

# **Chapter 1: Introduction: The Socio-Cultural Bases of Conflict, Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Africa**

Bertha Z. Osei-Hwedie and Treasa Galvin  
University of Botswana

This series focuses on the interface between indigenous culture and conflict resolution and peacebuilding. African culture, viewed as knowledge, practices and institutions, does not form a large part of the tools and mechanisms for resolving conflict and building peace in Africa. This is due to the prominence of external initiatives of conflict resolution and peace initiatives based on liberal values of democracy and capitalism, and institutions including the United Nations system of organizations and Western donor governments. The continent needs effective approaches to resolve conflict and create peace in parts of Africa mired in continued violence. Culture is seen as a very useful approach as it does not only identify the sources of conflict in terms of groups holding steadfast to their ethnicity, but also offers effective solutions as culture determines how groups perceive conflict and its resolution (Avruch, 1998; Avruch and Black quoted in *Culture & Conflict Resolution*, 2008; Lederach, quoted in *Culture & Conflict Resolution*, 2008). Therefore, there is need to integrate mainstream culture in conflict mechanisms, peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts in the African context if durable peace and security are to be realized. This would pave the way for both state and human security, and provide the necessary environment within which socio-economic development could take place..

## **1. Culture, Conflict Resolution and Peace Nexus**

For African culture to play its role as the solution, the underlying causes of conflict have to be discerned. In Africa, the culture of conflict and violence stems from tribal or

ethnic, religious, regional, racial differences and class divide. These reflect the diversity of cultures, and increased economic inequalities between the haves and have nots. Oftentimes, cultural and economic factors intertwine as causes of conflict, highlighting the complexity of conflicts in Africa. An example is the post-election violence in Kenya, following the December 2007 polls. While the Kenyan conflict is explained in terms of Kikuyu-Luo/Kalenjin/Luhya confrontation, it is also about poverty, economic inequality, unemployment, class divisions, and access to land and social amenities which cut across ethnic lines. However, the land question disadvantages one ethnic group most, in this case the Kalenjin, because the government settled the Kikuyu in the Rift Valley, the home of the Kalenjin.

Also, the elite or leadership often times appeal and manipulate tribal loyalties in the struggle for power, dominance and resources. Bass (quoted in Brown, 2001) argues that leaders use the 'ethnic card' and glorify a particular group to promote their selfish group interests; mobilize support; compete for political power; secure economic resources; and achieve social status (Levy, 2001: 16; Brown, 2001: 211). An example is the conflict between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda which resulted in genocide. What makes culture potent is that cultural affinities are emotive and have everlasting historical roots (Brown, 2001: 211).

Cultural and economic diversities, capitalized upon by the elites, explain why intra-state conflict is the most common phenomena in the post-Cold War era, with the decline in inter-state conflicts. However, it should be appreciated that tribal conflicts can be manifested as interstate conflicts as well, especially, when members of a particular ethnic group traverse boundaries as in the case of Sudan and South Sudan. Scholars have paid most of their attention to explaining the causes of intra-state conflicts, the ways of resolving them, and determining and justifying the role of international intervention in ending internal conflicts (Levy, 2001: 16). Intra-state conflicts are assumed to be ethnic or ethno national in origin, hence increasingly attributed to cultural factors. Therefore, conflicts must be understood in the context of culture which determines behaviour, and is also critical to resolving conflicts and building peace.

The utility of culture lies in being both a cause of conflict and the basis of

conflict resolution. Therefore, it is critical to creating sustainable peace and security. Lasting peace, it is argued, can only be achieved if there is a better understanding of the root cause of intra state conflicts as the basis of conflict resolution and building and managing of peace (Banseka, 2006). Proponents of the cultural model of conflict and peace argue that human conflict and conflict resolution are cultural phenomena, and culture shapes a group or people's perception, evaluation and choice of options for dealing with conflict (Fry and Bjorkqvist, 1997: 10). For instance, group perceptions and historical memories are said to account for the Hutu slaughter of Tutsis in Rwanda, which Hutus regard as self defense not genocide (Brown, 2001: 218). Different cultures develop their own formal and informal ways of resolving conflict. Culture becomes of utmost urgency when groups or people from different ethnic, racial, religious, and social backgrounds are engaged in resolving their conflicts. This means that conflict resolution requires sensitivity to cultural differences because there is no universal manual for resolving conflict (Avruch, 1998; Avruch and Black quoted in Culture & Conflict Resolution, 2008). Therefore, conflict should be studied from different cultural settings. This will lead to conflict resolution processes that may apply to specific cultural settings (Fry and Bjorkqvist, 1997: 3).

Avruch and Black's (quoted in Culture & Conflict Resolution, 2008: 4) cultural analysis of conflict resolution requires four things to be taken into account: what the contenders' 'cultures tells them about the nature of conflict and appropriate behaviour when in conflict'; a mediator trusted by all parties to the conflict; the 'cultural common sense of parties' regarding issues at stake; and culturally accepted process or mechanism desired by parties to resolve conflict. Similarly, Lederach (quoted in Culture & Conflict Resolution, 2008: 3) argues, succinctly that conflict resolution 'must situate the conflict in the disputant's frame of reference, understanding how the participant interprets the boundaries and context of the conflict'.

However, while sensitivity to uniqueness of cultural settings is applauded, it is also possible to search for general principles to conflict resolution that cut across cultures, especially, where there are shared values and norms such as *ubuntu* among the Bantu-speaking people in Southern Africa, that has been included as part of the

governments' visions in South Africa and Botswana. Another example is that (the African) cultural approach to conflict resolution requires the participation and involvement of those individuals, groups or communities who are affected by the conflict. This is akin to the common sense understanding of conflict resolution as advocated by Avruch and Black (quoted in *Culture & Conflict Resolution*, 2008).

## **2. Practical Examples of the Utility of Culture**

In Africa as a whole, institutions of chieftaincy, village assemblies, elders; mechanisms of mediation, negotiation and reconciliation; and gender role specialization in conflict resolution and community relations as a whole have been instrumental in promoting peace, harmony and prosperity. Indeed, the use of reconciliation in some post-conflict societies have paid dividends such as in the case of the Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa and Liberia, and Gagacha traditional courts in Rwanda. Unfortunately, in some post-independence African countries, such institutions, values and mechanisms have been either subordinated to Western ones or eliminated. Botswana is one of the few African countries that have ingeniously blended traditional institutions and practices with modern ones to create a relatively sound basis for peace, security and development (Osei-Hwedie, 2010).

In African cultures, females have a role in peace efforts which has not been capitalized upon by Western institutions involved in peace missions, including the UN. This partly accounts for the dismal record of UN peace efforts in Africa. For example, traditionally, through inter-clan marriages, Somali women have acted as intermediaries between opposition clans, and through traditional women's networks that support women and their families during conflict. Therefore, women would provide a source of information on how traditional practices could be alternative means to conflict resolution and promoting peace ('Gender', 2008). Mutamba and Izabiliza (2005) argue that in Rwanda's cultural context, women are the mediators, restorers of peace, and preemptors of violence.

In African societies, gender role differentiation allocates the responsibility for food production to women and finances to men (Banseka, 2006). Thus in areas of conflict, humanitarian food aid, which is part of complex peace missions, should be distributed by women to fellow women with sensitivity and understanding to ensure that the needy have access to the necessary food rations, thereby taking care of their welfare needs. This would undoubtedly lessen or eliminate the negative consequences of the current practice of food distribution through men as in the DRC, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Mozambique (Nkechi, 2008). Similarly, when it comes to election assistance as part of peacekeeping, women to women interaction during voter education would facilitate voter mobilization as women feel more comfortable with their own gender, a reflection of African cultural practices and socialization. In this way the political or voting rights of women are safeguarded and contribute to political equality among gender. Furthermore, mobilization of women by women contributes to expansion of women's participation in the political process, allows women to support each other through information sharing, and give each other moral support based on common interaction and shared experiences.

In addition, networks, support and solidarity as practiced among the Somali women would serve as building blocks for cooperation for development purposes. Sen (2007) argues that social solidarity and mutual support, as cultural products, are important means of social and economic development because they form the basis of community cooperation in development projects. Increasingly, the World Bank has shown interest in understanding how cultural factors impact on development, including gender roles.

### **3. The Case for Indigenous Knowledge and Institutions**

The intractable and resilient nature of conflicts has precipitated the need to identify and understand the sources of conflict, and search for effective approaches to conflicts, peacebuilding and security. This has led to considering African culture as an imperative

for effective and sustainable peace. The call and urgency for inclusion of indigenous knowledge and institutions to conflict resolution and peacebuilding is premised on a number of factors. It is in part a response to Africa's desire to determine its destiny and take responsibility for the continent's conflicts by using initiatives suited to Africa. These are popularly known as 'African solutions for African problems' or according to the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), 'African solutions for African challenges'. This is the motto which is supposed to guide the activities of refurbished regional and sub-regional organizations mandated with conflict resolution and prevention on the continent. These include the Organization of African Unity and African Union, and sub regional organization such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and ECOWAS/ECOMOG. These organizations are increasingly expected to play important roles in the promotion of peace, stability, and security to supplement the UN role (Bonyongwe, 2000: 89), and to create conditions conducive to socio-economic development.

There are already indications that continental and sub regional organizations are willing to adapt new peace initiatives. These include the hybridization of peace missions that combines AUPSC peace force and UN technical and logistical support to resolve the Darfur crisis, and the use of women peacekeepers for Liberia. The hybrid peacekeeping mission for Darfur, the first of its kind, is meant to allow Africans to take up more responsibility for peacekeeping on the continent in line with the desire to solve their own problems and the belief that Africans would understand and resolve African conflicts better than foreign peacekeepers. ECOMOG's successful peacekeeping efforts in Liberia provide a strong argument and practical example for a cultural approach to peace in Africa. ECOMOG's successful end to hostilities and civil war, and a return to an elected government have been attributed to its appreciation and sensitivity to specific characteristics of the Liberian situation. Bonyongwe (2000: 89) argues succinctly that "Due to cultural affinity and common social and historical configuration ...". ECOMOG "...had more intimate knowledge of the evolution and political sensitivities of the conflict in question". The same argument applies to the mini ECOMOG mission in Sierra Leone. ECOMOG refrained from applying resolution techniques developed in

different cultural setting to Liberia or Sierra Leone.

The prevalence and dominance of Western approaches, practices and institutions to the search for peace is an added motive. The liberal approach, premised on democratization and markets, has had limited success as conflicts continue to rage on the continent as witnessed in the long drawn conflicts in the DRC, Uganda, and Niger Delta in Nigeria. Pre- and post-elections violence in Kenya in 2007, Zimbabwe in 2008 and the DRC in 2011; the new and vicious religious violence, between Christians and Muslims, characteristic of Nigeria recently; and poverty and delivery protests, have added other dimensions to the causes of conflicts. These illustrate that democracy does not always translate into peace as argued by democratic peace theorists (Doyle, 1997; Newman et al, 2009). Instead, democratic elections contribute to recurrence of conflicts and preclude the nurturing of a culture of peace.

The UN has been most visible in the continent's peace efforts which have evolved in line with the needs of different intra-state conflicts and civil wars. The UN has relied on a range of measures including negotiations, mediation and military force, resulting in a government of national unity and peacekeeping, respectively. However, the fact that the UN has a checkered record of conflict resolution and peace efforts; not prioritized African conflicts; and has been reluctant to readily intervene in African conflicts, especially, following the debacle in Somalia and Rwanda in 1994, has prompted African security organizations to seek 'home grown' strategies.

The UN does not rely on local culture in its peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations. Darfur is cited as an example of the absence of effective peacekeeping due to insensitivity of peacekeepers to local culture which would have helped in creating a close relationship with the population. Fry and Bjorkqvist (1997: 5) contend that one of the reasons for the failure to resolve conflicts or negotiate for peace is the fact that mediators impose their own premises and assumptions about conflict and conflict resolution to opposing group which do not share them. Similarly, the gender question has not been relevant until the inclusion of the first all-female contingent of UN peacekeepers from India in Liberia in the 2000s. The UN has embraced local participation and collaboration in response to accusations of neo-colonialism and neo-

imperialism as well as to augment the legitimacy of its missions; and to pave the way for sustainable peace and development (Wilén and Chapaux, 2011: 531). Unfortunately, local participation and collaboration is faced with three major challenges of identifying local participants and collaborators, inherent mode of operations of the UN as an organization, and the practical problems of implementation. Burundi is cited as an example of the inability by the UN and the government to collaborate to the extent that the government asked the UN to leave. The government in the DRC also requested the UN to depart. Liberia is a classic good collaboration between the government and the UN. However, in both Burundi and Liberia there are problems of local participation in UN peacebuilding activities (Wilén and Chapaux, 2011: 543-545).

The urgency, therefore, to use culturally appropriate conflict resolution and peacebuilding process stems from the intricate relationship between peace and development as peace guarantees conditions within which development can take place. As a late developing continent and characterized by poverty, peace is of utmost importance to Africa, and to enable it to concentrate efforts on socio-economic development.

#### **4. The Imperative for Research**

There is recognition of the urgency to mainstreaming culture in peace and security mechanisms in the African context; and that adoption and practical application of indigenous methods, no matter their utility, ultimately depend on their acceptance by international organizations and donor agencies as key actors in Africa's peace initiatives. The main task remains one of availability of in-depth research that identifies indigenous approaches that are applicable to resolution of conflicts in modern systems. The efforts in this volume are meant for this purpose. In chapter two, Malan provides the principles and processes of indigenous methods of conflict resolution in Africa, highlighting relevance to, and practicability in, modern society. He argues for the need to ensure that the past approaches are not romanticized, rather, outdated elements should be modified



to supplement modern national and international ones. In chapter three, Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo, using the Akan of Ghana and Tswana of Botswana, detail the underlying principles, institutions and processes of indigenous conflict resolution in modern systems. They demonstrate that chiefs and traditional courts play critical roles in resolving conflict at the individual and family levels, including spiritual matters. Dzimbiri, in chapter four, compares and contrasts indigenous conflict resolution at the family level among the Lomwe and dispute resolution mechanisms in modern organizations. He concludes that indigenous methods serve as a supplement to modern ones. The final chapter five by Shinoda tackles the sensitive yet topical issue of local ownership to close the gap between outside and inside methods. He illustrates his arguments with reference to international peacebuilding agencies, such as the OECD/DAC, UN Peacebuilding Commission, and indigenous methods of Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and Rwanda. The basic problem highlighted by Shinoda is the fact that many traditional methods do not involve peacebuilding within the concept of the nation-state.

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