

# **Indigenous conflict resolution in Africa**

by Birgit Brock-Utne

University of Oslo

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So if Africa has to put the ‘falling apart together’, her original values must be re-visited. (Bob-Manuel, 2000: 10)

It is now wide knowledge that Africa profiles the highest statistics of violent conflicts in the world. For years the treatment of conflicts in Africa involving national armies revolved around conventional mechanisms that have excluded the traditional approaches that are, according to Ofuho (1999) now in grater demand in the contemporary world, particularly in Africa.

Ofuho (1999) in his paper to the All-Africa Conference on African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation which was held from the 8th until the 12th of November 1999 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia brings to light the experiences of grassroot peace-making efforts among the communities of the Kidepo Valley of Eastern Equatoria. Kidepo is a big forest that starts from Karenga Hills in the north-east of the border with Uganda and extends deep into South Sudan. The people living along both divides of the valley regard Kidepo as a major asset in terms of both water and grazing resources, particularly during the dry season. It is worth pointing out that communities of the region under study have lived in hostility and co-existence for years and their conflicts have just recently picked up intolerable proportions due to the proliferation of modern weapons.

The common source of conflict in the Kidepo Valley is cattle rustling. Cattle herds are the main source of income. Cattle can be sold in exchange for other commodities. A cow is like a modern account in the bank. A cow is payable as

dowry in marriage negotiations or used in exchange for grain during hunger situations. Cattle are used as a source of milk, beef and cow dung mixed with mud is used for mud-slinging the walls of the huts for shelter. Cattle are a highly regarded asset and each community believes that all the cattle of the world belong to them by divine right. They also claim that each of them is bestowed with the divine right to retrieve by stealth or armed force all cattle that neighbours possess or which each ethnic group might claim to be their own. In the Kidepo Valley, cattle rustling is mainly carried out by a group of men widely known as mojirimoit. It is only after a group of mojirimoit from neighboring communities have raided another community's cattle that responses to such incidences have led to conflict.

Initially, all people who own cattle in the region used ordinary spears and arrows for protection of their cattle against rustlers. With the proliferation of light arms, such methods of defence have now been overtaken, and almost all cattle owners have now acquired deadly automatic rifles. The Karamoja and Dodos of Uganda have been prominent notorious cattle rustlers even across borders into Kenya and South Sudan. These communities have often raided each others cattle but often resolved their disputes at the community level without much government or NGO involvement. Thus traditional approaches to reconciliation and conflict resolution existed among these communities from time immemorial.

Since the beginning of life in Kidepo Valley, there have been as many attempts and practices of peace-making as there have been wars over resources in the region. Each member group of the communities often began their attempts of peace-making by first identifying the rote causes of the problem. Most of the problems occurred due to revenge for death previously committed over cattle rustling or during fighting over grazing and water resource areas in the Kidepo Valley. Once the problems are identified, communities convene meetings that may last two to three days in isolation in some forest where they deliberated

over them and resolved them. But for such meetings to bear fruit, the role of what may be called opinion leaders and council of elders is crucial. These elders have gained their authoritative influence through wisdom and experience. What must also be keenly noted by conventional mechanisms is the salience of traditional practices such as the use of rituals, symbols and interpretation of myths to bring conflicts to an end. These include the identification of a particular type of cattle and/or goat that must be sacrificed to cleanse away the evils of conflict from society.

Another effective way of grass-root peacemaking in this valley is the use of curse by elders to deter the young mojimots from continuous raids. The curse of elders is believed to lead to mysterious death. The word of elders are bitter and those who have caused troubles often vanish from society.

Ofuho in his paper exposes factual stories about the conflict, highlights the use of symbols and interpretation of myths to resolve them. All these constitute practices of peacemaking, now fashionably termed "grass-root peacemaking" that have for years been used to contain cattle rustling in this region

Lanek (1999) presented a paper he called: " 'Mato Oput', the drinking of Bitter Herb" to the All-Africa Conference on African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation which was held from the 8th until the 12th of November 1999 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He is in this paper concerned with integrating indigenous approaches with national and international mechanisms for conflict resolution and reconciliation. He also contrasts the indigenous approaches, here especially the Acholi approach, with the western legal ones. Western legal approach emphasises establishing guilt and executing retribution and punishment without reference to the victim or the wider families or future reincorporation of the offender into the community. Physical and material penalties and use of force, including costly prisons, provide the sanctions against

offending. Western legal approaches are adversarial and evidence must be direct and specific. The process, according to Lanek, effectively encourages the accused to deny responsibility while the Acholi method of peace, conflict resolution and reconciliation are co-operative and can be indirect and circumstantial which does effectively encourage the accused to admit responsibility.

He tells that the Acholi, a Luo speaking tribe occupying northern Uganda, for generations has used Mato Oput as a means of reconciliation within the context of their tradition. The Acholi believe in leadership through consensus, allowing everyone in their localised clans to have a voice while the traditional head of each clan rules by consent. A major function of the traditional chiefs is to act as arbitrators and reconcilers when disputes occur in order to restore peace and maintain harmonious relations between families and clans. The reconciliation process he describes is called the "Mato Oput" process (Mato Oput - an Acholi vernacular meaning drinking the herb of the Oput tree) because it ends in a significant ceremony of "Mato Oput", the traditional drinking of a bitter herb of the Oput tree. Mato Oput is not a happy ceremony, the mood of all present expresses the seriousness of the occasion. The process involves:

- the guilty acknowledging responsibility,
- the guilty repenting,
- the guilty asking for forgiveness
- the guilty paying compensation
- the guilty being reconciled with the victim's family through sharing the bitter drink - Mato Oput

The bitter drink has no medicinal effect. It only symbolises the psychological bitterness that prevailed in the minds of the parties in conflict situation The Mato Oput process covers offences across the board

In the publication announcing their Third Three-Year Programme 1995-97 AALAE (African Association for Literacy and Adult Education) makes an outline of the activities in the field of peace education that it wants to undertake in the three years to come. They also emphasize: "For this programme to attain its goals and objectives it is imperative to undertake in-depth research into the African concepts of conflict, as well as the African methods, techniques and processes of conflict prevention, management and resolution" (AALAE, 1994: 19)

The Ugandan researcher Dani W. Nabudere (1997) mentions that the recent collapse of the Somali nation-state and the reversion to the post-traditional method of social and political organisation in northern Somaliland have shown how dynamic some of the old systems are. The restoration of the gurtii system of Clan Elders who intervene to settle conflicts and mediate between the hostilities of the different warlords have helped to maintain a semblance of order and stability in an otherwise hostile environment created by social relations and politics of modernity. The *dia*-system of compensation which in the old days was based on bloody compensation and revenge, is undergoing transformation while also providing a reference point for the reorganisation of the Somali society and conflict resolution and conflict management.

In her term paper written for the course: "Culture of Peace and Education" taught at the European Peace University in Stadtschlaining Austria in the fall of 2000 Ineba Bob-Manuel from Nigeria is concerned about the fact that for more than a decade, and especially since the end of the cold war Africa has been torn apart by extremely intense conflicts which have resulted in thousands of deaths, and the internal displacement of millions of civilians. She notes that the use of western methods of conflict resolution has failed. Peacekeeping operations,

which have been conducted in the last few years under the auspices of the United Nations, have allowed for the establishment of peaceful processes only in very few countries, for example, Mozambique. More often than not they have been resounding failures, recent examples are: Somalia, Rwanda and Angola. This, she claims, is mostly because the political, military and sociological realities of these countries were not fully appreciated and comprehended. Today's predominant pattern of conflict in Africa is proving resistant to the available and accepted tools of conflict management. What Bob-Manuel sees needed is a new range of flexible and adaptable instruments that can take the more subjective, complex and deep-rooted needs and interests that underpin these conflicts into account. Special attention should be given to the valuable contributions from Africa. This thinking is the justification for the study she has undertaken for the "Culture and Peace Education" course that I taught for the Master students at the European Peace University in Stadtschlaining, Austria in the fall of 2000.

The study considers African value systems and conflict transformation systems as viable means of resolving African conflicts today. Based on this background, Ineba Bob-Manuel suggests the preposition that it is only when potential and actual conflicts in Africa are understood in their social contexts that they can be solved. Values and beliefs, fears and suspicions, interests and needs, attitudes and actions, relationships and networks have to be taken duly into consideration. Origins and root causes of the conflicts need to be explored, so that a shared understanding of the past and present is developed.

Bob-Manuel claims that the gradual erosion of the values that existed within the traditional African societies and the replacement of these values by foreign ones introduced systematic problems for Africans because they were unable to adapt to the new system of political power. The control of political power by an elite who took over from the colonial powers she sees as one of the factors in the

continuing discord and discontent. This has led to different ethnic groups struggling for dominance in the new system of political power. In her paper Ineba Bob-Manuel attempts to explore possible answers to the following questions: Are there techniques in the indigenous political cultures of Africa that can contribute to the experiences needed to weather the crisis in Africa? What were the processes of conflict resolution in Africa?

During the years of traditional leadership in Africa various conflicts caused by different issues attracted various approaches to their resolution. Most conflicts and their resolution methods at that time were predominantly local. Conflicts were between individuals, villages, communities or tribes who lived in the same or adjoining areas. Those who intervened were often local elders and /or tribal leaders. When kingdoms developed about the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC in West Africa, stronger and wider authority came into power, but the traditional methods of instigating and resolving conflicts had gone through very small changes.

### ***The Traditional Values From Africa***

The concept of “warp and weft”, which is about two basic and interwoven elements, has been used from the very beginning of weaving through to date. The concept denotes that even if the most complex of designs are woven into a piece of cloth, the basic structure is formed by two interwoven sets of thread traditionally called the warp and weft. The concept is evident in the conflict transformation system of Africa. One of the two basic elements – the warp - is the tradition of family or neighbourhood negotiation, which is normally facilitated by elders. The other basic element – the weft - is the attitude of togetherness in the spirit of humanhood (kparakpor). Kparakpor is a Yoruba word for humanhood, ubuntu in the Zulu language of South Africa, ujamaa in Kiswahili (denoting – a family feeling of togetherness. This concept points to the committedness to the community, as men and women of all ages are allowed

to participate meaningfully in co-operation. The concept emphasises association and relationships, as well as a collective goal, which is peace.

### *African Conflict Transformation Methods*

When focusing on Africa, Bob-Manuel advises theorists to try as much as possible to move towards real life in all practicality. Social realities within societies should be taken seriously. Conflicts should be viewed as non-isolated events in their social contexts. When Africans sit down to discuss a conflict, the talking usually covers all kinds of relevant background and goes into the thoughts and intentions of others. The elders from a family, clan or state see their traditional objectives in conflict resolution as moving away from accusations and counter-accusations, to soothe hurt feelings and to reach a compromise that may help to improve future relationships. They also dwell on values, aspirations, perceptions and visions. All over Africa people have deeply rooted cultural commitments, and in many of the conflicts in Africa this cultural heritage play a decisive role.

In Africa, family ties and community networking are constantly respected, maintained and strengthened. When there is a dispute between different parties, priority is given to restoring the relationships. During the dispute settlement, which would normally involve supporters of the disputing parties and the elders meant to talk the matters through, relationships are given prime attention. The relationships are viewed according to the past, and the tense or current conflict, and then the aim would be to improve future relationships. Indirect relationships are analysed along with direct ones to see cross-stitching potentials, for example, if each of the disputing parties happen to be musicians, this commonality may be utilised as a converging factor. The fear of sorcery or divine punishment is also used to show what the breach of peace would bring upon the society and the conflicting parties.

A western mediator may begin the exploration by retracing the steps of the parties to the point of the initial conflict. But an experienced African elder, considering the social realities, may start from a vintage point further back and try to form a frame of social reference. He may ask questions as: Who are you, and where are you from? Explain your family link. Where did you grow up? What do you like doing? Etc. These may provide clues, not only about immediate causes, but will reveal long-standing grievances, thus offer a wider and deeper insight into the differences and similarities between the parties. Parties often have fairly similar needs, but rather different interests. They may also have similar or different ideologies and beliefs. The age and power differences must also be considered. All these help the African elder in the discussion to get at the remote and immediate causes.

The immediate objective of such conflict resolution is to mend the broken or damaged relationship, and rectify wrongs, and restore justice. Another aim is to ensure the full integration of parties into their societies again, and to adopt the mood of co-operation.

Other long term aims are based on a kparakpor building harmony in the community. From experience it has been realised that tolerance is not maintained automatically, and should purposefully be aimed at and worked for.

The Kpelle people of Liberia of West Africa are known for their ad hoc local meetings called “moots” or “house palavers”, where the conflicting parties arrive at mediated settlements through the use of experienced African elders. Bob-Manuel tells that among the Ndendeuli of Tanzania mediators play active roles in conflict solving by suggesting an agreement and get as far as pressurising the parties into accepting it. Pressurising can be done through talking or singing: shaming and ridiculing. This special method can be used in contexts where it is acceptable, and in instances where the cause of the dispute is

self-evident. In an effort to change the behaviour of troublemakers, through ritualised or ordinary conversations anti-social and conflict-causing conducts are put to shame, by individuals gifted in poking fun at others, in jocular ways. Comedians, singers etc., can here be of great influence.

The method of negotiation generally used in Africa is the neighbourhood system. Its success may be attributed to its elemental simplicity, participatory nature, adaptable flexibility and complete relevance. It starts with discussions by individuals within the social context on an emerging dispute. The contexts usually are according to the circumstances, for example, a condensed family or an extended family, immediate neighbours or a larger neighbourhood, or a combination of family and neighbourhood or different parties of a state. It can also be a smaller or a larger organisation, for example, a school or a religious group. In this method, instead of directing the discussion towards spite, or the apportioning of blame, it is pointed towards a solution. Judges and mediators make decisions based on rules. They look forward to the future, for improved relations – not only between the disputants but also in the whole community that is involved. Often the disputing parties are granted the scope to make their decisions.

This kind of interest-related discussion can progress naturally into the mode of negotiating, which can be very effective. But if it happens that all the informal discussions and negotiations do not lead to a satisfactory solution underlying the problem, real mediating may be used more formally. This formality is, however, not one derived from professional accreditation. Mediators are sought from within the communities or societies of the parties concerned. Then people who enjoy social recognition for their experience and integrity are sought for as well. A mediator is often connected with one of the parties; so more than one mediator is used. Usually a smaller or larger group is used, made up of people

selected to resolve a particular conflict or of an already existing committee or council of mediators.

Elders are respected as trustworthy mediators all over Africa, because of their accumulated experience and wisdom. The roles of these mediators would depend on traditions, circumstances and personalities, accordingly. These roles include: pressurising or manipulating as earlier mentioned, making recommendations, giving assessment, conveying suggestions on behalf of a party etc. Behaviour used is facilitation, through clarifying information, promoting clear communication, interpreting standpoints, summarising discussions, emphasising relevant norms or rules, envisaging the situation if agreement is not reached, or repeating of the agreement already attained. The mediators can also remain passive, as they are there to represent important shared values. There is no predetermined model, so they are entitled to change their roles from time to time as they perceive needs at various times. The entire approach is flexible and dynamic, while every part of the talk is related to and influenced by the social context.

As the background of the conflict is explored, the social situation of each individual or party is considered. This is to form an impression of the interests and needs, aspirations and motivations of each party. From the beginning of the conflict transformation there may be an inclination to understand more about the inner motives of the parties.

As the talking proceeds, there is an openness to feedback or influence from the social surrounding, which may lead to modifications of perceptions or positions of the mediators or the parties involved. And the constituencies of the parties as well as the social groups are respected. If a party feels insecure and acts unassertively, the mediators help by making such a party realise that they would

be impartial in their role. This is done to enhance the sense of empowerment and confidence of the unassertive party.

The decision making process is characterised by consideration of the social importance of conflict solving as social relations and internal solidarity are crucial. At this stage having looked at both sides, your community may suggest that you - the one party - make this concession. It would then be fair to expect you - the other party - to respond by reciprocating concession from your side. The point is to make a fair exchange for public recognition.

Consensus seeking is the next important approach. This may develop into an extended search, and much patience is needed here. Every new consensual outcome confirms the validity and value of the time-proven tradition of this process. It also creates confidence that such a jointly developed decision will prove to be effective and long lasting.

When an agreement is eventually reached, the good news is shared with the groups and communities concerned. The agreement is then affirmed as a social contract in a ritual way, which differs from society to society. The affirmation can range from a handshake in public to an elaborate ceremony as required by tradition. The purpose of this is to spread the news about the satisfactory conclusion of the conflict resolution process. This also places an additional obligation on the parties to observe the agreement.

The society plays an important role by assisting with implementing the agreement. From this stage, all the parties and the entire community can check whether the parties are really keeping to their commitment.

If a party needs face-saving, empowerment, or encouragement, sympathetic members of the community often render valuable assistance. Ineba Bob-Manuel (2000) tells that such assistance was needed as mediation had taken place

between rebel leaders and the surrounding community and these rebel leaders then were to be accepted back into their societies without being labelled, as in the case of the Biafran leaders during the Nigerian civil war.

The advantages of the social perspective in the conflict transformation process to Ineba Bob-Manuel are obvious as it leads to a more profound and shared understanding of the conflict. It also encourages the acceptance of the aim of a satisfying relational life after the conflict is resolved. It makes the transformation process participatory in a full sense as it involves more than just the inclusion of the parties and the mediators. It further promotes a sense of belonging, which in turn, may contribute to the restoration, maintenance and building of relationships.

The concept of ‘Nneka’ (an Igbo word meaning mother is supreme) a belief in the traditional Igbo society in Eastern Nigeria refers to women as sustainers and healers of human relationships. Achebe (1970) in his well-known novel “Things fall apart” explains that:

“.. when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother’s hut. A man belongs to his father when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you.”

Ineba Bob-Manuel (2000) tells that the Luo women of Kenya were at the forefront in the various stages of peace processes like preventive diplomacy, peace making, peacekeeping and post conflict peace building. They used methods like direct or indirect interventions through elders and women’s networks that existed within warring parties. When a conflict was perceived through preparation for war or actual outbreak of war, women got together and discussed the issue among themselves. Then they asked the elders in their clan or community to arrange for a dialogue with those of the opposing clan or community. If the elders refused them, the women from one community

arranged to visit their counterparts in the enemy camp and built alliances as a strategy for convincing the elders in both camps to resolve their conflicts in non-violent ways. This strategy used in conflict solution is one of the three characteristics of women's peace-making which I discuss in my book: "Educating for Peace" (Brock-Utne, 1985).

This system created an atmosphere of trust between both communities, and encouraged informal contacts, rather than contact through representatives.

If the male elders made a decision to settle a dispute through war, they consulted with the female elders. And the decision would be revoked on the strength of the women's objection. Women even had the capacity and the ability to make peace at the eleventh hour. They would block, with their hands raised, the path of warriors who had set out for battle and the warriors would then turn back. No warrior or elder could ignore the women's cry for them to refrain from battle and no woman ignored her moral obligation to intervene and create peace in the face of violence.

The Luo people believed that if a woman said "no" to something, you should not do it. There is the story of a Luo legendary warrior, whose first wife asked him not to go to war, but he ignored her words. Unfortunately, he never came back home – he died during the war.

Among the Luo, a woman only needed to stand between two men engaged in a fight for them to stop. Also if one sought refuge in a woman's hut the opponent was forced to abandon the fight, not only in domestic fights but also in communal conflicts.

The role of elderly Luo women, is for instance, to arrange marriages between clans, especially warring clans. This is also part of the tradition of peace building (confidence building).

Ineba Bob-Manuel (2000) feels convinced that if political processes are not remodelled from the short-term power dominated interests towards longer-term co-operative and people centred interests, conflicts in Africa will continue. Therefore, she asserts, conflict resolution should not be the responsibility of a privileged few alone, but rather be a participatory process in every sense involving all affected people. African intellectuals and professionals in the field of conflict studies should seek to inculcate African ethical values into modern academic structures, especially in conflict resolution (Brock-Utne,1996).

Finally, greater participation of women should be ensured, because women are still carriers of life as in the traditional African belief. They can still have a strong moral obligation to say 'no' to violent ways. They still have the capacity to form networks that cut across ethnic, national and racial barriers. So, the increasing number of women's organisations and networks that have started in war-torn parts of Africa can stand as in the case of the Luo women, between the opposing parties. It is not enough that women should be the court of last resort, because the last resort is a too far away and may come too late.

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