

Conflict, as we know it today, has changed immensely since the early days of clashes between kings and kingdoms. In the contemporary world, three major causes of conflict have been identified: cultural, socio-psychological and material. These three analytical perspectives claim that the essential goods at stake are values, status and scarce resources, i.e. the cultural perspective denotes that conflict emerges owing to clashes in values; the socio-psychological perspective argues that conflict is caused by clashes in status; and the material resource perspective argues that conflict is caused by the never-ending struggle over lucrative resources.

For the purpose of this article, only the cultural perspective as a cause of conflict will be explored. Here, focus is placed on the growing and important role of religion, and specifically the role of resurgent fundamentalist Christianity in conflict relations. The possible causes for a clash of civilisations and the change in fault lines between the West and the non-West will be explored. It is also important to note that the three perspectives can merge to form a combined cause for conflict.

The cultural perspective

Patterns of conflict have changed immensely over time. A clear shift has been witnessed where conflict between leaders has made way for conflict between nations and nation-states. Hereafter, conflict occurred owing to differences in ideologies so as to lay the foundations for conflict between civilisations.(2)

In his famous *The Clash of Civilisations*, Huntington(3) presupposed that the fundamental sources of conflict in the contemporary world do not lie in the ideological and economic spheres. He believed that the divisions between people and the central source of conflict are cultural. Even though future power will still be in the hands of the nation-states, conflict will occur between nations and the different civilisations. Thus, the clash of civilisations will dictate the direction of global politics where, as Huntington states, "the fault lines between civilisations will be the battle lines of the future."(4)

Civilisations, as cultural entities, are recognised through objective elements such as history, language, religion, tradition, customs and institutions, as well as through the subjective

Culture as a cause of conflict in Africa

Written by Lize-Marié Smuts

Wednesday, 10 November 2010 08:08 -

self-identification of the peoples. Civilisations are also dynamic: their boundaries are not fixed, but constantly undergo change when they rise and fall, merge and divide and sometimes even disappear. By keeping this conceptualisation in mind, Huntington recognised eight important civilisations as the emerging civilisations that may portray an important role in future conflict. These are the Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic Orthodox, Latin-American and African civilisations.(5)

There are various reasons why the clash of civilisations may occur. Firstly, the (often basic) differences between the civilisations will create fragile fault lines. Amongst the different objective elements, religion is seen as the most important. The fundamental differences seem to be stronger than those of political ideologies and regimes.(6) Within Africa, Islam and Christianity often play conflicting roles as these religions often transcend and share borders, which could enhance the clash of civilisations.(7)

Secondly, as the world is becoming a smaller place, globalisation is recognised as another reason for why the clash of civilisations may occur. Globalisation leads to increased interaction between people of different civilisations. The increased interaction thus intensifies civilisation consciousness and their awareness of the differences between other civilisations and commonalities within their own civilisations.(8)

The third reason comprises economic modernisation and societal change, which could bring divisions between people sharing long-standing identities. The process of modernisation includes industrialisation, urbanisation, increased literacy levels, education, wealth and social mobilisation, which are all elements evident in Western civilisations.(9) As modernisation occurs, the nation-state as a source of social identity weakens. At this point, religion often steps in to fill the gap and is often referred to in fundamentalist terms. This *la revanche de Dieu* or the revival of religion thus provides the foundation for identity that transcends national boundaries and unites civilisations.(10) Islam and Christianity have played important roles in conflicts and, at times, been referred to as fundamentalist ideals, in Nigeria and Sudan (Christianity) and Algeria and Morocco (Islam).(11)

Fourthly, the West, occupying its position as universal power-holder, has further enhanced civilisation consciousness. The West was the first modernised civilisation and, as the civilisations jumped on the modernised bandwagon, Western culture has become the culture of the world, or the universal culture. As the influences of the West have penetrated all levels of civilisation, a 'return to the roots' phenomenon has been witnessed amongst non-Western civilisations.(12) Thus, tribalism - the desire to reinforce and safeguard tribal/cultural identity emerged as a reaction to universalism - the worldwide trend towards global uniformity. Thus,

Culture as a cause of conflict in Africa

Written by Lize-Marié Smuts

Wednesday, 10 November 2010 08:08 -

globalisation has indirectly led to the enhancement of tribalism.(13) Huntington reinforced this idea of tribalism as he argued that the return to the roots phenomenon is seen in the "Asianisation" of Japan, the "Hinduisation" of India and the "Re-Islamisation" of the Middle East and, to some extent, North Africa. In these examples, civilisations have the need, desire and resources to formulate the status quo according to non-Western ideals. Civilisations thus return to their roots in order to build their identity to safeguard themselves against the universal Western ideals.(14)

Fifthly, cultural characteristics and differences have been more unchangeable and easily resolved than political and economic characteristics and differences. In the past, affiliation with a group could be distinguished by the question "which side are you on?" Today, however, affiliation is much easier identified by asking, "what are you?" In various countries such as Sudan, Rwanda and Somalia, the correct answer to this question can be the difference between life and death, as ethnicity is regarded as the most important characteristic in civilisations.(15)

Finally, an increase in economic regionalisation has been witnessed amongst the countries of the world. Economic regionalism can reinforce civilization consciousness; but, often enough, economic regionalism can only succeed if it is rooted in a common civilisation.(16) This, in itself, is a catch 22 situation. A manifestation of this is the regionalism between the previously French colonial African countries where tension existed between the uniformity of a Francophone region versus the individuality of the different civilisations.(17)

Fault lines

As mentioned earlier, Huntington stated that fault lines between civilisations will be the cause of future conflicts.(18) He noted that the fault lines between civilizations will replace the previous political and ideological divisions of the past. As ideological divisions have disappeared, a new cultural division between, specifically, western Christianity (on one side) and orthodox Christianity and Islam (on the other side) have emerged. Thus, the predominant division line is

Culture as a cause of conflict in Africa

Written by Lize-Marié Smuts

Wednesday, 10 November 2010 08:08 -

drawn between the West and the rest. As the ideological borders changed after the end of the Cold War, cultural differences of the West resurfaced.

With regards to religion, the West is seen as the Protestants and Catholics - people with shared experiences of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French revolution as well as the Industrial revolution. Economically, these civilisations are seen as more developed than those civilisations on the other side of the fault line. Their future holds the promise of increased European economic integration and political consolidation.(19) Orthodox Christians and Muslims, found on the other side of the fault line, have been part of different kingdoms in the past and did not take part in the same modernisation process of the West. Economically, these civilisations are observed to be in a weaker position and the possibility to achieve stable economic systems is less viable.(20) In these civilisations, liberalisation often occurred through the use of force and peacebuilding activities, which in most cases have reinforced their unstable position.(21)

Furthermore, as Western influence has spread across the globe, Arabic nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism has resurged. Tension between these two spheres is rising and thus the possibility of conflict between the West and the non-West becomes a reality.(22) The non-Western communities can take either three forms of action against the dominance of the West. The first is to take on a position of isolation in order to defend their civilisations against further penetration of and participation with the West. The possibility of success is, however, not viable and costs will be high. Secondly, a meeting of masses where civilizations try to accept the values and institutions of the West may be realised. In this way, the non-Western civilisations may become part of the universal culture. Thirdly, an attempt to bring balance between civilisations may occur. Here cooperation with the West will occur while indigenous values and institutions are protected.(23)

The fault line can further be conceptualised according to the Confusion-Islamic civilisations.

Culture as a cause of conflict in Africa

Written by Lize-Marié Smuts

Wednesday, 10 November 2010 08:08 -

Here the emergence of weapon states plays an important role. From the end of the Cold War, the West has decreased their military power in the rest of the world. During this movement, China, North Korea and the Middle East used the chance to develop their military capabilities in the hope of strengthening their positions against the West. Even though the West tried to stifle the attempts through international agreements, economic pressure and control transfers, development was still witnessed amongst non-Western states. In this way, non-Western civilisations continually try to gain wealth, influence, skills and weapons to formulate their identities in the modern world.(24)

A third group identified by Huntington as a threat to the West is the Orthodox Christians. These Orthodox civilisations may have a major impact on worldwide conflict in the future. Developing Governments often still struggle to accept the idea of Islam as a threatening ideology. They do not realise the potential of its political role as emphasised by Orthodox Christianity.(25) The emergence of Christianity may be larger than that of Islam. It is, however, important to note that this type of Christianity is not Western, but Orthodox Christianity. There is currently a worldwide desire for and trend towards a super naturalism and neo-orthodox view of religion. This trend acclaims an antique worldview of the New Testament. Various civilisations in Asia, Latin America and Africa are hosts to the strong growing Orthodox Christianity, such as Egypt, Ethiopia and Eritrea.(26)

Conclusion

In the future, the clash of civilisations may be a main cause of conflict as can be illustrated by using examples of African conflicts. Even though nation-states will remain as the actors with the most power, war may break out between the different nation-states and civilisations. The source of this conflict can be found in the fault lines between the Western and the non-Western civilisations, mostly articulated by religion. As such, Arabic nationalism, Islam, Confucian-Islam as well as Orthodox Christianity (the religions/civilisations on the other side of the fault line) may become the main obstacle to the West on their road to development, self-determination and, inevitably, universalism.

Written by: Lize-Marié Smuts (1)

NOTES:

- (1) Contact Lize-Marié Smuts through Consultancy Africa Intelligence's Conflict and Terrorism Unit (conflict.terrorism@consultancyafrica.com).
- (2) Kaplan, R.D. 1994. *The Coming Anarchy*, *The Atlantic Monthly* (October), Vol. 290(3).
- (3) Huntington, S. P. 1993. *The Clash of Civilisations*, *Foreign Affairs* (Summer), Vol. 72(3).
- (4) *Ibid.*
- (5) *Ibid.*
- (6) *Ibid.*
- (7) Jenkins, P. 2002. *The Next Christianity*, *Atlantic Monthly* (October), Vol. 290(3).
- (8) Huntington, S. P. 1993. *The Clash of Civilisations*, *Foreign Affairs* (Summer), Vol. 72(3).
- (9) Huntington, S.P. 1996. *The West Unique, not Universal*, *Foreign Affairs* (Winter), 75(6)
- (10) Huntington, S. P. 1993. *The Clash of Civilisations*, *Foreign Affairs* (Summer), Vol. 72(3).
- (11) Jenkins, P. 2002. *The Next Christianity*, *Atlantic Monthly* (October), Vol. 290(3).
- (12) Huntington, S. P. 1993. *The Clash of Civilisations*, *Foreign Affairs* (Summer), Vol. 72(3).
- (13) Dixon, P. 2004. *Futurewise: Six Faces of Global Change*. London: Profile Books.
- (14) Huntington, S. P. 1993. *The Clash of Civilisations*, *Foreign Affairs* (Summer), Vol. 72(3).
- (15) *Ibid.*
- (16) *Ibid.*
- (17) Armstrong, D., Loyd, L. & Redmond, J. 2004. *International Organisations in World Politics* (3rd edition). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- (18) Huntington, S. P. 1993. *The Clash of Civilisations*, *Foreign Affairs* (Summer), Vol. 72(3).
- (19) *Ibid.*
- (20) *Ibid.*
- (21) Van Creveld, M. 1991. *The Transformation of War*. New York: Free Press.
- (22) Huntington, S. P. 1993. *The Clash of Civilisations*, *Foreign Affairs* (Summer), Vol. 72(3).
- (23) *Ibid.*
- (24) *Ibid.*
- (25) Jenkins, P. 2002. *The Next Christianity*, *Atlantic Monthly* (October), Vol. 290(3).
- (26) *Ibid.*

Culture as a cause of conflict in Africa

Written by Lize-Marié Smuts

Wednesday, 10 November 2010 08:08 -

Article by: [Consultancy Africa Intelligence CAI](#)