobs to the majority of people, whose sense of disenfranchisement and hopelessness makes them highly susceptible to political manipulation.[2]

Fourth: African conflicts shatter the civil society that is the foundation of peace and development. In many cases, war undermines social cohesion,[4] and the desperate nature of the living conditions makes it difficult for people to support each other as neighbors. Protracted armed conflict has militarized numerous African societies, flooded countries with weapons, and created a sense that war is the normal state of affairs. Not uncommonly, youth groups and other civilian structures become part of militias in hopes of providing the security that the state cannot guarantee. In cases such as the Angolan civil wars, the opposition group, UNITA, families supported the troops and became integral parts of the political and military system. Where the state is the perpetrator of the violence, it often launches attacks on elements of civil society such as rival political parties that are perceived as threats to its legitimacy or power.[2]

Fifth: Terms such as "armed conflict" or even alternatives such as "political violence" do not capture the diversity that is hidden beneath their labels. It is valuable to remember that different kinds of conflict and violence produce different patterns of psychosocial distress. Genocide such as that in Rwanda, in 1994, may have unique psychosocial effects both in the transformation of government and civil society into a

killing apparatus and in the creation of profound existential fears and identity threats experienced by the ethnic groups that had been targeted. Similarly, state-sponsored violence and torture that divides communities, and families through a system of informants may have different effects on the social fabric of a society and the well-being of members of opposing groups than does, say, an unpredicted attack by rebel groups. Distinctive psychosocial effects may also occur in countries such as DRC, where villagers face attacks by a dizzying, changing array of armed groups. This diversity cautions against universalized images of war-affected populations.[2]

Sixth: Rape and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) are integral elements of armed conflict in African countries.[5-8] Rape is often used as a terror tactic and has also been used as a means of ethnic cleansing.[9] Among combatants, those who have survived GBV show greater prevalence of mental health problems.[10] Since it is women who are the primary targets of GBV, it is necessary to view war-affected populations through a gender lens and to avoid the assumption that women and men have been affected in the same ways.[2]

The impact of armed conflict - on a short and long run basis

The works of Grace Machel (Impact of Armed Conflict on Children - A 10-year strategic study presented to the United Nation General Assembly - I recommend for your read) have clearly spelt out evidence-based impact of armed conflict on children.[11]

However, let me kindly pre-empty, my expectations in the future should there not be any measure to tackle this situation. What we are likely to be faced with in the future if not addressed now may include:
1. Another channel of insecurity likely leading to the development of new militia groups.
2. Produce adults who become a reflection of previous maladaptive lives.
3. Produce youths who have lost hope with life.
4. Predispose the youth population to more and more psychological distress.
5. Substance use increase is likely to be witnessed
6. Increased anomie including theft, armed robbery, organized crime, etc.
7. More children are likely to find the streets as a habitat.

Lusk developed four categories of children found in the street.[12] Each group has its own psychological characteristics. First, there are poor working children returning to their families at night. They are likely to attend school and not be delinquent. Second, there are independent street workers. Their family ties are beginning to break down, their school attendance is decreasing, and their delinquency is increasing. Third, there are children of street families who live and work with their families in the street. Their conditions are related to poverty. In India, they are referred to as pavement dwellers,[13] whereas in the United States, they are the children of homeless families. Finally, there are the children who have broken off contact with their families. They are residing in the streets full time and are the "real" street children. Lusk considered this group to be about 15% of his sample of children in the streets of Rio de Janeiro.[12] Patel, in her study of street children in Bombay, had a similar categorization of children in the streets. Moreover, what we have here is a large number of children on the street due to displacement while another group due to cultural norms. What the war scene produces is even less compared to the after war effect.[13]

Bottom line of this discourse

Our societies ruined, our functionality turned into shrugs, our communal lifestyles in disarray, our villages turned into some mini theater of war, our children living and feeding on the streets, our men thrown into distress, and our lives defined by meaninglessness. War is a monster!.[14] This is the feeling we get from most of these survivors and since life has turned into meaninglessness, we must be able to understand behaviors within the context of (meaninglessness) the persons' subjective feelings.

When the sound stops, another sound starts afresh. This sound is not physical, but psychological… who feels this is the survivor of this warfare with its spillover effect on the society. We are left with flashbacks and frightening thoughts of what occurred, we are left with the fear of witnessing and seeing another occurrence, we are left with a people who only know war to be the best form of life, we are left with thoughts that hardly allow us to live a life, we are left with survivors with tunnel vision who seem to be helpless, and we are left with so much troubles. The streets and people around us will live in distress because they are our next hub.[14] Furthermore, to this end, traumas do not exist in vacuum,[2] they start from an accumulation of factors.

We are likely to have repetitive maladjusted behaviors such as increased theft in our communities, increased number of child-headed homes, increased number of child unwanted pregnancies as our girls prey into the hands of men with little resources, increased number of drug and substance users to help mask symptoms of trauma and depression, increased number of children on the streets due to displacement, increased number of children not in school, and increased need for social amenities as outcomes of post-conflict.

The bottom line to this discourse is that these children and survivors of this armed conflict are mostly left with a lot of things to deal with. Therefore, it will be clear to live with the earlier postulation that traumas do not exist in vacuum. These children that are not better able to comprehend sounds, talk more of differentiating between dangerous sounds and sounds that are

healthy, and are likely to be accumulating peritrauma factors only to be triggered with slight provocations in daily living.

Way forward

A key part of transforming a society for peace following such conflict is the rebuilding of civil society, enabling access to education and jobs, and creating norms and systems for handling political and ethnic conflict without resort to violence. In this respect, it is essential to connect psychosocial support with wider macro systems of civil society - educational, political, and economic - that supports peace, social justice, and development.[2]

Furthermore, the existing community-based system should be strengthened; this serves as the nucleus for social support fabric; and also, recovery largely depends on the social support mechanisms in place.

Government will have to be present in the lives of these victims; they must inculcate psychosocial support into a triad of actions involving educational policy formulation, mental health policies formulation, and a combination of the political will to see the implementation of these at the level needed to.

The dominant roles of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) will have to be admonished at all or most times as these CSOs carry along with them powerful messages about the dreaded impact of war which is expected to lead to genuine behavior change.

There will be a need for behavior modification to be admonished and incorporated into various medium of our dealings. People and children have grown up to find appropriateness in behaviors that have no importance and the need to help unlearn such behaviors while teaching these children new ones.

The mass media should be fit to ensure proper ventilation of useful information and not information that does not improve our growth and development. The media houses must stand their grounds to ensure that all message passed across come with the right intensity and the need to work on stereotype which may lead to labeling and other sorts of distorted behaviors.

A child is a child - it is good we know this so we can make corrections at a more plastic stage. The children roaming on the streets should mostly be taken and planted in for good formal education, as this will help them develop more sense of responsibility rather than being on the streets.

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