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Social Organisation and Conflict Resolution among the Kouya

Eddie Arthur

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to investigate some aspects of conflict resolution among the Kouya[1] people of central Côte d'Ivoire. Rather than describe the actual mechanics of conflict resolution, the paper looks at the various principles which are called into play during conflict. We examine the various strata of Kouya society: the family, the clan or *quartier*, and the village, and then look at other factors which are important in dispute resolution: age, group solidarity, and face. The interaction of these factors in dispute resolution is considered before going on to look at records of actual disputes.

KOUYA SOCIETY

Each Kouya is linked to those around him[2] by a series of relationships and obligations. These relationships, defined mainly in terms of family links and age, form the center around which all Kouya life revolves. Other relationships, springing from common village origins, loyalty to the same football club, or groups who work together for any other reason, are also important, but family ties form the basis for social interaction.

The basic unit of Kouya life is the nuclear family, a patrilocal and patrilinear unit. A person typically has three part names, the first name being his father's personal name, then his own name, followed by a French name used for legal and civil purposes. Thus:

Touali Tra Etienne, is the father of Tra Tui François.

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[1] The Kouya people live in twelve villages to the south and west of Vavoua in central Côte d'Ivoire. Kouya belongs to the Kru family, a branch of the Niger-Congo family.

[2] The male pronoun is used without intending any prejudice.

In cases where a child has parents from different ethnic groups, the Kouya consider the child to belong to the same ethnic group as his father. This becomes important in those villages where Kouya men tend to marry Gouro women. Even one who has grown up in Gouro areas with his mother's families and speaks no Kouya is considered to be Kouya if his father is a Kouya. The fact that many Kouya marry Gouro women means that in a large number of families, Gouro and not Kouya is the main language spoken.

The Kouya are forbidden to marry within their extended family or clan, and women typically move to live with their husbands' families, although they retain close links with their own people. Married women return to their own families for extended periods of time, and children will often go to live with their maternal families for months at a time.

Thus the Kouya person has two basic sets of family relations, the paternal family among whom he passes the majority of his time and his maternal family, who live some distance away. We will consider each of these in turn.

The paternal family.

Because the family is patrilocal, three, four or even five generations from the male line can be found living in close proximity. The smallest unit, the nuclear family, consists of a married man and his wife/wives and children. The largest family unit is the extended family, or clan, who are descended from a common ancestor. The clans tend to live in a defined area in each village, referred to by the French word *quartier*, a section of town.

The nuclear family. The nuclear family finds physical expression in the courtyard or *buduãw¥¥*. This is a defined area in the village occupied by a family. In its most simple form the family consists of a man with his wives and children. Their physical living arrangements will include a house for sleeping and storage, a cookhouse, a washing area, which is normally open to the elements, if not to public view, and a swept area. The cookhouse is the preserve of the women and is used, as its name suggests, for cooking as well as a shelter from the sun and rain. When a man has two wives he may build a cookhouse for each one if they are unable to get on together. The men may sit in the cookhouse but they often also have an area of shade in front of the house or under a tree where they sit and talk while the women work.

Both men and women work in the fields, but the domestic work around the courtyard is almost entirely the preserve of the women. The men build the houses and repair them, but it is the women and children who fetch water, cook, sweep the courtyard and wash clothes. Most men are unable to cook, some for want of ability, others because they refuse to consider doing women's work. A man whose wife is absent for any length of time will either subsist on braised yams and bananas or rely on others in the family to provide him with more substantial food.

When the women cook, they bring the food to their husbands, who will eat it either on their own or with any friends who happen to be present. The women and children eat apart in the cookhouse.

Most houses contain two or more rooms. The children sleep together while the husband sleeps with his wife. When a man has two or more wives he sleeps with each one for three nights, the other woman sleeping with her children during the intervening time.

As his children get older, a man may build further houses in his courtyard area where they can sleep. In this way a man with many children can end up with a courtyard composed of a number of houses. The doors of the houses always open onto the courtyard area. When courtyards are adjacent, it can be seen which houses belong to which courtyard by the direction their doors face. Apart from this, there are few physical signs which denote the end of one courtyard and the start of another. Occasionally, people build small walls around their courtyards to try to divert rain water from flowing through their area. These walls are rare, however, and tend to be somewhat controversial, as diverting the rainwater away from one courtyard almost inevitably involves diverting it into another.

When the daughters of a family grow up they eventually marry and leave the courtyard, although, as we have mentioned, they return regularly. Sons on the other hand stay with their fathers. Traditionally, a father gives a piece of land close to his courtyard to his sons once they are married so that they can build their own houses and start their own courtyards. In time, a father's courtyard will be surrounded by courtyards belonging to his sons. Each of these courtyards is self sufficient, with a house, cookhouse and wash area. However, it is not unusual to refer to the whole as the father's courtyard. In this manner, the word *buduãw¥¥* can be seen to function on two levels, an

individual courtyard or family and the larger, extended family or courtyard, descendants of one man.

Changes in social patterns, and the imposition of *lottissements* (allotted plots of land) in villages means that these patterns are breaking down to some extent. Many men leave to work elsewhere and do not build homes in the village. Also, space in the center of the villages is now restricted and young men must build on the edges of the village rather than close to their fathers. Today, too, men tend not to wait for their fathers to give permission to build but just go ahead and do it, something that would have been unthinkable a generation or so ago.

The process described above, whereby a man allots land around his courtyard to his sons, eventually leads to areas of a village being settled by one patrilineal grouping. Most Kouya villages have a number of these groups which are called *gl gbj*[3], the basic meaning of which is hearthstone, referring to the three stones around the fire on which pots are balanced.

In many senses the *gl gbj* is no more than an extension of the basic family unit. This is reflected in the domestic roots of the word itself, which can in fact be used, in a more restricted sense, to refer to an individual nuclear family. Although the *gl gbj* form the basis for much Kouya social interaction, their origins seem to be relatively recent. The Gaizrulia *gl gbj* in Gouabafla, for instance, traces its ancestry back to Gahi Zouhla who was the grandfather of people still alive today. This is in direct contrast to the situation among the neighboring Niaboua whose seven clans originated in the distant past[4]. Note, too, that although the Kouya are much fewer in number than the Niaboua, they have something like 30-40 *gl gbj*. To avoid comparison with the more ancient and well-developed clan structures of other ethnic groups, we will use the French word *quartier* to refer to the *gl gbj*. This reflects the fact that the members of the *quartier* live together in one section of the village as well as being the word which the Kouya use to translate *gl gbj* .

Each clan forms an exogamous group, within which intermarriage is strictly forbidden. The clans often have common dietary restrictions or totems and share sacred objects. In Gouabafla the four clans are

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[3] The same word is used by the Bété, a neighbouring Kru group, to refer to clans.

[4] Bentinck Julie, personal communication.

Gaizrulia, who do not eat *siako* (a sauce made from the pods of a certain tree); Gbessigboa, who worship a yirocco tree; Zaiboa, who have a sacred stone in the Mossi area of the village and do not eat mutton; and the Vacia, who do not eat chicken.[5]

Historically the Kru peoples lived in small family units in the forest, moving around in search of land to farm and hunting grounds. It would seem that these family units have become consolidated into the village clans of today.

In many ways the *quartier* is an extension of the nuclear family and so the words for family relations apply to all members of the *quartier.* The Kouya terms for father and mother *(dide, 'nyaa)* refer to all men and women of a person's biological parents' generation, while all of the people of one's own generation are referred to as brothers and sisters *(bhelia, bhɨlɨa)*. All of these words can be used in the more restricted sense of biological parents and siblings, but their normal usage refers to the clan as a whole. It is important to note that these terms are not used for the maternal family.

Most Kouya villages have three or four *quartiers*. Kétro, the smallest village, has only one while Déma has five, and Bonoufla six *quartiers* .

The maternal family.

Kouya people grow up among their paternal families, but from early childhood they spend extended periods with their maternal relatives. As I have already noted, kinship terms such as father and mother cannot be extended to cover the members of the maternal family. So, although one would refer to his father's brother as *dide* 'father', he would refer to a maternal uncle as mother's brother. Nonetheless, the links between an individual and his maternal family are strong. Although women cannot own land, boys may inherit land, via their mothers, in her natal village. A particularly strong link is between the maternal uncle and his nephew, *('gloyu)*. The maternal uncle has an obligation to care for and protect his nephew and cannot, at least in theory, refuse any request he makes. A common arrangement is for a maternal uncle to pay the school fees for a child when his own father is either unwilling or unable to do so.

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[5] A Vacia child is reputed to have been born holding a hen's egg. Since then the chicken has been viewed as a member of the Vacia family and so is not eaten.

The village.

The village is the highest level of Kouya society. Each village comprises one or more Kouya *quartiers* as well as a large number of non-Kouya who tend to live in their own areas. The villages are recognised by the local government and it is on this level that the Kouya are represented to the authorities. However, as the villages are ethnically very diverse, representation is not a purely Kouya phenomenon.

Each Kouya village has a chief whose job it is to relate to the civic authorities in Vavoua and to help settle village disputes. However, as most inter-Kouya disputes are dealt with at clan or family level, the chief's role tends to be in relating externally and in helping to settle inter-ethnic disputes.

Several things suggest that the role of chief is not a traditional one in Kouya structure but has been imposed on the area from the outside in fairly recent time.

For example, the Kouya tend to use a loan word to designate the village head[6], although a Kouya composite, meaning village leader, does exist. Other evidence comes from Gouabafla, which has had no real chief for the past four years, although at one point two rivals, each from a different political party, held the title of chief simultaneously for a short period of time. At no point did the lack of a chief (or two rival chiefs) appear to effect the good order of the village.[7]

Alongside the village chief there is also the committee, composed of one representative from each Kouya *quartier*. Once more this appears not to be a traditional structure, first on linguistic grounds, as there is no Kouya word for the committee which is always referred to in French, and secondly in terms of composition. As we shall see later, Kouya decision makers are normally chosen on the basis of age, whereas committee members are chosen because of their ability to represent their *quartier* to the authorities and are therefore often young and well-educated. A further indication that the committee is not a native structure is that all of the villages in the Vavoua area have committees, whether or not they are Kouya.

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[6] *Dutii*, from the Dioula *Dougou Tigii*, village chief, or some variation on the French word Chef.

[7] Note also that in his book on the Bété (a closely related group), Jean-Pierre Dozon makes no reference to village chiefs as a Bété phenomenon. (Dozon J. P. 1985. La société bété. Paris: ORSTOM/Karthala)

As has been mentioned, the Kouya villages are ethnically very diverse. Within the village of Gouabafla, the following people groups are found in addition to the Kouya: Gouro, Bété, Kroumen, Mossi, Dioula, Malinké, and Dagari, this list being far from exhaustive. Within the villages, the Gouro tend to be there as wives of Kouya men. They live among the Kouya, although they very rarely learn to speak the language[8]. Those from the south of Côte d'Ivoire tend to be teachers, who live in their own part of the village next to the school. The majority of the non-Kouya, however, come from the north of Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and particularly Burkina Faso, being mainly Mossi and Dioula. These people live in their own *quartiers* in the Kouya villages, with their own authority structures. The Dioula and Mossi chiefs relate to the Kouya authorities as and when needed. For the most part the northerners came to the Kouya area seeking work in the plantations, although over the years many of them have bought fields and started small businesses. In many cases the outsiders are now richer and more prosperous than the Kouya and in some villages they outnumber the Kouya numerically. One notable example is Brouafla-Kouya, where the village authorities have forbidden the sale of land to non-Kouya.

This being said, social and political power in the villages still belongs to the Kouya, even if economic power does not. Village meetings are held in Kouya, and only translated into Dioula or Mossi if comment is required. The authorities in Vavoua relate to the Kouya chief and through him to the Mossi and Dioula leaders.

In Gouabafla the Kouya young men have recently formed a group to represent themselves in the village, *L'amicale des Jeunes de Gouabafla* (Young people's association). This group has to some extent started to fill the gap caused by the absence of a chief, as we will see later.

There are a number of societies, found in most villages, whose members cut across ethnic lines. These include the *Association des parents d'élèves* (Parent teacher association) and various agricultural cooperatives.

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[8] Many Kouya children are brought up to be bilingual, speaking Kouya with their fathers and Gouro with their mothers. As a result a very large proportion of Kouya are bilingual in Gouro and in one or two villages close to Vavoua, Gouro is the principal language spoken.

Other factors.

Solidarity. The Kouya place a high value on group solidarity. First of all, solidarity is expressed within the family and extended family. Once children are old enough to be left on their own (or whenever their mother has another baby), they are in the care of their older siblings and cousins. So, the children grow up playing with and being dependent on others in their *quartier*. Contact with children from other *quartier*s is limited until such time as children go to school, and even then they tend to have their closest friends within their own family.

Secondly, solidarity is expressed during competitions within the village. For example, different *quartier*s engage in football tournaments. Teams may be given the names of famous international sides, such as Monaco, Brazil, etc., but in reality they represent the various *quartier*s in the village.

Solidarity to the *quartier* is such that even groups which appear to be at a village level may actually be *quartier* groupings. During a recent Kouya dance and theater competition, Gouabafla presented two teams, neither of which were drawn from the village as a whole, both represented individual *quartier*s.

This can at times cause problems. A football tournament for primary school children was staged in Gouabafla during which it was decided to choose teams from across the *quartier*s to avoid too much partisanship and the possibility of violence from onlookers.

Solidarity does exist at village level, too, however. In the example above of the dance competition, support for the Gouabafla teams was wholehearted from everyone in the village, regardless of their own *quartier*. In regional competitions, in discussions about the purity of spoken Kouya or in any other situations in which the status of the village may be at risk, people's support for their own village is never questioned.

What this often means, in practice, is that people will take the side of those close to them against outsiders, whatever the rights and wrongs of the situation. In the incident described below, a young man was accused of stealing from members of another ethnic group, beaten up and then taken to the police in Vavoua. Despite agreeing that the case against him was just, the young men of his *quartier* and many of the others from his village went to Vavoua to demand that the police release him. They then sought revenge on those who had beaten him. In particular, a cousin of

the accused argued very strongly that, even though he was guilty, outsiders had no right to judge him.

Age. Age plays an important role in all relations within Kouya society. It is typically the oldest men who are called on to judge disputes. The relative ages of siblings and cousins can be expressed easily in Kouya, even though the words "brother" and "sister" do not give an exact indication of biological relationship.

A younger sibling or cousin is referred to as *b±sÐa bheli/bh¡l¡*, while an older one is *bheli/bh¡l¡ kpasa*. The adjective kpasa can also be applied to person (*nyÚm¥ kpasa*), in which case it means respected person or elder.

When greeting family members, it is common to refer to them as older or younger brother/sister, and even old people will use terms like these, showing that relative age is very significant.

Face. The concept of face is very important to the Kouya, and in any dispute or argument, the face of each individual must be preserved. For example, in an argument between two men, which had continued over a number of months, one party was most concerned that his opponent had insulted him in front of his (the opponent's) family, and so he had lost face before his opponent's children. This was seen as a far greater offense than all of the slights which had preceded it.

No dispute can be resolved unless the face of both parties is maintained.

DISPUTE SETTLEMENT

When a dispute arises, all of the various relationships and structures mentioned above must come into play to resolve it. We will now look at various mechanisms which are employed once disputes arise. Finally, three different examples of conflict will be described.

Resolution.

A dispute is considered resolved when the two parties feel their grievances have been adequately aired, while face has been saved or preserved. Then they will declare the problem over.

In less serious cases, a problem can be drawn to a close purely by the intervention of a respected person who asks the offended person to calm down (asking for pardon). In case study three below, an older man was extremely angry with his son-in-law, but calmed down and declared the dispute "finished" when a missionary, adopted into his family, came

alongside him and asked him to stop. The intervention of a respected person on his side saved the face of the angry man and allowed him to resolve the affair.

It is important to note that a dispute can be declared resolved, even when there is no rapprochement between the two sides. Nor is it always necessary for anyone to admit guilt and to make restitution. The important factor is always public face saving.

In more serious cases disputes are resolved by being talked through and judged by old men who represent the parties involved. In these cases the elders talk together with the aim of agreeing on the cause of the problem and then deciding on what restitution, if any, needs to be made. Very often, those involved in the conflict will be required to buy wine for those judging the problem. Drinking the wine together symbolizes the end of the affair.

Asking pardon.

In the example above, a respected person was asked to intervene in a dispute. This intervention consisted of *asking pardon* from the offended party. The Kouya term (*zukpa*) has no direct translation in English. It is used to intensify a request or to repeat a refused request (please). It is used as well in asking pardon by parties in disputes. The word is translated into Ivorian French as *pardon*, hence the English translation we have used. If an offended party is asked *pardon* from someone they respect, their face is saved and they are able to declare a problem finished.

There is not necessarily any contact between the two parties for resolution to be reached. The intervention of the respected person is sufficient. When a young family head insulted one of the oldest members of his family, the old man was extremely angry for a number of days. Finally, someone of his own age group came to ask pardon, at which point the man declared the problem resolved. From that point relations between the old man and the one who insulted him were resumed. When, a day or two later, other people asked him to resolve the problem, he said there was no need, his brother had already asked his pardon and it was over.

Judging disputes.

Kouya lifestyle, where people spend most of their time outdoors, ensures that most arguments and disagreements are carried out in public.

Often resolution is arrived at between the two parties themselves, or the intervention of someone respected will help to finish the affair. However, other disputes will require that one or more third parties mediate between the people in conflict.

The principle of group solidarity is very important when disputes are being judged. No group wishes to have its problems aired in public and so discussion of conflicts is always carried out at the lowest level of society possible. Thus, if a dispute arises between two brothers, their father, and possibly their paternal uncles, will talk the case through. A problem between two members of a *quartier* will be judged by the old men of the *quartier,* and disputes which occur across the boundaries of the *quartiers* will be arbitrated by the old men from the *quartiers* concerned. The wider village authorities, the chief and committee, are only brought in to solve problems found to be intractable at lower levels.

An illustration of this can be seen in the case of someone committing adultery, that is sleeping with someone else's wife. If a man sleeps with his brother's wife, then judgment and restitution will be carried out at the family level. The elders in the family will meet together and try to ascertain the person's guilt and, if this is proved, the guilty party will be required to make some sort of restitution. In these cases, restitution would probably take the form of giving cloth and money. In inter-family disputes, the principle of age becomes very important. A man who sleeps with his elder brother's wife would not only be expected to pay a penalty, he would also be beaten by the rest of the family. Someone sleeping with his younger brother's wife, however, would not be beaten. Sleeping with your older brother's wife is not purely adultery, it also shows a lack of respect for your elders, a potentially more serious offense.

When someone is accused of sleeping with the wife of a man from another *quartier,* the elders from the two *quartiers* will meet together to discuss the problem. The two sets of elders talk together and seek to establish some means of repairing the damage to the face of the offended family. Once more, a gift of cloth and money would normally be required to be offered by the guilty party.

At whatever level in the village, once those who are judging the problem reach a consensus and decide on the penalty to be paid, the offending person must accept that judgment. It is simply not seen as possible that someone should publicly refuse to pay the sum which the

elders demand of him for restitution. However, public judgments of disputes are primarily concerned with restoring the face of the offended party and their family. Once the offender has publicly acknowledged his fault and agreed to pay restitution, he has restored the face of those he offended. At this point, it is possible to privately approach those to whom restitution is to be paid and ask them to lower or even cancel the debt. On one occasion a Kouya man allowed his fire to destroy a large cocoa plantation belonging to his nephew. The family elders met and decided that the uncle should repay a sum equivalent to the loss of earnings on the plantation for a number of years. The uncle publicly accepted to do this even though such a sum was well beyond his ability to pay. He later approached his nephew through a third person and had the debt reduced to an amount which he could pay without too much difficulty.

At this point the maternal family comes into play. An offender who is required to pay restitution to another will approach the maternal nephew (*gloyu*) of the one he must pay and ask him to intercede on his behalf. If the *gloyu* agrees, then his uncle will be obliged to forgo the restitution due to him.

Group solidarity is always an important factor in problem solving. When a dispute arises between *quartiers*, the young men of one *quartier* will often visit the other *quartier* and threaten them. If someone does not pay the restitution which they have agreed on, the family of the offended party may come and beat the offender or barricade him in his house. This sort of solidarity, although comforting for those who need to be helped, does little to solve the long term hostilities which can arise in these situations.

Sacrifice.

In particularly unpleasant disputes, where there is a good deal of anger on both sides, those judging the dispute may declare that a sacrifice should be made to deal with the anger. The normal sacrifice required is a chicken. The sacrifice is made to the ancestors of those involved, and it is felt that the blood being shed takes away the anger of those involved. In other cases, the two parties will symbolically take water into their mouths which they then spit out, symbolizing the end of their anger.

RECORDS OF DISPUTES

Case study one.

In July 1993, a young Kouya man was approached by a friend of his very early in the morning and asked to go and help gather corn in the fields. Despite the fact that it was still dark, the Kouya man got up and went with his friend to the fields some distance from the village and started to gather corn.

As it turned out, the corn did not belong to either of the young men, but to a Bouale man who lived in a nearby *campement*[9] and who surprised the two in the act of stealing his corn. The friend who instigated the affair managed to run away and escape, but the young Kouya was caught, soundly beaten and then taken off to the police station in Vavoua, the nearest town, to be tried for theft. The following morning all of the young men from the Kouya's *quartier* and many others from the village went down to town and petitioned the police to release him, which they finally did, and he returned home to the village.

A group of Baoulé men then came in from the *campement* to have the affair judged by the Kouya authorities. However, in Gouabafla there is no chief, and so the affair was dealt with by the *Président de la jeunesse* (Chairman of the youth association). He, together with his counselors, finally arrived at a solution which was acceptable for most of the parties concerned. A sum of money and some cloth was to be handed over in restitution for the stolen maize. However, many of the Kouya young men, especially the family of the accused, felt aggrieved that their brother had been beaten and wanted to extract revenge on some Baoulé men. They said that if any Baoulés came into the village to sell palm-wine, they would be attacked and beaten. This proved to be very unpopular with many of the older men, who rely on the Baoulé for their supplies of palm-wine. Eventually one man invited the palm-wine sellers to come to his courtyard, promising them his protection. This further inflamed the young men, who called in the *Président de la jeunesse* once more. He suggested that the palm-wine sellers should stay out of the village for a few days to allow tempers to cool, which is what happened. Within a short space of time, the whole thing had blown over

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[9] A *campement* is an informal habitation, normally smaller than a village, without a chief and of a more or less temporary nature.

and the palm wine sellers were back and the young man who had caused all of the problems seemed none the worse for his adventures.

Reaction to the whole thing among the Kouya themselves was mixed. There was little sympathy for the young man involved. He protested his innocence, but the general view was that no one gathers corn at that time in the morning and that he must have known he was being asked to steal. He had, in any case, a reputation for dishonesty to start with. At the same time, there was a widespread sense solidarity. No-one outside the village, including the civil authorities, has the right to judge a Kouya man, they would say, and the Baoulé certainly did not have the right to beat him, whatever the justice of the case. Why the police released someone caught in the act of theft is not clear, but that is beyond the realm of this paper.

Case study two.

Two families live close together at the edge of their *quartier*, and although they belong to the same patriclan they are actually quite distantly related. For a number of years bad feeling has existed between the two families.

The head of one of the families is one of the oldest men in the *quartier*, while the head of the other is a much younger man. On one occasion, one of the older man's children broke a bucket belonging to the other family. The younger man went to the elder to tell him this, but also said that he understood that these things happened and did not want to make a fuss. Even though his younger relative was not asking for restitution, the older man would lose face if he admitted that his son was in the wrong. For this reason he denied that it was his child, said that it was actually the child of someone else and then demanded that the parents of this child pay for the broken bucket. The younger man repeated that he did not want payment and was just stating what had happened. This infuriated the older man and both parties became very angry and started to bring up old grievances, most of which had already been declared to be finished. In the heat of the moment the younger man called his elder a *vieux con* (an old fool), a strong insult.

The older man was greatly offended. This lack of respect for an elder was a greater offense than any which had preceded it. However, two days later another elder from the *quartier* visited the older man, (the young man was in his fields), and asked him for pardon. The old man agreed and declared that the problem was over. The dispute was thus

resolved without any acceptance of wrong, without the two parties being drawn together, and actually in the absence of the offending party.

Case study three.

A young lady had returned home to her paternal family for a while and her husband followed on later for a visit. During his stay, the husband insulted one of his brothers-in-law, and this greatly angered his wife's father. The father-in-law started shouting and threatening violence. He was about to strike the young man when family members called in a missionary who lived in the same village, who had been named after the older man's grandfather. The missionary told the man to sit down and then asked him for pardon. The man replied that since it was his grandfather who asked, he would agree. His anger seemed to cool immediately and he said that the problem was over.