Healing the Wounds of Conflict through Reconciliation: The African Paradigm

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Abstract

Introduction (the structure and central argument of the paper)

Conflicts, wars, organized violence and so on, the world over leave millions dead; others displaced, uncounted for or wounded both physically and psychologically. While each region of the world has had its share of violent conflicts, it seems fair to say that Africa has had a lion's share of these conflicts. Indeed Africa's history of conflicts may be traced from tribal/ethnic conflicts in pre-colonial times going through the liberation wars of the 50s, the 60's through the 70s and 80s, to the proxy wars during the Cold Wars. As we speak Africa is awash with recurring power and resource-based conflicts across the continent. This paper is, on the one hand apprehensive of the fact that this mismanagement of conflicts has gone on despite the fact that Africa has a rich resource in terms of mitigating and resolving conflicts. It is therefore of the view that due to these cyclic and violent conflicts globally but especially in Africa, the time may be ripe to revive and promote existing traditional methods of conflict resolution, conflict transformation and peace-building. This is to the effect that both old and modern/conventional means of settling conflicts, mainly through military means have not always achieved peace, let alone healing the wounds of conflict and violence.

Moreover, the paper takes note of the fact that one does not need sophisticated military hardware or an all-out-war to cause massive death, deprivation, pain and suffering. The 1994 Rwandan genocide is a good example. The perpetrators of that genocide, in which close to a million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were massacred, used *Machetes* and not the American Tomahawk Cruse Missiles or B52 Bombers. Similarly single suicide bombers in Iraq and Afghanistan to-date may have killed more American soldiers and civilians than during the 1991 and 2003 invasions of Iraq by the coalition forces combined. There is no doubt that what took one hundred (100) days for the masterminds of the Rwandan genocide to effect the near 1 million massacre could have taken a twinkle of an eye for a 400 Pounds "smart bomb" dropped from a B52 war plane to decimate even a greater number. But the end result is the same: destruction of property and life, and leaving many hurt and wounded physically and psychologically, and

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even worse, leaving unresolved differences that led to the conflict in the first place.

What becomes very evident in the Iraq war scenario on the one hand and the Rwandan genocide on the other is that if military might or unleashing of ethnic anger against others were the best options to resolve conflicts or settle historical grievances, then what happened in both the Iraq war and Rwandan genocide would have worn both Mr. George W. Bush and his Coalitions and the Rwandan genocidals on the other the UN Prestigious Nobel Peace Prize. On the contrary, both scenarios received worldwide condemnation.

However, while Rwanda is gradually recovering from the 1994 Genocide, attracting Direct Foreign Investment and the Tourism Sector is booming, Iraq's crisis is deepening, claiming more innocent lives in the daily violent confrontations across the country. What makes the difference between Iraq and Rwanda? The difference can simply be explained as follows: While the American rubber stamped Administration in Iraq has pushed mainly the Western Model of justice, namely, retribution, harsh punishment for one's crimes etc, the Rwandan Government has pursued more the Traditional Restorative Justice system, through the Gacaca courts. Despite some internal limitations of the system itself, Rwanda has made tremendous strides to re-unite her people while Iraq is bleeding with factional blood letting violence.

It is the humble submission of this paper, therefore, that the Iraq and Rwandan Scenarios, although different in many respects, in terms of issues, actors and players involved, present a good example to argue the case in favor of the central thesis of this paper namely, that it is possible to heal the wounds of conflict, restore trust, confidence, harmony and peaceful coexistence between communities and nations, if only the conflicting parties are given room to reconcile with each other.

To be sure, this paper is not about mechanisms to eradicate conflicts or wars but mitigating present and past conflicts from escalating or re-emerging. It is about coming to terms with the past, in order to create room for the birth of new communities and societies. It is about healing the wounds of conflict through reconciliation with special emphasis on Africa's contribution to this quite often neglected and yet efficient and effective mechanism of building lasting peace in ongoing but most especially post-conflict situations.

Similarly the paper takes cognizance of the fact that while violent conflicts may last as long as man is, they are not a destiny for humanity. It argues that many conflicts can be resolved using peaceful means leading to sustainable peace, though healed and reconciled relationships. This is to the effect that human beings have capacity to exercise reason and manage and resolve conflicts

through negotiations and other peaceful means of conflict resolution, much of which is already provided for by custom and practice. Indeed, this paper is an attempt to demonstrate that Africa is abundantly endowed with this resource only that it has not been fully and effectively tapped by Africans themselves, and much less shared with the rest of humanity.

Paper Lay Out

The paper has three parts. The first part of the paper is an attempt to explore and expose the conceptual/philosophical underpinnings or grounding of the African paradigm of peace-building and conflict resolution. It then goes on, in the second part, to expose how this grounding of the African mechanism of conflict resolution and peace building factors into the African paradigm of restorative justice (reconciliation, which involves truth telling, acceptance, forgiveness and restitution or compensation). To demonstrate this, the Gacaca Courts in Rwanda is used as a case in point on how a traditional mechanism may be used to bring about the desired therapeutic experience of a wounded people or nation. In this particular case, Gacaca Courts are being used to heal the wounds of the 1994 genocide and other historical grievances between mainly majority Hutus and minority Tutsis, gradually raising hopes for a genuinely healed and reconciled nation.[1] It is goes without say that where there is peace and harmony, everything else fall in place consequentially: trade and development, investments, tourism industry etc.

The third part of the paper is a proposal for possible short course module developments in two to three related aspects, namely, *Conflict Resolution Skills, Traditional Methods of Conflict Resolution* and a home-grown, context specific *Alternative to Violence Program (AVP). Such courses should have* inbuilt students/participants exchange programs as a mechanism to promote unity, mitigate prejudices and stereotypes that people knowingly or unknowingly develop about each other over a period of time The latter aspect of exchange program would also be an indirect means of promoting indigenous tourism as a tool for national reconciliation.

The paper concludes by recommending further study and analysis of the various African Traditional Approaches to conflict transformation and peace-building in order to better document these processes for the benefit of future generations and the human community at large.

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[1] In Uganda, there is almost unanimity with respect to the call for the application of the *Mato Oput*, the Acholi Traditional mechanism of restorative justice as an alternative option to the much drummed up International Criminal Court (ICC) to peacefully resolve the 20 or so year old conflict between the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda. The outcry now is, give peace a chance to prevail.

Part One:

1. *Conceptual Grounding for the African Paradigm*

African Philosophy (Sense) of Communitarianism[2]

o Unlike Westerners, Africans have a synthesizing mind set, as opposed to the occidental analytical one. That doesn't mean Africans are better or worse; it just says God is smart. Westerners have analysis. We have synthesis. Westerners have a very strong sense of individualism. We have a strong sense of Community. Because Westerners have a strong sense of the value of the individual, they are able to take personal initiatives. It's not so easy, when you are a community-minded person, to go against the stream…This feel for religious and spiritual realities has made it difficult for atheistic and materialistic ideologies, such as communism, to attract many African adherents.
   -Desmond Tutu, "Where Is Now Thy God?"

1.1. Preamble
- "Communitarianism" in Africa, can also be translated as "belongingness." That is a strong sense of belonging to or ties with the family, the community, a clan, a tribe or ethnic grouping, and a nation or state in the modern sense of the word. The African society was/is organized around the family and community, clan or tribal/ethnic ties. The community was/ and to a great extend still is even today, the organic institution that shapes or molds the way of life of individuals who belong to that community. In other words, in Africa, human community is vital for the individual's acquisition of personhood, self identity and sustenance of one's existence.

- This philosophy is well captured/summarized by John Mbiti, an African Scholar in African Religions as follows: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." This paradigm of life is further translated as: *An injury to one is an injury to all*, or with a more popular version in Runyakitara (one of the widely spoken Bantu Ethnic languages in the region: *Agetereine nigo gaata eigufa (literary translated as: only the two jaws that make a strong contact with each other can crack a born. The popular translation of that is: Together we stand, Divided we Fall.*[3]

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[2] A comparison with Western Philosophy of Individualism which is also beginning to overshadow the African communal life style among the so-called elite class in Africa and in the Diaspora might create an exciting debate and conversation between the two civilizations.

[3] Here, someone might raise an alarm to suggest that this philosophy equally applies to the West and the rest of Humanity and therefore there is noting unique to Africa. Our response would be: yes and no. Yes, to the extent that all human beings feel the need for each other and therefore form alliances (political, social, economic etc.). That is what is common to all human beings. No, to the extent that in Africa, the sense of belonging and therefore surviving or perishing together, starts already at the family level and has strings

- It should be emphasized here that the African philosophy of life is neither out of a blue nor is it functioning in a vacuum. On the contrary, it is well grounded in the African World View, that is, how the Africans perceive(d) and locate(d) themselves in the interplay and inter-relationships of a complexity of reality-loosely translated as the Universe.

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through the community, the clan, the tribe or ethnic group ties and even extends to the environment and the spiritual world as well.

1.2   African *Weltanschauung* (World-View)

- One Being/Reality of a Hierarchical (Pyramid-Like) Structure)

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The Spiritual Realm (World)   The Spiritual Realm (World)

God
The Supreme Being
(The Source and Giver of all Life)

Spiritual Mediums (the "gods")
god of fertility
god of rain and sunshine
god of the floods
god of healing
others

The Ancestors
exemplary family, clan or tribal heads
while they lived in the physical world, now occupy
this prestigious position in the hierarchy

The Living Dead
still much alive in peoples' minds/memory
so much alive that they still enjoy
a reserved place at the table during meals

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The Physical Realm = the Ream of Man and Environment   The Physical Realm

Kings, Queen Mothers, Heads of Tribes

Heads of Clans and Heads of Families

Family Members
(includes the not yet born in the wombs of expecting mothers)

Animate beings   Inanimate beings
Nature, the Environment

Here I wish to emphasize that within the realm of nature or environment, there
were special trees, unique sources of water like springs or special water falls,
special animals and special places for worship, special mountains or rocks or

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caves. Because of their uniqueness and the role they played within the community or clan, they were traditionally preserved and therefore contributed to the conservation of nature for generations to come.

For an outsider to the African way of life,[4] this might sound not only strange, but hard to conceptualize how someone in his or her right sense of mind might think that a certain cave or rock or tree, or wild animal etc has social or spiritual significance and therefore deserving respect to the extent that no one should dare interfere with its natural environment. For the traditional African, however, the universe is a complex of networked and interrelated, interlocking relationships within the hierarchy of beings. And precisely,

- The overarching and guiding principle in this hierarchy of beings is: Harmonious Coexistence between the spiritual world and the physical world: in essence a harmonious co-existence between
    a. Man and spiritual beings
    b. Man and man or neighbor
    c. Man and the environment or nature
- This guiding principle was so strong, to the extent that if there was interference in the harmonious co-existence, for example through wrong doing, bad leadership, by the King, the Queen, Chief of Heads of tribes/clans or family, the entire Community would be negatively affected
- How? Infertility, prolonged drought, strange diseases or epidemics killing both people and livestock, hunger, disease, conflicts, wars etc: in general bad doing of an individual or a group of people would bring about disharmony, chaos and general suffering of the community.
- The contrary was believed to be true. That is, good acts such as good leadership, caring for others, hospitality, reaching out to the needy etc, brought about peace, harmony, fertility of both man, livestock, and land thus boosting the clan and tribal populations, multiplying livestock and having bumper harvests respectively. Death would only be by natural occurrences, namely, old age since there would be no disease, no hunger etc
- To a great extend, this discussion is already touching on the next point for our consideration:

1.3   African Spirituality (Scriptural Grounding)
- To a large extent, the African philosophy of Communitarianism shares a lot in common with Christian and other World Religion's spirituality.
- In accordance with their perception of the universe, as One, Undivided, hierarchy of beings, spiritual and physical, the Africans had a sense of

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[4] To be an outsider to the African way of life does not necessarily mean that one is a foreigner. One may be an African but one who has lost touch with the African systems, perceptions, and understanding of how reality is intertwined and relationally functions.

Sin, although this differs radically from, for example, traditional Christian spirituality. While both attribute human suffering to the "sin" of man and therefore some form of punishment from God, African spirituality, to a great extent exonerates God (the Supreme Being) from being responsible for human suffering. The blame is put on individuals within the community or on an angry "god" or "ancestor" as a result of acts contrary to the sustenance of the harmonious coexistence.

- To maintain this harmony, Africans emphasize strict observance of traditional, cultural taboos, rules, customs and regulations in accordance with family, clan or tribal beliefs and practices. Acting outside or contrary to these rules and regulations is what brings about disharmony and therefore suffering and premature death.

1.4   Consequences (Contentious Propositions/Positions/Beliefs/Practices) of the African Weltanshauung (Worldview):

- In traditional Africa NOTHING (especially bad events) happens(ed) by chance BUT someone in the hierarchy of being (but more specially in the physical world) was responsible for the disharmony in the rhythm of life.
- As already emphasized, bad happenings or phenomena such as infertility, famine, disease, prolonged drought, epidemics, fatal accidents, even defeat in battle or clan football competition, were all attributed to someone in the community, who had angered either the ancestors, or the gods and as a consequence the occurring of bad omens.
- Since God was considered as the source and giver of all life, He was not responsible for any bad or negative phenomenon or event.
- It follows that the CAUSE for example of drought, death, accidents, defeat in the football match was either angry ancestors, any of the spiritual mediums, some distant living dead or one among the family, community, clan or tribal members.
- There were "trustworthy" systems of knowing or establishing who, indeed in the community was responsible for the disharmony
- This was through the intervention of Diviners (overseers).[5] Diviners (not witchdoctors) were persons in the community believed to be specially endowed with unique intuitive knowledge such that they could interpret phenomena and tell not only the causes of sometimes inexplicable events, but could also foretell what might happen in the foreseeable future.[6]

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[5] Not witchdoctors but diviners. There is a difference.

[6] Some anthropological studies have indeed convincingly argued that divination is an alternative system of knowledge and that this was found abundant in traditional societies, Africa in particular. Cfr. Devisch, R., "Perspectives on Divination in Contemporary Sub-

o Once the Diviner had done his/her duty, and it was established that someone in the community was responsible, the latter would appear before a community tribunal, commonly known as a council of elders, where appropriate measures would be taken to ensure restoration of broken relationships and harmony. This took different forms: special rituals, animal sacrifice, cleansing of and reparation by the guilty party.

Part Two:

2   *How does this Background Knowledge Factor into the African* System/Paradigm of Restorative Justice?

o "The challenge of reconciliation is not how to create the place where one can 'forgive and forget'. It is about the far more challenging adventure into the space where individuals and whole communities can remember and change." John Paul Lederach, "Five Qualities of Practice in Support of Reconciliation Processes" in Raymond G. Helmick (ed) et at. *Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (pp. 193-203)   P. 201.
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2.1   Time Tested but Evolving Mechanisms of Resolving Conflicts and Building Peace/Restoring Harmony at family, community and inter-tribal/ethnic levels

Basing on the African Philosophy of Communitarianism of "I am because we are" and therefore the understanding that "an injury to one is an injury to all": Africans (Black Africa) have over the centuries developed context specific mechanisms of resolving and transforming conflicts and restoring harmony (peace) and order at the family, clan, community and inter-tribal/ethnic levels.

2.2   The guiding principles, though evolving, have in essence/basically remained the same (whether it is at the *Gacaca courts in Rwanda or Mato Oput* among the Acholi of Gulu, Uganda).

a. On the side of the Offending Party the expectations are:

- Voluntary Confession

Saharan Africa" in W. Van Binsbergen and M. Schoffeleers (Eds.) 1985. *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion*, London; R. Devisch., "Mediumistic Divination, in P.M. Peek (ed). 1991. *African Divination Systems. Ways of Knowing*, Indianapolis; Alex Nkabahona. 1994. *Towards an African Reception of Jurgen Moltmann's Theology of Suffering and Hope*, Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Leuven Catholic University.

- Truth telling: what exactly happened? This is one of the most difficult moments and sometimes this is expressed emotionally, by the offender simply bursting into tears
- Accepting responsibility and accountability
- Repentance
- Asking for mercy and forgiveness
- Accepting to go through the "cleansing" rituals (where applicable)
- Agreeing to compensate the aggrieved party

b. On the side of the Offended/Grieved Party

- Coming to terms with the loss/offence/crime committed against him/her
- Preparedness to forgive (though may not forget)
- Prepared to reach out to the offender to amend the broken relationship (reconciliation)

c. On the side of the Mediating Party (whose composition has been shifting poles over years: council of elders, religious leaders, now sometimes local government leaders get involved or a combination of all or some of the above categories). What has been the role of the mediators?

- Promoting dialogue between the parties
- Listening to both parties
- Allowing each to tell his/her/their story
- Providing impartial counsel
- Overseeing the reconciliation process (may involve certain rituals)
- Determining an appropriate compensation (restorative justice) where applicable

What happens in real life is the next subject of our discussion by giving an outline of how the *Gacaca Courts of Rwanda Functions*[7] It is a grassroots system of administering justice and the Rwandan government strongly believes that it will lead to Rwanda's unity.

Historical Background

Gacaca Courts take their origin in the Rwandan culture where people used to sit together in *gacaca* (literary translated as low grass) and settle their disputes. Ideally, the *gacaca* process helps communities and individuals to "recover" from

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[7] Reference is here made to www.inkiko-gacaca.gov.rw for further reading. Much of what is presented here is directly drawn from the Republic of Rwanda National Unity and Reconciliation Commission Legal Working Document (Not dated or numbered).

the genocide shocks, it helps to fight the culture of impunity and above all, it helps to heal the wounds of memories of the genocide and build unity.

Mission of Gacaca Process

- o To disclose the truth on the genocide events
- o To speed up genocide trials
- o To eradicate the culture of impunity
- o To reconcile and strengthen unity among Rwandans
- o To prove the Rwandan Society's capacity to solve its own problems

Gacaca Process, human rights and reconciliation: among other things Gacaca Process helps to:

- o Disclose the truth about everything that happened during the genocide: removes suspicion among Rwandans, dispels rumors and distrust and establishes individual responsibility
- o Administer justice in accordance with community standards and requires no money, no lawyers
- o Speed up trials
- o Ensure that the guilty are prosecuted
- o Integrate the guilty person into society faster
- o Establish where the bodies of the victims of genocide were dumped or buried for easy retrieval and descent burials

Summary and conclusion

Summary

All in all we can say that dialogue, truth telling, forgiveness, reconciliation and compensation/reparation, are the five pillars of the African conflict transformation and peace-building paradigm. Despite some weaknesses and limitations, where this has been effectively applied, it has transformed antagonistic families, clans, communities and tribes into healed, reconciled and vibrant communities.

Conclusion

Since humanity is one and shares the same destiny and as such there has always been cross-fertilization of cultures and civilizations, this paper is of the opinion that indeed the rest of humanity that has until now resorted only to retributive justice, may wish to borrow a leaf from the African restorative justice system of addressing grieved members of society and communities to experience the healing power of truth telling, forgiveness and reconciliation. Having said that,

this paper recommends that further study, analysis and proper documentation of African traditional systems of administering justice is needed. And hence also the need to develop relevant short academic modules to be used as outreach programs, targeting selected sections of society. Here below are just thoughts for the consideration of Educator's Forum Participants.

Part Three

Developing Short Training Modules or Outreach Courses in Conflict Resolution and Peace-building Skills

Description:

In this part of the world, quite prone to conflicts and violence, everyone is a stakeholder of peace. Right now there are only few organizations/institutions in Uganda which can offer highly accredited training in conflict resolution and peace-building skills.

The trainings should be inter-disciplinary, drawing from Gender, Religious studies, Politics, Human Rights and Law. They should be guided by the principles of Human Rights based approach and non-violent action. In that sense, therefore, these modules may be best developed in close collaboration with the faculties of Arts, Social Sciences, Law and Gender. They would subsequently be conducted within institutions of higher learning, with the Local Governments, CBOs, and lower levels of schools as well. For the start three short courses could be developed and offered as follows

Conflict Resolution Skills

A complete short course on Conflict Resolution Skills developed and effectively offered. This could include, among other aspects, theory of conflict resolution, religion and belief systems, reconciliation, transformation, positive peace and case studies of good practices of reconciliation from Africa and other parts of the world.

Traditional Ways of Conflict Resolution

More detailed study and analysis of African traditional (original) ways of solving problems in a community setting; identifying those that are still used, exploring whether they are effective enough etc. It would be of interest to compare and contrast with how these approaches are used in other parts of the world. This course should explore the richness of original or alternative ways of democratic governance and participatory decision-making processes. The trainees should be

able to learn from indigenous knowledge systems how to strengthen community organization and community peace building.

Context Specific Alternative to Violence Training Module

Target Group: priority: Lecturers from higher institutions of learning, Guild leaders in these institutions and selected students from the rest of the student body, targeting different disciplines or programs

Description:

An alternative to violence project (AVP) is a highly effective international conflict resolution program which is a great learning experience. It offers three days experiential workshops for adults and mature youth. Based on the nondenominational spiritual principle of transforming power, the focus is on examining the root causes of violence, community-building, communication skills, and affirmations. AVP is an experiential program, helping people change their lives. The context-specific alternative violence module would be designed to create successful personal interactions and transform specific violent situations. Using life experience of participants as a learning resource, the module would aim at drawing on that experience to deal constructively with the violence in the participants themselves and same principles would be applied to the respective communities they live in.

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