

The spiritual dimension of conflict prevention and conflict resolution mechanisms in African countries

*University of Oslo, Unit for comparative and international education,
Institute for Educational Research, 23.02.01*

By Prof. Kum' a Ndumbe III.

Conflicts and armed rivalries wage in African societies since five centuries. One could say that this continent just doesn't find peace since the discovery of the oceans by the Europeans. From the 15th Century on the African societies gradually lost control over their own destiny, the present precarious equilibrium is threatened by internal contradictions of this process of dispossession of one's own history and stability can often only be reached by paying a high, often bloody, price.

This was the case in the times of slavery, when many wars broke out all over the continent to capture slaves, that were sold to the foreigners and shipped away, it was the case when Europeans fell upon Africa in a concerted aggression to rob the land from the Africans and to rid Africans of their own fate/future.

Yes, blood had to flow when "pacifying" African countries for European needs, an imposed "peace" that was contested throughout the colonial period. The "colonial masters" spoke of "Indigenous uprisings", while from an African point of view it was a "resistance against colonial rule".

This permanent resistance lead to a formal independence, which was essentially a defeat for the African liberation movements, who, because of the postcolonial structures and the international block-division of the Cold War in the 60s and 70s, could not shake off the essential features of foreign rule.

In secret Neo-colonialism was celebrated as the triumph of Colonialism and officially praised as international cooperation with allegedly free African States. The fight against Neo-colonialism again caused many conflicts all over Africa, which were paid for with blood.

This fight is still going on, Africans speak of a second Liberation fight against foreign rule and against indigenous rulers, who are enriching themselves and their foreign "partners", the big multinational companies and several other actors, but who completely ignore and exploit their own populations thanks to military and police repression.

But the resistance of African populations today has made a qualitative leap forward as the blood that is presently flowing in the different conflicts and wars is clearing the way for self-devised and self-sustained new structures in culture, politics, economics and military, in order to enable African States to have their destiny in their own hands again.

These bloody conflicts will probably last for an unpredictable period, until Africans have found themselves again, until they have made peace with themselves, with their own history, with their own worldview, with their own political and economical structures and with their own spirituality. It is true that Africans today live in a modern globalized world and that they cannot, in their own process of renewal, ignore certain global tendencies. But they don't want to be completely determined by these global tendencies.

They want and must draw from themselves before they accept outside influences to strengthen them in the process of re-acquiring their own destiny. In this framework, the spiritual dimension of African societies plays an important role in the resolution of conflicts, in the restoration of peace and in the construction of solid structures and of a progress-seeking society.

Conflicts rage all over the world and become more and more violent. Nevertheless most of the conflicts on a world scale are held in Africa, and there are many obvious and objective structural reasons that are sufficiently analysed and widely known. Therefore it will not be part of this contribution.

The spiritual dimension of the African human being

I just want to mention some essential features, which are accepted as fundamental values in all the diverse societies on the African continent, especially among the Bantu Nations, even though these values are in constant evolution.

These values must not be seen as specifically or exclusively African, as human evolution reaches different stages at different times in different societies. They impress certain values upon humankind, which continually change with time. The values that will be described here, do not only belong to the African past, but still today shape the lives of the majority of Africans.

The “Self” (“I”) and the “We” (The individual and the Community)

I am, because we are, I am, because we live together, I am, because our lives are interlaced in togetherness and care for each other, I am, because I am part of a group of the ‘not yet born’, the ‘living’ and the ‘already gone’, I am, because I, as part of the Universe, was born to fulfil certain tasks. The approach “I think, therefore I am” is a constraint of human existence and a reduction to the pure cognitive level, which cannot be enough to capture the whole dimension of life and human existence. The essentiality of reason and thinking are very important, but they represent only one possibility to perceive reality and human existence. They hardly allow to move beyond the limits of the measurable, the logically repeatable and are therefore inadequate to be deeply shaped by the Universe and the entire creation.

But human existence, life and the Universe form an indivisible entity, which cannot be considered separately. What is meant here is that they form a global entity, whose single elements are wrapped into one another and in constant interconnection with each other.

The “Self” and Nature

The “Self”, which is represented by the thinking and conscious human being, is no contradiction to Nature, its duty is not to rule over or dominate Nature. Man (here as human being) and Nature are different elements of the same Universe, elements which need and influence one another. By deciphering several laws of Nature, man can use Nature in order to achieve a qualitatively better life. But by disregarding and breaking the laws of harmony and evolution, he destroys Nature and by the same time destroys his own means of survival and of qualitative improvement of life.

The “Self” and the Universe

Therefore Man has to live in solidarity and harmony with Nature in order to be merely able to take his place in the whole Universe. Man is not the centre of creation, he is a conscious and active part of this Creation, which by far surpasses the dimension of human experience. By taking his place and imbedding himself into the bigger context of the Universe, Man himself reaches a higher dimension of being which, beyond the physical and material dimension, allows him to be part of the universal flow of energy. Through this process Man also finds his place in the universal evolution which is in a constant process of completion, and human life is but one sign of this evolution at a certain point in time.

The “Self”, the family, the ancestors and God

We are born into a family, which has been built by the parents and the ancestors, with a certain duty, and it is up to each of us to discern and eventually fulfil this special duty. This

individual evolution, caused and supported by our membership to a network, a group, a society or a State leads us to the dimension of the Universe, and automatically to our relationship with the ancestors of the family and to the creator of the Universe himself, to God. Life without this higher dimension, which perceives Man as well as the Universe itself as being in constant process of completion, would be reduced to a small incomprehensible adventure on Earth and would not bear a higher sense. The connection to the creator, to the primary source of energy, allows Man to increase his own life energy and to preserve and enrich his own life through vital forces.

The “Self” and Life as flow of vital energy

Life is made of vital forces, of energy, which is transformable, not bound to any space, an energy that often is perceivable with the bare eye, but that also can be invisible, sometimes perceivable with human senses and sometimes not, etc.

This energy is visible matter, measurable atom, produces visible but also invisible connections and moves in form of energy flows, but this energy also moves human beings in a kind of energy-vehicle. Through concentration and an intimate connection with the vital forces Man can overcome his material form and reach an immaterial dimension of being, of movement and of communication. In order for this energy of vital force to materialise in life, joy and happiness, beauty and light, solidarity and interconnection have to come together in a human being.

If this energy flow is disturbed or interrupted, stress, illness, conflict or crisis are the consequences. When all energy escapes from a human body, death follows and in a long process slowly transforms the material energy of each body until all particles are freed and connect with other particles to new flows or clusters of energy.

Conflicts and wars are intended to disconnect and disperse or fully dissolve the energy flow. They deplete the energetic and energy-carrying person.

Healing can only occur when the energy is allowed to take its undisturbed and free course.

This healing, the settlement of a conflict, dispute or argument, or peace can only be achieved, when this energy of the vital forces can flow freely. In human societies however this can only happen if there is a combined will of all people involved and their respective social environment – family, group, State, etc., the will of the already gone but - though invisible - still present ancestors, the will of the vital forces of the Universe and the will of God, the Creator come together and join to free the way again for the flow of energies.

So the settlement of a dispute/conflict is not the matter of single persons or of the two conflicting parties, but rather the matter of a much more complex interplay of actors, who send their positive determination as energy in order to re-establish the disturbed flow of energy.

The treatment to achieve healing

The treatment to achieve healing therefore cannot only comprise the sick person, it must comprise the whole network of vital forces surrounding this person, the material, psychological as well as the spiritual around this person, because he/she cannot be seen as a free-floating, isolated individual because he/she is, before and after birth, and especially after death, interwoven into a complicated network. That is the reason why father, mother, brothers and sisters, uncle and aunt, nephews etc. have to be integrated in the healing process. They can be responsible for the interruption of the flow of energy. They too have to agree, or have

to be forced through different measures to agree, to set the energy flow free again. It has to be clear that the energy, which nurtures human beings comes from various sources and that these sources have to recover or to be cleaned so that the nurturing energy can have a positive and healthy effect on Man. Therefore it is insane to believe that Man can draw vital forces when the sources are impure, negatively loaded and when they spread aggressiveness, egocentrism, maliciousness, envy, humiliation, destruction, illness etc.

Healing of disputes and conflicts

What is the central task to be taken in order to settle a conflict? The central task is not to find and punish the guilty person and to indemnify the victim. The central task is to re-establish the energy flow within individuals, between the conflicting persons/parties, within the family, within the society or within the State. So the primary goal is the re-establishment of harmony, which is the prerequisite to access a higher dimension of life. This of course presupposes that the perpetrator recognises his/her culpability and regrets the things he/she has done, that the victim forgives and engages together with the perpetrator onto the path of reconciliation. As this process often does not work by its own in human societies, certain mechanisms are engendered in order to reach these described goals. A quarrel or conflict is settled in presence of the family members, of the whole village community, of different groups of a town or of a State by holding a palaver or dialogue forum. Even though these palaver, dialog forums or National Conferences as recently practiced in several African countries can last for weeks until the quarrel is settled, it is essential that everybody “spits out all the dirt in himself”, that the others have shown readiness to listen, and that a consensus, which has nothing to do with a majority decision, is reached and supported by all.

As well as remorse and repentance are expected from the perpetrator, it is also expected that the victim accepts the expressed regrets and excuses by showing his agreement, offering presents, friendship or marital union between members of both families, groups, societies or nations. This is the framework within which reconciliation becomes possible, a reconciliation which does not only commit all who are present, but also the ancestors and the whole Universe who keep watch that the energy flow will not be interrupted again (by the actions of one of the persons involved).

The healing process of violent conflicts

If, however, blood has been shed during a conflict, blood must also flow during the reconciliation process. In the past this was achieved through the execution of the perpetrator before the reconciliation process between the two social groups or nations was initiated. Today though, most societies use an animal – a goat, a cow - which in the mystic world of the respective society is said to represent Man. The blood flows into the earth - sometimes a whole is especially dug for this process – in the presence of both parties often wash their hands in this blood or the blood poured into the air. So the blood of expiation is touched by both conflicting parties, but also by the ancestors and by Nature as the blood flows into the earth or is poured into the air.

The path of reconciliation, beyond the repentance of the perpetrator’s party and the acceptance of this repentance by the victims, demands symbolic gestures. This can be the exchange of presents but also can lead to the intermarriage between members of both groups, States or Nations. The marriage between two persons means as we all know an agreement between two families, groups or even States which promise each other mutual protection, assistance and blood relationship. Even though this formerly strict relationship has broken up a little in modern Africa, the rituals at marriage ceremonies still recall the participants that marriage is

an alliance that beyond the two marrying individuals unites and mutually commits/obliges two groups.

The adventure of international actors and their mechanisms of conflict prevention and conflict resolution in African societies

The International Community, represented by the Lending Countries, in their co-operation structures put the accent on values like individualism, rationality and rationalisation, universalism of their specific models, pent-up demand of other societies compared to them, globalisation of capitalist interests, structure and values of a given, preconceived path which is believed to be the only possible and universal one. In this path however spirituality is conceived as something exclusively personal and private. The individual and the society as such are discouraged to incorporate it International mechanisms of conflict prevention and conflict settlement therefore concentrate on the imposition of individual rights, on the rights of the democratic majority decision, irrespective of the structure of the society, on the separation of the three classical western spheres of power, lately on the participation of civil society groups in State/Government decisions, etc. Even though all these mechanisms are also important and praiseworthy, is it possible to avoid the question of their relevance and productivity in certain African societies? These mechanisms conceal or negate the absolute necessity of the spiritual dimension in order to find the equilibrium in a society and to allow this entire society to attain a higher stage of evolution, which is beyond the present stage of euro-american societies. The International Donor Community, which through Colonialism, later through Europeanization and today through Globalisation tried to sell rationalism, materialism, scientific progress, individualism, personal achievement and enrichment and the improvement of the material conditions of life as the highest stage of human evolution which it is still willing to impose globally, fails due to the ever growing realization, that humankind is moving towards a higher stage of evolution. The secrets of this higher stage of evolution are already visible in the everyday life in African societies.

The challenges to conflict prevention and resolution in Africa today are to understand the spiritual dimension as the basis of life and of the whole universe and to consider this spiritual dimension in all problem-solving approaches.

The powerlessness of the Europeanized African Elite facing this spiritual background

The Africans who have the power to determine the future of African countries today, not only have been educated and trained in European schools, they also have adopted and internalised many European values. On the other hand many of them, during their education, haven't been able to become acquainted with the deeper meaning of African values. In their education the individual was praised, rationality was said to be the only instrument of comprehension of the world, of man and of nature, and everything spiritual was reduced to religion. Even though many people within this African elite feel a certain connection to the deeper African spiritual world because they were from their earliest childhood confronted with it outside the schools and churches etc. , they nonetheless have difficulties combining the spiritual dimension of everyday life with the evolution of the universe.

The members of this elite feel and know that to live and survive, they need the contribution of the spiritual world, which has nothing to do with church and which in Africa is always and everywhere present. But they often feel alienated by this spiritual world, because through their European education they have lost the necessary access. Therefore they are in many cases not able to understand the spiritual dimension in its depth as the basis of the life of ordinary people and for the functioning of their African society. In order to get access to this spiritual

world and to seek protection from the vital forces, they often try to take control of, to use and misuse/abuse the existing African structures, which are often termed “traditional”. Thus traditional leaders and Kings, who are not willing to play the game are denied access to the throne, are dismissed or are forced into exile exactly like in the colonial time some African leaders were perceived to be a danger against the interests of the metropolis. Even today such intransigent traditional leaders are replaced by willing servants at the top of the still working traditional structures. In many traditional structures, it is the duty of these traditional leaders and of the council of the elders to assure the free flow of the vital forces in the society and in the State, they are not allowed to abuse their privileged knowledge of the laws for the unjust benefits of an individual to the detriment of the society and of the common good. This is the reason why in many traditional African societies the King, who despite all warnings by the elders and sages abused his power in such a way, had to be deposed of or killed. The initiation of the individual to the spiritual dimension of the universe in order to ensure his/her independent and free blossoming and development, since the European predominance faces many big obstacles.

We can observe today how the Europeanised elite tries to utilize traditional structures for the conservation of its own power or for personal seizure of power in complicity with willing or dependent traditional leaders. If they don't succeed it is because the laws of the flow of vital forces is misunderstood and because they try to use it for individual, eurocentric and egoistic means. The African culture with its specific laws of the universe appears as the stronghold of resistance against the misunderstood evolution of mankind.

This elite, which has a conflicting and schizophrenic relation towards its own people, but this elite determines the political future of a country, manipulates groups in order to get to power or to hang on to power, stirs up crisis in complicity with foreign and African actors and uses the population as cannon fodder.

But the Europeanised power-elite in Africa at the same time is the contact group for international organisations and NGOs. This Europeanised and often completely dependent elite negotiate and execute what non-African actors have written about conflict prevention and conflict resolution in Africa. In most cases these measures or programs are not successful. It becomes more and more obvious, that the Europeanised elite, which for historical reasons has monopolised political and economical power in their respective country, in order to assume their leadership in accordance with the needs and hopes of the people, has to go back to school, to the African school. This path requires modesty and dignity, subordination/self-integration into the energy-flow of the universe as well as a better understanding of the responsibility and of the rules of creation. When this elite one day will have changed into a new, deeply rooted and truly African elite, only then the key to a higher dimension of being for the society as a whole will be handed out to her. Africans will finally make their contribution to conflict prevention and resolution and beyond this to a higher stage of the evolution of mankind.

© Kum' a Ndumbe III. / AfricAvenir
Translation by Eric Van Grasdorff and Jan Strotmann