

## Between Violence and Nonviolence as Tools for Liberation in Africa

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### *Abstract*

Political theory as the study and systematic speculation of the writer or an author about the phenomena of the state has really served as models for explanation of the political reality and conditions of the people. Political philosophers and theorists through political theories have raised questions about “what should be the relationship between the state and the citizens?”, “How do we organize human societies?”, “what is the best principle or ideology for regulating the actual human society?”, among others. In the modern era, we have seen nations, political communities; postcolonial societies and indigenous peoples battle for political cum territorial sovereignty and self-determination. Different political theories, ideologies, methodologies and experiences; both colonial and postcolonial have shaped liberation struggles. The dimensions that the struggles have taken are informed and shaped by political theories and ideologies inherited from colonial mentality and residue. However, two prominent methodologies have played out in African struggles, these are violence and nonviolence. Each of these methodologies have manifested in different parts of Africa owing to the prevalent political theory embraced, in some Arab nations and other parts of the world, especially nations that went through colonialism. In spite of myriads of political theories on how best to organize human society, the establishment of a “perfect” or “ideal” political society has always eluded human beings. In this regard, I intend to examine the roles of violence and nonviolence as tools in liberation struggle for political and territorial sovereignty and self-determination. In doing this, I will be arguing that though violence and nonviolence are effective tools for achieving peace and liberation, depending on the prevailing circumstances, nonviolence is a better and more pragmatic alternative. The case for nonviolence would be drawn and anchored on some cultural values known in various African societies. This paper will draw from the concept and principle of UBUNTU – which means *I am because we are. That is, I am only a human being because of other human beings such that when I inflict pain on others, I am also inflicting pain on myself.* The paper concludes that nonviolence as a method anchored on some African values, such as *Ubuntu*, will set a better model for the best life.

*Keywords:* Africa, liberation of Africa, non-violence, violence.

### 1. Introduction

The problem of human liberation is as old as human society itself. Right from the earliest recorded history to the contemporary period, human beings have always sought and developed methods of achieving peaceful co-existence. Violence and nonviolence methods have played significant roles in liberation thought. Violence could be seen as the intentional use of force to injure, abuse, damage destroy or to influence people’s behavior. It manifests in various forms.

It could be physical, structural, political or psychological. Similarly, nonviolence may be seen as the use of means like negotiations, dialogue, peaceful protest, non-resistance, non-cooperation to achieve political or social change. For example, the violent and nonviolent struggles and the anti-colonial resistance that shook Africa was a result European imperialism and aggression towards the Africans for the greater part of the twentieth century. This resistance to colonialism manifested in diverse forms which included violent and non-violent resistance which differed from one African nation to the next. In recent times, events such as the insurrection at the US Capitol, coup d'état in some African countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Gabon), violence perpetrated by Hindus on Muslims in India during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Taliban take over in Kabul that is threatening the lives of women, forcefully remind us of violence as a means. To some people like the libertarians, violence is a justified means, at least for self-defense. As a matter of fact, violence is common and ubiquitous.

Dating from the ancient period, human beings have always sought and developed methods for achieving peace and organized society. In human society, peace is the most essential commodity for a good and fulfilling life. It is only in a peaceful environment that good life can take place. However, the more human beings yearn for peace, the more it becomes elusive. In achieving peace, violence and nonviolence have played prominent roles, at one period or the other. Violence and nonviolence are crucial tools in liberation struggles. This becomes important because according to Hoffman and Graham, “In all relationships, power is involved and, therefore, there will be those who are relatively disadvantaged” (2006, 248).

In view of this, I intend to examine the roles of violence and nonviolence in liberation struggle in Africa. Are violence and nonviolence compatible? What is even liberation in the context of violence and nonviolence? Can either of the two, or both be justified? Which, between the two, is more effective? What are the strengths and weaknesses of violence and nonviolence? In responding to these questions, I intend to argue that though violence and nonviolence play significant and effective roles in liberation struggle, nonviolence is a better option or alternative. It is not only a better alternative; it will set a better model for the best conception of the good life. To achieve this, the paper will be divided into three sections. The first section attempts to conceptualize the key concepts: violence and its roles in human liberation; the role of nonviolence in liberation struggles. The second section examines the justification of nonviolence over violence, showing why it will be a better alternative through Ubuntu Philosophy. The last section is the conclusion where the key issues discussed in the paper were summarized. nonviolence. It was noted that notwithstanding that nonviolence will be a better alternative, it is not a perfect method. It has its own limits and weaknesses. The paper also acknowledges that the political environment or situation determines the effectiveness of any method. That is, the effectiveness of either violence or nonviolence, as a method of liberation depends on the virtues that have been cultivated by both those who employed the method and those against whom it is employed.

## 2. Conceptual clarifications

It is important to conceptualize and clarify the major concepts and terms employed in this paper. The concepts include violence, nonviolence, as well as Ubuntu philosophy as necessary ingredient in-built into nonviolence philosophy.

## 3. Violence and its roles in liberation thought

The best and first step to be taking in the discussion of a subject or topic is to start from the definition or clarification of concepts. The concept of *violence* is complex and diverse, such that each author or scholar tend to define it from his/her perspective. Hence, the definition varies as the individuals that attempt to define it vary. Violence is such a concept that getting a

precise definition poses a problem. It could be defined narrowly as physical actions of human beings that inflict painful and physical injuries on the victims. This definition sees violence as an act of aggression against the objects at which it is directed. Along this direction, in *Violence, Inequality, and Human Freedom*, Ladicola and Shupe (1998) provide a conceptualization of violence that affords a comprehensive examination and dissection of violence in any society. These authors divided the world of violence into three interacting spheres, domains, or contexts: (i) Interpersonal violence- what happens between people acting in their private lives, without regard to occupational roles or formal institutions; (ii) Institutional violence- what happens within an institutional context vis-a vis the action of institutional agents and others; and (iii) Structural violence- what happens within the context of establishing, maintaining, extending, and/or resisting hierarchy, privilege, and inequality. Violence is a universal phenomenon. According to Gregg Barak (2003), “violence is an integral part of every society”. This implies that every human society witnesses and is a product of one form of violence at a particular point in time or the other. It manifests in form of interpersonal, institutional or structural, depending on the human conditions that give rise to it.

In the same vein, Salmi, a development economist from Morocco, in his important work entitled *Violence and Democratic Society* defines violence as an act that threatens a person’s physical or psychological integrity (Salmi 1993: 16). He distinguishes between four categories of violence: (i) Direct violence- This involves deliberate attacks that inflict harm (rape, kidnappings, torture, homicide); (ii) Indirect violence- This is inflicted unintentionally as in cases of violence by omission, when for example inaction contributes to starvation or genocide; (iii) Repressive violence – when people are deprived of their political, civil, social and economic rights; and (iv) Alienating violence – This embraces the kind of oppression (ethnic and male chauvinism, racism, hostile acts of homophobia, opposition to AIDS sufferers etc.) that undermines a person’s emotional, cultural and intellectual development. This succinctly depicts that violence is not only about physical force. This is made clear by Hoffman and Graham, who maintained that “By violence we do not simply mean the direct infliction of physical harm by sticks and stones. We also mean the indirect infliction of physical harm which arises from abuse, the kind of security that causes pain and depression, torment of a kind that destroys a person or a people’s sense of self-worth (248).

However, in *The Use and Abuse of Political Violence*, David Miller argues that violence may be permissible in dictatorships and other repressive regimes when it is used to defend human rights, provoke liberal reforms, and achieve other desirable objectives (Miller, 1984). In this regard, violence may serve as a good weapon in the hands of the oppressed people. For example, during apartheid regime in South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC), resorted to this form of violence (among other tactics). It is important to note that the ANC only resorted to violence as a response to the actions of a regime that banned the organization and imprison its leaders. Brian Bunting, a South African, who has written widely on the anti-apartheid struggle, has documented in detail the laws passed in the period of “grand apartheid” under Dr Verwoerd that, among other things, prevented peaceful protest.

What the above implies, is that, violence could be justifiable in its repressive form. That is, when people have suffered under violent regime, fighting back with violent means will be justifiable. But, does violence, in anyway serve as a solution to violence? The obvious problem with this view will be that such move will lead to circle of violence and invariably those that have suffered from violence are likely to continue being victims of violence (Hoffman & Graham, 2006, 2). Hence, the initial problem of how to liberate themselves from violent and oppressive regime will be rather aggravated than rooted out of the human society.

To corroborate this view, John Hoffman and Paul Graham hold that if political violence can be justified when a state is explicitly authoritarian and denies its opponents any channel of legal change (as in apartheid South Africa), it becomes terrorism when employed

against a liberal state (Hoffman & Graham, 2006, 230). The reason for this is that the liberal state is in opposition to force or violence as a method of settling conflicts of interests.

Violence arises in human society as a result of struggle for power and how to distribute and manage power. According to Arendt Hannah, power springs up between people as they act together; it belongs to the group, and disappears when the group disperses. It is a collective capacity. Until this coming together, it is only a potential. Violence is an instrument. It is the use of implements to multiply strength and command others to obey. When power and violence are combined, “the result is a monstrous increase in potential force”. This is Rollo May in his book *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence* maintains that:

Violence has as its breeding ground in impotence and apathy... as we make people powerless, we promote their violence rather than its control. Deeds of violence in our society are performed largely by those trying to establish their self-esteem, to defend their self-image, and to demonstrate that they, too are significant... violence arises not out of power but out of powerlessness.”<sup>1</sup>

Violence manifests in various forms as direct and visible, which is intended to harm and hurt an opponent; structural violence, which is invisible and is embedded in the structures of the society like poverty, slavery, colonialism and imperialism. Violence also manifests in its cultural form which is invisible but seen in the marginalization and exclusion of certain people of different caste, color, sex and community. In whatever form violence is experienced, be it visible or invisible, it is against human flourishing and improvement in the modern world both in its manifestation and results.

Similarly, violence is not limited to physical actions like riot, arson, war, murder, and physical injury or act of physical aggression. Violence encompasses both physical and psychological aspects of human experience and existence because it is not just limited to the intended action of an individual or institutional agents. An act of violence covers intentional violation of people’s right and also embraces both the overt and covert acts of violence, including psychological abuse, dehumanization as well as moral abuse. It is in the light of this that Robert McAfee Brown sees violence as “whatever violates another, in the sense of infringing upon or disregarding or abusing or denying that other, whether physical harm is involved or not, can be understood as an act of violence.... In the broadest sense then, an act, that depersonalized would be an act of violence.”<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that violence is often perpetrated as a result of wrong or forceful exercise of power by those that possess and wield it. I now turn to the concept of nonviolence.

#### 4. Conceptualizing nonviolence

Nonviolence as a strategy or method for liberation was developed most fully by Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Junior. Each of these authors and scholars developed and applied nonviolence resistance in their respective domain and on different degrees. Nonviolence is the use of peaceful means, not force, to bring about political or social change. It is the abstention from violence as a matter of principle. It is used by different people for different reasons. It is an important technique for dealing with conflict without harming anyone by bringing about the desired and targeted end. In particular, Luther King Jnr. That nonviolence involves practical action that seeks to win friendship and understanding of the opponent, not to humiliate

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<sup>1</sup> Rollo May, *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Source of Violence*, New York, W. W. Norton, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *Religious Violence*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987, p. 7.

him. In his words, “Many of the things that I had not cleared intellectually concerning nonviolence were now solved in the sphere of practical action.”<sup>3</sup>

Nonviolence is the absence of violence. It is a state or condition of avoiding violence. It could mean the process of protesting peacefully or working for social changes without resorting to violence. It is a tool or method for combating societal injustice and oppressive regimes. Nonviolence as a tool for liberation attempts to refrain from the use violence, especially when reacting to or protesting against oppression, injustice, discrimination, or the like. Nonviolence rejects the use of physical violence in order to achieve social or political change. It seeks to defeat injustice, not people. It holds that suffering can educate and reform. It chooses love instead of hate.

The trio of Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jnr. Had a great impact on the intellectual history of nonviolence through different epochs. In *My Religion* (1884) and *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1893), Tolstoy laid down his political philosophy of nonviolent resistance. He vehemently criticized in particular the modern slavery of military conscription or compulsory military service which had been introduced in Russia after the army reform of 1874. To Tolstoy, nonviolence became the ethical basis for the doctrine of Truth Force which was later developed by Gandhi in his Satyagraha philosophy and Martin Luther King Jr. in his Soul-Force. “The trio regard violence or power as absolute evil and reject fighting against evil using the same means as does evil.”<sup>4</sup> For Gandhi in particular, nonviolence was not just a negative concept of non-injury but a positive one in which meant love for selfless service. He understood nonviolence its Sanskrit root *Ahimsa*, which translated in English means and implies non-injury or avoidance of physical violence or any form of violence. Both Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledged that nonviolence as a method of liberation recognize that evildoers are also victims and are not evil people. In a similar vein, Tolstoy repudiates violence and power and regard both as absolute evil. He warned that evil should not be fought using violence and power because they are evil and it is not good and acceptable to fight evil using the same evil means.

According to Gandhi, nonviolence is the personal practice of not causing harm to others under any condition. This may come from the belief, among others, that hurting any creature, including the environment, is unnecessary to achieve an outcome. “Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man.”<sup>5</sup> Under nonviolence, the weakest have the same opportunity as the strongest. To Martin Luther King Jr., nonviolence is the activation in us of that true courage, honor, faithfulness, integrity and loyalty to truth and justice (Luther King Jr., 1991). Gandhi unequivocally states that nonviolence contained a universal applicability. In his word, he stated that “I have no message to give except this that there is no deliverance for any people on this earth or for all the people of this earth except through truth and nonviolence in every walk of life without any exceptions.”<sup>6</sup> Gandhi’s aim was to bring every problem, social, political, economic or otherwise, face to face with truth as it may present itself at a given moment. Nonviolence as a philosophy was a way of life for Gandhi, who sometimes describes it as a method of noncooperation with evils.

Gandhi and King adopted nonviolence or nonviolent resistance with the conviction that it is a way of life that has to be embraced and lived after a conscientious search for an enduring meaning of human life and the brotherhood of all mankind. In reacting to this, John Okwoeze

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King Jnr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, HarperCollins, 1958, p.84.

<sup>4</sup> Tetsuo Mochizuki, “Nonviolence by Tolstoy and Gandhi: Toward a Comparison through Criticism”, *Comparative Studies on Regional Powers*, No.11, pp. 149-169, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Gandhi, M. K. *Hind Swaraj*, Ahmedabad, 1944.

<sup>6</sup> Gandhi, M. K. *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Navajivan Publishing House, 1955.

Odey maintains that “the goodness of nonviolent resistance is characterized more by its moral truth and beauty rather than by its immediate practical usefulness.”<sup>7</sup> For Gandhi and King, nonviolence method is not just mere a functional alternative to violence, it aims primarily to employ good means and the most morally constructive means to achieve good ends.

In the contemporary and recent literature, nonviolence has been similarly conceived to be a weapon or method in the hands of a group for the resistance of oppressive regime without employing or relying on violence. For example, Ettang asserts that:

Nonviolence is the means through which groups can actively oppose a system of injustice and violence without using violence and exacerbating an already volatile situation. In the case of Africa, these systems of injustice range from oppressive governments to structures that perpetuate violence and deepen inequalities among various groups. As the definition depicts, nonviolence is not passive or weak but requires action in transforming a situation. Discourses on nonviolence agree that conflict is necessary and an inevitable part of society. As long as there is a desire and competition among individuals and groups, conflict is bound to emerge.<sup>8</sup>

The above definition clearly sees nonviolence as a veritable tool for pursuing and achieving peace and justice. It is a weapon of liberation drawn from the strength and resolve to oppose and confront oppression and injustice without resorting to violence. This is with the recognition that conflict is inevitable in human society, especially in the process of acquiring and exercising power. Nonviolence aims at achieving equality for the oppressed people in the face of inequalities. In a similar vein, Erica Chenoweth and Kathleen Gallagher assert this:

We define nonviolent resistance as the application of unarmed civilian power using nonviolent methods such as protests, strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations, without using or threatening physical harm against the opponent.<sup>9</sup>

It is unanimous among scholars from the above definitions that nonviolence does not employ violence, force or any form of threat that will harm anyone, including the perpetrator of oppressive regime.

## 5. Ubuntu philosophy as an indispensable tool in nonviolent liberation struggle

The Ubuntu Philosophy is one of the philosophical traditions that evolved in African continent over hundreds, if not, thousands of years. Ubuntu is an ancient African word meaning ‘humanity to other’. It is often described as reminding us that “I am what I am because of who we all are.” It originated in the Bantu and Xhosa people of Southern Africa by popularized by Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. As a philosophy rooted in African tradition, it embodies a communal ethos that emphasizes shared responsibility, trust in each other, interconnectedness and solidarity among the individuals in the community. Generally, it translates to “a person is a person through other people.” This implies that the source of knowledge and power is the community, not the individual. From this, we could say that for Ubuntu, “I am because we are.” There is no individual without the community and no individual can outshine or grows beyond the

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<sup>7</sup> John Okwoeze Odey, *Active Nonviolent Resistance: The Moral and Political Power of the Oppressed*, Enugu: Snaap Press Limited, 1996, p.44.

<sup>8</sup> Dorcas Ettang, “Factors for Successful Nonviolent Action in Africa”, *Peace Review, A Journal of Social Justice*, vol.26, Issue 3, pp. 412-419, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, “Understanding Nonviolent Resistance: An Introduction”, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 50, no. 3, pp 271-276, special issue, Understanding Nonviolent Resistance, 2013.

community. In this regard, Ubuntu can aid nonviolence to disarm and change the world – our lives, our relationships and our communities but it has to be well organized and disciplined.

Ubuntu is an ancient African Philosophy that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all people and the importance of community. It has the potential to play a significant role in strengthening peace, cohesion, and national integration. In the words of Tim Murithi, “Ubuntu” acknowledges the interconnectedness of humanity at all times (Mbigi, 1995). From this, Ubuntu implies, among other things, that an individual can only increase his good fortunes by sharing with other members of the society and thereby also enhancing their status within the local communities. According to Desmond Tutu, the concept of Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a western philosophy but it is one of many African Philosophy and indigenous approaches from South Africa which highlights the framework of understanding humanity (Tutu, 1999). One of the notable values in Ubuntu philosophy as a nonviolent ingredient is that the role of elders and chiefs are highly recognized and respected. They function as a court with broad and flexible powers to interpret evidence, impose judgements, and manage the process of reconciliation (Pkalya et al., 2004).

The argument of this paper is that nonviolence is a better alternative to violence in liberation thought and that Ubuntu philosophy is deeply engrained in nonviolence and readily reinforce and facilitate nonviolence as a liberation tool. The primary aim of nonviolence is to liberate the people in an oppressive regime. In this regard, Ubuntu guides everyone towards lives dedicated to active practice of nonviolence with the purpose of overcoming violence oppression and injustice. The Ubuntu philosophy embedded in nonviolence method facilitates human liberation from the oppressive structures of the government, from one’s ego and the urge to control others forcefully. Ubuntu philosophy is embedded in nonviolence since it emphasizes togetherness, harmony, reciprocity and solidarity. With these features, Ubuntu is an essential aspect of nonviolence process of liberation. It encompasses the political, cultural, economic, social and philosophical dynamics of African society which is practiced across Southern, East and Central Africa. In the words of Tim Murithi, Ubuntu involves the values of reciprocity, inclusivity and a sense of shared destiny between people (Murithi, 2008). Similarly, such values as solidarity, compassion, generosity, mutuality and commitment to community can find resonance well beyond Africa’s borders (Ngunjiri, 2010). Nonviolence promotes reciprocity and inclusivity hence Ubuntu philosophy with such values will enhance nonviolence as a tool for liberation. This will make nonviolence achieve a permanent victory whereby violence will be avoided and social or political change would still be avoided.

Ubuntu promotes the principles of empathy, justice, collaboration, diversity and education which greatly contribute to fighting social challenges by fostering a collective and inclusive approach focused on the well-being and empowerment of all individuals. This is part of what nonviolence liberation thought aims at achieving, hence Ubuntu can easily facilitate and support nonviolence as a better alternative for liberation. In line with the people-centric Ubuntu Philosophy, individualism is not viable, for it is inadequate as a model to understand the basic human elements of a society (Khoza, 1994). In nonviolent resistance, everyone counts. The liberation is targeted at nonviolent activities like strike, noncooperation, boycott, peaceful demonstration and protest that will connect everyone by removing the disadvantages experienced by particular groups within the society. This will easily be made possible by the Ubuntu philosophy since it promotes peace by acknowledging guilt, showing remorse and repentance, asking for and giving forgiveness and paying compensation or reparations as a prelude to reconciliation. In line with this, Mbigi identified the five principles of Ubuntu as survival, spirit of solidarity, compassion, respect and dignity (Mbigi, 1997). Survival enabled African communities during harsh environment conditions, to rely on each other for existence despite differences they might have had among themselves. This is capable of reinforcing nonviolence liberation process.

## 6. Conclusion

The major claim of the paper is that violence and nonviolence are viable methods in liberation thought but that nonviolence is a better alternative in liberation discourse. Also, that Ubuntu Philosophy rooted in African traditional society readily reinforces and facilitate nonviolence as a tool for liberation of the oppressed people. It has been argued in the paper that nonviolence is a better alternative than violence in liberation thought because it chooses love over hate unlike violence that reinforces oppression, repression and revenge, thereby causes more havoc. It was argued that nonviolence is a better alternative because it aims at transforming everyone-the oppressor and the oppressed by seeking to defeat injustice and powerlessness through suffering, education and reform that will be favorable to everyone. It was also argued and established in the paper that nonviolence as a better alternative method for liberation harbors some principles in ubuntu philosophy that can easily reinforce it. These principles include compassion, reciprocity, solidarity, mutual understanding and generosity. The paper conclude that nonviolence is a better alternative tool for liberation than violence because of its numerous merits like making the antagonists to start being peaceful, encouraging people to resist evil without resorting to violence, making it a powerful and just weapon. Above all, nonviolence is a better alternative than violence because it leads to much greater degrees of democratic freedom. It is also important to note that there are some demerits associated with nonviolence as a method such as protesters can be abused, or even killed by violent opponents. Also, nonviolence as a method can be pacifying but could be incoherent and disorganized sometimes. However, notwithstanding the demerits of nonviolence, it is still a better alternative than violence as tools for liberation- this is the central argument defended in the paper.

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