

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

**MAY 2021**

# **AFROCENTRIC CONCEPTIONS OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION:**

## BEYOND UBUNTU MYTHOLOGY AND ROMANTIC TRADITIONALISM

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## Introduction

Mbembe notes that the term “Africa” generally points to a physical and geographic fact—a continent.<sup>1</sup> The geographic fact of Africa in turn signifies “not only a state of things but a collection of attributes and properties—and a racial condition.” It is a state defined over time by several related and at times conflicting “images, words, enunciations, and stigmas, all meant to establish physical, geographic and climatic conditions, the supposed attributes of local populations, their states of poverty, their desperation, and, above all, their commerce with a form of life whose length was never certain, as superstition, death, and ugliness always lay close by.” Mbembe, therefore, argues that “Africa” is the word through which the modern age seeks to designate two things, namely “a certain litigious figure of the human as an emptiness of being, walled within absolute precariousness,” and “the general question of the inextricability of humans, animals, and nature, of life and death, of the presence of one in the other, of death that lives in life and gives it the rigidity of a corpse.”<sup>2</sup>

Africa in Mbembe’s characterization is the “mask as well as the hollow sun, reminding us of the persistence of death in life through the play of doubling and repetition.”<sup>3</sup> Mbembe concludes that in modern consciousness “Africa” is the name generally given to societies that are judged impotent—that is, incapable of producing the universal.<sup>4</sup> This understanding of Africa, and in particular its relationship with the colonial moment, slavery and neocolonial experience, tends to dominate understandings of African-ness. At the centre of this understanding is the issue of African “humanity,”<sup>5</sup> masculinity and the psyche of “black” persons. The hollowness imposed on the meaning of African-ness is at the same time transposed onto a hollow existence of black men and women. Their humanity is deemed derivative and dependent on the other.

Arguably, peacebuilding or conflict transformation, no matter how we define it and whatever form it takes, does not operate in a vacuum. It exists and it is expressed in a social and historical context. History, politics, culture and economy all to a greater or lesser extent define and are defined by the varieties of conflict experiences found in any society or group(s) of societies. The “act of peacebuilding,” whatever the motivation, is an expression of political and economic relations. It follows, therefore, that the acts and forms of peacebuilding are socially constructed and socially changed, determined by how specific historical factors have shaped social positions, questions of identity, access to opportunities and resources, as well as material and cultural goods, power and privilege between groups and individuals.

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These factors are, in turn, shaped by the types and content of values and norms of humaneness, co-existence, social capital, reciprocity and solidarity as well as how such values and norms are structured, defined, challenged and transformed in any given society. Peacebuilding, therefore, is an overtly political act laden with sociocultural assumptions, preferences and values. It is also an act impelled by the geoeconomic and geopolitical considerations of both the protagonists and some “invisible hands” with a stake in the ongoing conflict.

In essence, the process of defining African peacebuilding and its socioeconomic value is both revolutionary and futuristic in pointing to a possible trajectory for the development of the sector beyond its bureaucratic organizational forms. The historiography of

1 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

2 Ibid., 49.

3 Ibid., 49.

4 Ibid., 49–52.

5 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965); Frantz Fanon, *The Fact of Blackness* (New York: Grove Press, 1952).

the range of practices employed at a micro and macro level must be viewed and interpreted with this understanding in mind.

In this paper, I explore the relationship between the African philosophy of Ubuntu and the practice of peacebuilding in historical and contemporary Africa. In particular, I seek to establish Ubuntu's actual and potential value-added to shaping the theory and praxis of peacebuilding in Africa. I make neither pretentious nor romantic assumptions about the universal acceptance and application of the Ubuntu philosophy in precolonial, colonial and postcolonial African governance. In this, I am encouraged by the fact that every global idea was once a "local idea" that forged global consensus through consent and repeated application. I reference Ubuntu as an example amongst many other Afrocentric philosophies<sup>6</sup> and not necessarily as an absolute.

## **Background: African Peace vs. Afrocentric Peace**

Africa's liberation from colonial rule, economic structural transformation and social change have historically been informed by African conceptions of humanity, solidarity, faith and collective citizenship. This tradition of mutuality and reciprocity is derived from the philosophy of Ubuntu and similar humanistic philosophies found across Africa. In each historical epoch, Ubuntu has required transformative leadership, institutions and policies and conscious citizens to implement the ideals, ideas and visions of this common humanity.

### ***Common Cultures and Common Humanity?***

Historically, conflict transformation processes in Africa have tended to be inclusive and context sensitive, informed by an understanding of local complexities, aspirations and values. In multi-ethnic communities, conflict transformation has emerged as an organic practice in some instances and a borrowed and localized set of approaches in others. In some contexts, peacebuilding has not been sustainable owing to

disproportionate dependence on external interlocutors and skills, capacities, finances and ideas.

In Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Burundi, Northern Uganda, South Sudan, Liberia and Mozambique, western-style peacebuilding has often been fused with local traditional/customary orientations, initiatives and belief systems. Modern peacebuilding in Africa, therefore, is a heterogeneous mix of traditional, Judeo-Christian and western approaches and discourses. Notwithstanding this diversity of practice, peacebuilding models and regulatory frameworks, including in relation to conflict resolution, remain largely a patchwork of ill-coordinated laws and policies that hardly cope with the large expanse of the modern field.

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There is a rhetorical commitment to ensuring that all conflict transformation and peacebuilding investments in Africa are contextually relevant and developmentally oriented. Equally so, there is a rhetorical commitment to ensuring that the beneficiaries of peacebuilding, Africa's poorest and most vulnerable, exercise direct agency in their own social transformation and development. The gap between intention and practical implementation remains huge. There is a palpable disconnect between peacebuilding efforts and centres of excellence on African knowledge and practice. A whole industry populated by scholars of African descent has emerged since the early 1970s that specializes in trading nomenclature and supposedly "Africanist" views on conflict analysis and resolution. Stripped of their pretences, they are reducible to the dominant western scholarship's preoccupation with greed, grievance, identity and social meaning. Their narratives and writings on conflict and peacebuilding in Africa suffer from excessive westernisation or ahistorical African romanticism.

6 See Gerald Joseph Wanjohi, *The Wisdom and Philosophy of African Proverbs: The Gikuyu World-View*, rev. ed. (Nairobi: Nyaturima Publications, 2008).

### ***Foreign Peacebuilding Practice***

The literature on the evolution of peacebuilding since Elizabethan times in Britain suggests that the experience of western peacebuilding is that the focus is on institutional capacity, models and beneficiary profiling. In the United States and Europe, there is an intense search for individual accountability, institutional engagement and a funding formula, which is projected through US foreign policy onto aid-dependent developing countries emerging from conflict. The institutions have over the years developed along corporate and non-corporate lines. The focus of Euro-American peacebuilding practice is mainly to deliver goods and services to persons affected by conflict. It is therefore dependent on the fact of a single or series of large-scale, almost industrial-size conflict moments. This subjugation of peace and justice to tragedy undermines the structural nature of conflict and injustice, as well as solutions to the same.

### ***African Tragedies and Euro-American Markets and Philanthropy***

Peacebuilding is linked to western media corporations and pop culture, wherein the peacebuilder must be an inspiring visionary, high-end United Nations bureaucrat, retired dictator or western leader, enterprising industrialist or leader of an international nongovernmental organization (NGO)—the saviour-philanthropist. In this sense, western peacebuilding practice, stripped of all its pretensions, presents the peacebuilder as a messianic actor or missionary figure who possesses both power and generosity to save the war-ravished, conflict-prone, indigent or less fortunate from wanton violence, moral decadence, mutually destructive political impasses and wallowing poverty. The peacebuilder is such because s/he or it has resources (including knowledge and power) in excess that can be used to empower the poor to aspire to be like the supposedly more peaceful western nations. The primary form of western peacebuilding is at best publicly acclaimed empathy, compassion and acts of charity and at worst bullish behaviour where western armies and bureaucrats destroy countries in order to rebuild them using their aid, skills and corporations.

Contemporary Euro-American peacebuilding is less concerned with humanizing conflict survivors through

socioeconomic justice and creating an enabling political, economic, social and environmental context as well as structures that enable the individual to innovate, build micro assets and infrastructure and work their way out of poverty. It is fixated on achieving political and economic stability. The strong undertone of legal social engineering is a legacy of the industrial revolution. Within the context of Euro-American peacebuilding in Africa, much time is invested in trying to help communities of the impoverished to develop bottom-up structures, even parallel to the state, for their own empowerment and supposed security. The notion of differentiated but common, complementary or shared roles, relationships and responsibilities dominates Euro-American peacebuilding in Africa.

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A key aspect of Euro-American peacebuilding is the idea of helping individuals to develop specific skills as a means to enhance individual competence and self-reliance in order to escape victimhood. In emerging Indo-Chinese peacebuilding in Africa, there is a preponderant focus on creating function or processes, teamwork (doing together) and a peacebuilding culture based on collaborative hard work to end poverty and social tensions. Arab peacebuilding in Africa has aligned itself with specific faith values, entrepreneurship and building competencies for self-reliance. It follows then, that Afrocentric peacebuilding is, in essence, a motley of these precolonial, colonial and neocolonial identities voluntarily embraced or forcibly imposed by the other.

### ***A Bifurcated Peacebuilding Sector***

Peacebuilding in Africa is characterized by a dualism or bifurcation that is largely a result of the uneven geography of development within and between countries. This dualism is evident in various ways linked to the dominant economic activities within countries and between countries. For example, industrial vs. agrarian, rural vs. urban, high income vs. low income, and formal vs. informal peacebuilding.

Different types of peacebuilders within Southern Africa, for example, have historically evolved with inherently bifurcated social and economic contexts within countries. One critical element of this bifurcation is the rapid urbanization of conflict drivers under conditions of stagnating, reversing or low industrial growth on the one hand and a declining agrarian sector under conditions of deepening food insecurity and rural poverty on the other hand. The dualistic and bifurcated nature of the labour markets in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has over the years become a new source of conflict. But even more bifurcated are the regulatory frameworks for migration and peacebuilding that are inextricably linked to labour markets.

Divergent national interests on issues such as labour, employment, foreign direct investment (FDI), trade, management of illicit financial flows, and right of remittance of profits and earnings are bound to hinder the growth of a common market for peacebuilding in the Southern African region. Most countries within the region share a common legal history, but there are hardly any bilateral or multilateral arrangements aimed at harmonizing and regulating the peacebuilding sector, labour markets and migration processes. In fact, even where there has been xenophobic violence, this has tended to be treated as an ad hoc occurrence. SADC governmental responses to collective violence have tended to be both ad hoc and denialist.

Within individual countries in SADC, deepening poverty and inequality has accelerated the rapid rate of rural–urban migration, stagnated micro enterprise development in rural areas and fuelled rising unemployment, underemployment and homelessness. These factors have created an unrealistic expectation that weak states should play a much more catalytic role in inclusive growth and sustainable development.

Despite the shifting expectations that peacebuilders should be able to both raise their own operational resources as well as contribute to addressing structural causes of poverty and inequality, their regulation persists in the charity or NGO model. The rapid growth

of technology and increased use of mobile telephony and mobile money services have significantly changed the means and ways of doing peacebuilding. SADC has also witnessed the growth of “cause marketing,” social enterprises and venture peacebuilding driven by both domestic and foreign actors. This financialization of peacebuilding has happened without the regulatory frameworks necessarily keeping pace with new developments.

International or cross-border peacebuilding has grown together with the rapid increase in both economic and political international/cross-border migration. Within the Southern African region, the bulk of this migration has been to South Africa, further amplifying the grossly uneven economic development within the region. This uneven development has produced loci of industrialization and capital accumulation that sharply contrast with large reserves of an impoverished labour force. Migration, therefore, is one of the most important aspects of SADC’s political economy and that of the political economy of peacebuilding within the region. SADC member states continue to experience various forms and levels of intrastate and interstate migration.<sup>7</sup>

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The economies of Southern Africa are primarily driven by mining, agriculture, manufacturing and tourism. In most countries, these economic sectors are still largely white-controlled or in the hands of foreign multinational corporations. These sectors in countries like South Africa attract large groups of migrant workers from the rest of Southern Africa. The lack of a deliberate policy linkage between labour migration and peacebuilding policies has stunted the ability of the latter to foster social cohesion between recipient countries and migrants. In seeking to understand the socioeconomic and political value-added of

7 Khabele Matlosa, ed., *Migration and Development in Southern Africa* (Harare: Sapes Trust, 2001).

peacebuilding in SADC, it is useful to appreciate that SADC is a region of migrants of different forms who go back and forth across the region as they try to satisfy their livelihood needs and aspirations. These migrants determine the nature of local peacebuilding in both recipient and sending countries. They remit funds back home and form *stokvels* and other structures to take care of their needs in recipient countries.

Peacebuilding in Southern Africa is, therefore, inextricably intertwined with the intrastate and interstate migration patterns and struggles of SADC residents for daily and long-term survival. Existing and historical economic imbalances and inequities drive interstate cross-border migration, cross-border trade and financial flows across borders. Time and space do not allow for an exhaustive discussion of the regional peacebuilding needs, but it is impossible to build peace in one SADC country without relating it to this critical question of migration and settlement histories and continuities.

These realities have resulted in highly dualistic and bifurcated labour markets in most of Southern Africa, as well as equally bifurcated forms of citizenship and a sense of belonging which is at times binational and yet mono-ethnic or bi-ethnic. Tragically, institutional regimes for peacebuilding are not developmental, transformational or up-to-date with the practice and challenges on the ground.

### ***The Predominance of State Security Logic***

It is important to understand how the webs of laws that regulate the doing of peacebuilding within Southern Africa generally tend to be restrictive. In instances where they could potentially play a catalytic role in the development of local peacebuilding, their implementation tends to be haphazard and not well coordinated.

Most African countries have not effectively addressed the new dimensions, challenges and opportunities of modern peacebuilding. For instance, none of the countries deal meaningfully with corporate violators or

accomplices, commercial activities and interests of peacebuilders, let alone social engineering that is treated purely as a social venture or short-term interventions. There are no standard African practices in any of our countries that specifically address the complex field of “comprehensive state reforms” and/or “security sector reforms” in a manner related to how security happens within rural, peri-urban and informal sector settings.

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On the one hand, we deal with slums as intruder communities or security problems and, on the other hand, we seek an approach that is all-inclusive. Thus, the “comprehensive state reforms” agenda remains largely self-regulated or covered by a patchwork of different laws or, at worst, donor driven. The issue of public support and general incentives for local peacebuilders remains underdeveloped in most African countries. More particularly, there are no significant incentives for horizontal peacebuilding. Peacebuilding generally, and local peacebuilders in particular, bail out the state in many faces of universal social protection and service provisioning. These local peacebuilding initiatives are derived from the concept of Ubuntu and its historical deployment in African governance and solidarity relationships.

### ***Ubuntu and African Governance***

Commenting on the social system of the Zulu, Krige observes the following:

The whole Kraal is responsible for the misdeeds and debts of any one of the inmates, and a principal is always responsible for the acts of his agents or dependents. The result is that every man in the tribe is a policeman and is bound to report to his supervisor any act or wrong which

he may see being done, otherwise he incurs responsibility in regard to the act.<sup>8</sup>

What was true for social mores holds for addressing need, calamity, common threats, conflict and peacebuilding. Traditional African communities—save for a few exceptions—did not have written criminal codes, adversarial courts of law and police to enforce the laws. Safeguarding shared values of a common humanity was the collective obligation of all within the community.

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The approach to peacebuilding in the majority of African “nations” and subclans was premised on this mutual obligation, as well as different conceptions of mutual accountability. As Schneider,<sup>9</sup> Mamdani<sup>10</sup> and Mbembe rightly note, conceptions of manhood,<sup>11</sup> Africanhood and African culture and customs have been significantly disrupted, interrupted, distorted and reformulated by colonialism and westernization generally across Africa. Consequently, much has changed over the last 150 years in terms of African

culture and practices of peacebuilding. The interactions with Euro-American and Asiatic cultures has infused into African praxis certain borrowed practices, organizational forms and methods of doing peacebuilding. In fact, the African practitioner over the years, as observed by Baxi in a different context,<sup>12</sup> has tended to suffer from some form of acquisitive mimesis. Mogapi suggests that this psychotic mimesis or mirror effect may be the result of multiple levels of chosen historical trauma and trauma arising out of change.<sup>13</sup>

It is therefore no longer possible to talk unproblematically of a virtuous set of African values and ways of doing life that have not been disrupted, interrupted, affected or infected by Africa's interactions with other civilizations, including from Europe, Asia, America and indeed the different parts of the African continent. As Africans, we are children of the past, the present and the future. We have the remnants of our indigenous values, vestiges of a diverse range of values we borrowed from other civilizations, and values that may not have been ours but that we have over a long time domesticated sufficiently to call ours. It is, therefore, fair to surmise that:

- Most local, national and regional peacebuilding initiatives have engaged in a “process of adaptation of Western thought and techniques, the establishment of bureaucratic organizational principles as ordering systems for peace knowledge production, distribution and exchange.”<sup>14</sup>

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- 8 E.J. Krige, cited in Mike Boon, *The African Way: The Power of Interactive Leadership* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2007), 123–124.
- 9 Harold K. Schneider, *The Africans: An Ethnological Account* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1981). See also Harold K. Schneider, “Livestock in African Culture and Society: A Historical Perspective,” African Pamphlet Collection, <http://www.indiana.edu/~afrcol/items/show/16060> (accessed 27 October 2017).
- 10 Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Mahmood Mamdani, *From Citizen to Refugee: Uganda Asians Come to Britain* (Dakar: Pambazuka Press, 2011); Mahmood Mamdani, *Beyond Rights Talk and Culture Talk: Comparative Essays on the Politics of Rights and Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- 11 Daniel P. Black, *Dismantling Black Manhood: An Historical and Literary Analysis of the Legacy of Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- 12 Upendra Baxi, “Acquisitive Mimesis in the Theories of Reflexive Globalization and the Politics of Human Rights” (presentation at Chicago Humanities Institute, 9–10 May 1996).
- 13 Nomfundo Mogapi, “Trauma Informed Transitional Justice” (presentation at Second Continental Transitional Justice Forum, 16–18 October 2019).
- 14 Kwesi Kwaa Prah, “Culture, the Missing Link in Development Planning in Africa,” *Présence Africaine* 1–2 (2001): 90–102.

- The institutionalization and consolidation of conflict resolution and mediation methods and principles have, unwittingly, resulted in the conflation of peacebuilding principles with the pre-existing catalogue of democratic governance principles.
- The financialization and incentivization of peace are informed by an almost mechanistic and toxic tyranny and/or sanction of law actuated by overbearing concerns for respect for human rights.<sup>15</sup>

A confluence of factors has produced and reproduced a praxis within peacebuilding efforts in Africa that has been posthumously called the “African approach.” In reality, though, apart from its geographic coincidence, there is nothing necessarily or uniquely “African” about the processes and outcomes of such programmes.

It follows then that beyond its historically occasioned conceptual contortions, the practice of conflict analysis, mitigation and transformation in Africa has also had to adapt to new information communication technologies (ICTs) and modern financial instruments—the operational imperatives. The challenge for most researchers and practitioners in the peacebuilding space is how to ensure that the practice becomes more innovative, equitable and transformational in order to be both relevant and sustainable.

**Whereas historical peacebuilding was centred on the collective agency of the entire community, postcolonial peacebuilding has tended to be “peace from above”**

The challenge for African states and policy makers is much more intractable and complex. Most African states adopt an approach to regulating and institutionalizing peace premised on the exclusion of violence, containing hate speech, reducing loss of life and damage to property, restraining profit activities,

limiting money laundering, incentivizing welfarist projects, ensuring state security and achieving supervision and surveillance of the non-profit sector. This approach to regulation of peace and peacebuilding efforts has been constructed out a constrained state–society relationship characterized by suspicion and at times resentment. In most instances, the pervading approach had been focused on protecting “state sovereignty” and thus failed to reflect the state’s responsibilities to promote and protect the liberty of citizens. It has also not prioritized the right of non-state peacebuilders to self-develop complementary to state-centric development approaches.

The ghosts of colonialism and apartheid loom large in contemporary African peacebuilding discourse and praxis. Whereas historical peacebuilding was centred on the collective agency of the entire community, postcolonial peacebuilding has tended to be “peace from above.” In this model of “peace enacted from above” by state elites, the community and by parity of reasoning the citizen becomes a beneficiary and not a critical actor and co-creator of peace. Such top-down peace tends to emphasize sanction, interventionism and rote legalism. It deems the organic efforts of citizens themselves and those of non-state actors “informal” activities. However, the credibility and legitimacy of a top-down peace approach must of necessity derive from the coercive capacity of the state and the allied political elite, as opposed to their capacity to build consent and consensus amongst all critical stakeholders.

### ***Towards a Conception of Afrocentric Peacebuilding***

As an aspiration, Afrocentric peacebuilding must seek to empower, build trust and enhance self-reliance.<sup>16</sup> In essence, it must proceed from the idea of a common humanity anchored on mutual responsibilities, accountability and solidarity. Afrocentric peacebuilding

15 Francis B. Nyamnjoh, “Relevant Education for African Development: Some Epistemological Considerations,” in *Philosophy and African Development: Theory and Practice*, edited by Lansana Keita (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2011).

16 Brian T. Kagoro, “Towards a Transformational and Developmental Peacebuilding: The Crisis of Nationhood and African-ness,” unpublished, on file with author.

views have emerged from an attempt by academics and practitioners to excavate memories of diverse African conflict transformation practices deeply damaged by the internalisation of westernization and historical denial of Africanity. There is a growing realisation amongst African scholars and practitioners that no peacebuilding initiative or investment will bear fruit as long as African peacebuilders and the communities they interact with are expected to deny their traditions and cultures of doing and transforming conflict.

A diverse range of African scholars have attempted (and still are) to devise theories to counter colonialist discourse about African peacebuilding and governance. This effort is in part intended to achieve a decolonization of the discourse on peacebuilding in Africa. To the extent that it is a response to a critique, such theorization risks becoming a catalogue of characteristics that are neither ontologically nor epistemologically credible. What is deemed African peacebuilding becomes merely a statement of disputation of what the Euro-American “other” has labelled as constitutive.

### A diverse range of African scholars have attempted (and still are) to devise theories to counter colonialist discourse about African peacebuilding and governance

In mainstream literature, African scholarship and indeed Africa are first viewed as a derivation of western scholarship and second as struggling to gain philosophical credibility within the dominant epistemic corridors. Even where concessions are made regarding the value-added of specific African traditions and practices, these are quickly assigned a sectarian pigeon hole (i.e., clan, ethnic, national, etc.). As such, they are denied a universal “African-ness” that would vest them with the force of principle. The theorists hardly engage in a multidisciplinary understanding of how migration, intermarriage, trade and even conflict itself have shaped the emergence of forms of “universal” or integrated “African-ness.” A

case in point is the emergence of Kiswahili as a language.

In this milieu of contested universalism and eclectic micro-African peacebuilding value systems, the most contentious debate is that pertaining to the existence of either a precolonial or contemporary African peacebuilding theory or praxis, distinct from the most commonly profiled western typologies. This question is central to the future of peacebuilding in Africa, as the denial of African peacebuilding philosophy (i.e., humaneness or reciprocal empathy and solidarity) is how various shades of colonialism corroborated the underdeveloped or savage construction of the African persona and modes of co-existence.

There is a way of defining African conflict transformation/peacebuilding that does not reduce it to the claim that it was purely a feudal coping mechanism confined within familial or narrow clan ties. As scholars and practitioners, we must ask whether there is a way of defining African peacebuilding that vests in it verifiable, unique characteristics that may be appreciated and applied with a measure of universality across Africa. Would such peacebuilding call for a different set of tools, skill sets, leadership, institutions and policy frameworks from the existing western ones? Does it have to be different in all aspects from the western approach in order to be acceptable as authentic?

To try and define African peacebuilding based on the need to redeem an uncontaminated African past that is uninterrupted by colonialism, Islam<sup>17</sup> and Christianity helps to answer the question relating to its utility in contemporary society, bounded by very practical existential challenges. The entitlement of an African past to a historical peacebuilding philosophy requires that the discourse of a brutal, backward, tribalistic or non-peaceful Africa be radically challenged, as well as the discontinuity created by this disparaging colonialist discourse within peacebuilding scholarship.

17 See Samir Amin, “Modernity and Religious Interpretations,” in *Philosophy and African Development: Theory and Practice*, edited by Lansana Keita (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2011).

## Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion: Conceptual Fuzziness or Versatility?

The complexities involved in developing African peacebuilding as a discipline and practice are best captured in the major schools of thought on the subject. As a first step, it is useful to appreciate the range of theoretical abstractions on African peacebuilding. Theories about and of peacebuilding in Africa can be clustered into the following overlapping clusters:

- **Ethnocentrism.** This approach explains the institutional underdevelopment of African peacebuilding as a construct of western cultural imposition. Its proponents argue for an African “otherness” and dispute western normativeness and definitions of peacebuilding. They see peacebuilding as a racialized discourse laden with cultural baggage.
- **Universalism.** This approach sees the relative underdevelopment of African peacebuilding forms and institutions as purely a lag in the evolution of social structures and governance processes. Its proponents do not accept the “otherness” of African peacebuilding; they see “otherness” instead as an endorsement of the colonial denial of an African humanism, pacifism, empathy, compassion and peacebuilding culture.
- **Afro-Peacebuilding Exceptionalism.** This approach seeks a middle ground by presenting more acceptable notions of African peacebuilding and practice. Its proponents deconstruct African peacebuilding using African precolonial governance and social organization structures. They reject the traditionalist conception of African peacebuilding without accepting the notion that there were no unique peacebuilding practices in Africa before and during colonialism, and that these evolved with each historical epoch and were informed by the dominant mores of each.
- **Trait Theory.** This approach may fall under the first three categories but it is more concerned with answering the question: What type of peacebuilding is African peacebuilding (e.g., value-based, collective decision-making, interactive and reciprocal peacebuilding, participatory decision-making regarding needs and supply of solutions, empathetic and not class-confined, etc.)? Its proponents seek to define the traits and qualities drawn from African social organization and values such as Ubuntu. Traits though are external attributes or manifestations of how an organization, group of individuals or community does peacebuilding and mutual support. They are not constitutive. They may actually find “African-ness” in how African practitioners and communities interpret and apply western peacebuilding tools.
- **Behavioural Theories.**<sup>18</sup> As with trait theory, proponents of behavioural theories are concerned with the following questions: What does an African peacebuilding effort or peacebuilder particularly do? How do African peacebuilders engage communities and conflict agents and organize, mobilize and resource their work? Do they involve the communities they work in to determine what help is required and design the nature and type of help, or do they engage in a form of top-down peacebuilding in the expectation of local gratitude and cooperation? Do they encourage solidarity peacebuilding by communities, participation in decision-making at all stages and genuine ownership of the peacebuilding process and its outcomes? What are the power dynamics between the facilitator and the beneficiaries?
- **Contingency Theories.** These are focused on how the socioeconomic and political context influences African peacebuilding. They argue that there is no single typology of African peacebuilding.<sup>19</sup> In

18 See Stephen Oola, “A Conflict-Sensitive Justice: Adjudicating Traditional Justice in Transitional Contexts,” in *Where Law Meets Reality: Forging African Transitional Justice*, edited by Moses Chrispus Okello, Chris Dolan, Undine Whande, Nokukhanya Mncwabe, Levis Onegi and Stephen Oola (Dakar: Pambazuka Press, 2012).

19 See generally Tim Murithi, “Towards African Models of Transitional Justice,” in *Where Law Meets Reality: Forging African Transitional Justice*, edited by Moses Chrispus Okello, Chris Dolan, Undine Whande, Nokukhanya Mncwabe, Levis Onegi and Stephen Oola (Dakar: Pambazuka Press, 2012).

essence, what constitutes African peacebuilding depends on the specific, national and local context (people, social organization, belief systems, tasks, resources, leadership and economic exigencies). The more nuanced contingency theorists hold that socioeconomic and politico-legal factors shape but do not constitute the values and organization of African peacebuilding.

- **Denialist Theories.** These hold that African feudal agrarian and pastoral communities—like any other similar society—engaged in the same mode of production and similar relations of production, self-help schemes and collective peacebuilding.<sup>20</sup> They suggest that nothing about such schemes is necessarily or uniquely African, and that such values and approaches to social production and relations are characteristic of all pre-industrial societies. Another denialist school of thought holds that, if it existed at all, African peacebuilding was limited to familial or kinship networks and that it had absolutely no universal application at a national, let alone sub-regional and continental level.

Whichever theory one adopts, it is useful in assessing the impact of peacebuilding in Africa to discuss its contribution to social capital and social cohesion. But the theoretical lens defines the approach to regulation.

## Ubuntu and Peace Governance

Mbigi discusses at length the African philosophy of social organization and peacebuilding.<sup>21</sup> African peacebuilding practice starts with the idea of a collective responsibility to create harmony between the individual and his or her community and nature (including ancestral spirits and gods). Everything in this socioeconomic ecosystem is done to ensure that self-reliance is always interdependent and collective.<sup>22</sup>

African peacebuilding, therefore, focuses on total community upliftment, collective endeavour and collective upskilling and education. Its values are transmitted not via glossy reports and media self-profiling, but by the spoken word, symbols, dances, songs and rituals. Mass mobilization and mass meetings are used in African peacebuilding to galvanize the emotional and psychic energy of the collective. African peacebuilding is both a translator of values and traditions and an enabler of development and mutual empowerment. Its aim is to instigate, nurture and sustain forms of collective community initiative and organization that transcend immediate catastrophe, constraints and aspirations. In this regard, African peacebuilding practice historically differed from western types in four fundamental ways, namely:

- The focus on collective responsibility, enterprise and benefit, that is, the idea that “we are mutually fulfilling complements” and that any misdemeanour, moral infraction or crime committed by one of ours becomes our collective responsibility. In other words, the concept of individual liability was alien to most African cultures and, as such, the notion of individual punishment or individualized solutions was as rare as it was discouraged.
- The deliberate focus on building social cohesion, value coherence and equal and equitable participation. Broody captures it this way: “We are obverse and reverse sides of one entity. That is, my neighbour and I have the same origins, shared life experience and common destiny. I am a person through other persons. Wealth must be shared and your neighbour’s poverty is your poverty. Knowledge is the challenge of being human so as to discover the promise of being human.”<sup>23</sup>
- Precolonial—and for the greater part present rural—Africans generally saw their peacebuilding as

20 See David Kaulemu, “Culture, Customs, Tradition, and Transitional Justice,” in *Where Law Meets Reality: Forging African Transitional Justice*, edited by Moses Chrispus Okello, Chris Dolan, Undine Whande, Nokukhanya Mncwabe, Levis Onegi and Stephen Oola (Dakar: Pambazuka Press, 2012).

21 Lovemore Mbigi with Jenni Maree, *Ubuntu, the Spirit of African Transformation Management* (Johannesburg: Knowles, 2005).

22 Ibid., 101–102.

23 Johann Broodryk, *Ubuntu: African Life Coping Skills, Theory and Practice* (Johannesburg: Knowles, 2006), 70–78.

a responsibility to fashion, preserve and consolidate a common humanity. Empathy is an integral part of Ubuntu and, by parity of reasoning, peacebuilding. No one was left out of the effort to build peace. No one was ever too evil or guilty to learn through participation. The guilt of one was a shared responsibility of the collective. No one was too poor to give towards a peace outcome and the giver was not a donor. The act was extended to family, kinsfolk and strangers alike. The Shona proverb *Panorairhwa mwana waMambo muranda terera* captures the premium attached to the educational value of peacebuilding. A literal translation of this proverb is "When the prince is being counselled, the servants who are present should listen to and heed the same advice." The peacebuilding process was deliberately used to deter similarly minded persons, but also to educate the ignorant about the consequences and social cost of deviant behaviour.

- The peacebuilding effort had to have guarantees and guarantors within the community and family, which suggested collective responsibility, collective accountability and collective guarantees of rehabilitation, restoration, reconciliation and relationship building. The idea that individual guilt, shame and censure/sanction was insufficient to ensure non-recurrence informed the collective approach to peacebuilding. The idea was that true peace requires social guarantees and guarantors.

Granted, the above values may find resonance in other cultures. This fact does not preclude them from being "African." Several African proverbs capture the worldview that informed this approach to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, mutual co-existence and justice in several African indigenous languages.

There are seven thematic strands in the conception of African peacebuilding, namely:

- Equitable, inclusive, accountable, gracious and people-centred governance.
- Pacifism, or commitment to a life of rational dialogue and discourse that eschews undue and unnecessary confrontation/conflict.

- Inclusiveness, participation, voice and valuing the opinions and contribution of all in society, including the smallest (or seemingly insignificant).
- Creation of positive memories, by encouraging processes of reparations, rehabilitation, healing, forgiveness and reconciliation.
- Truthfulness, honesty and integrity.
- Solidarity, mutuality and reciprocity.
- An intergenerational orientations or future-consciousness.

## Accountability to the Living, the Dead and the Gods

Pre- and postcolonial African sages and peacebuilding practitioners were concerned about the eternal or nonvisible impact of present or visible behaviour. To them, accountability was to the living (present and future), the dead (ancestors) and God or unseen spirits, howsoever conceived. They lived a life that was largely feudal and communitarian, largely egalitarian, but unmistakably patriarchal for the most part. Save for the few matrilineal societies in Central Africa, most African customs and culture privileged elderly males and tended to de-privilege, disarticulate and silence the voices of women, youth, children, foreigners and those from lower social castes in society.

## The historical conception of life and values was derived first from an epochal community to shared burdens, shared solutions, shared fears and shared values

The historical conception of life and values was derived first from an epochal community to shared burdens, shared solutions, shared fears and shared values. These values evolved and were legitimated by structures that we can, with hindsight, adjudge as insufficiently inclusive of everyone within society. The structures of power and decision-making, though participatory, were nevertheless hierarchical, elitist and patriarchal. These contradictions in the process of evolution of values, meaning and being "African" do not necessarily nullify

the validity of such values, nor do the contradictions define their essence as fundamentally flawed. We cannot even argue that the predominantly patriarchal nature of society necessarily makes all peacebuilding approaches, processes and outcomes drawn from such an African heritage incapable of modernization.

There remains a herculean intellectual task of determining how to give new meaning and relevant expression to the spirit of these values and the relevant intention of the communities that evolved them and those who seek to apply them in a contemporary fourth industrial age society. Western society, from which many values deemed universal or global evolved, was equally patriarchal, hierarchized and elitist. Through social struggle, certain of its historical values have been given new meanings, the historical contradictions notwithstanding.

**We cannot even argue that the predominantly patriarchal nature of society necessarily makes all peacebuilding approaches, processes and outcomes drawn from such an African heritage incapable of modernization**

Several interrelated phenomena defined the conception, tools, methods and approaches to peacebuilding amongst different African communities. These included different ways of doing traditional folklore, craft, medicine, divination, mediation, proverbs, idioms, songs, dances and community dialogues. I wish to reference a few proverbs, idioms, traditional folklore and songs in order to illustrate this point:

- *Inkosi yi Nkosi ngabantu*: One is only a leader if there are satisfied people that s/he leads.
- *Ubukhosi ngamazolo*: Kingship or leadership alternates, therefore exercise it with grace and as you would prefer that it is exercised over you when it is somebody else's turn.
- *Kwabo kagwala akula sililo*: There is mourning in the house of a coward. The idea was to promote a pacifist lifestyle that eschews unnecessary conflicts or confrontation.

- *Izandla ziyagezana*: Equivalent of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," but uses the metaphor of the one hand that needs the other in order to wash (or clean) itself.
- *Tsvimbo haivake musha*: You cannot build a home using a knobkerrie (traditional fighting weapon).
- *Pano yambirwa mwana wamambo, muranda terera*: When a prince is being advised, the servant nearby is also duly advised, meaning that you should treasure counsel/advice as a leader.
- *Chara Chemisi hachitswande inda*: A thumb cannot in isolation possess the strength or reach to scratch a back-itch caused by lice. African peacebuilding is not just about helping one another, it is about helping and being helped by others regardless of status. Its main premise is the equality of all human beings, without discounting individual positions and possessions. It privileges collective aspirations towards higher collective goals. Help is made possible by creating a culture that is perennially conducive to mutual support, solidarity and reciprocity.

Though in essence a kaleidoscope of different socio-economic and political meanings, we can derive from the foregoing proverbs, idioms, folklores and folk songs a sufficiently universal sense of being and a particular philosophy of life, of becoming and belonging to Africa. Africa conceived in this sense is several things in one, namely:

- A spiritual space.
- An intellectual space.
- A socio-cultural space.
- A physical or geographic space.

These spaces in turn define a dominant culture (and plethora of subcultures) embedded in specific values that constitute in each society the organizing principle of the collective to which all individuals are bound. These shared values define the contours of

peacebuilding, howsoever organized or implemented. The collective and individuals are accountable to these shared values, including the notion that no single member of the community should ever be left behind or is an island of exceptionalism. In essence, the most valuable possession of any African is their “humanity” (Ubuntu, Boto, Hunhu, Untu, etc.). This humanity is measured by the extent to which each individual treats the “other” with dignity, empathy, mutuality, reciprocity and love. The idea of not being “a person” is correlated to the idea of not behaving towards others with dignity, respect and humanity.

Arguably, in seeking to understand peacebuilding practice in Africa, one must necessarily go beyond those interventions that focus on individuals, grievance and identity and resource allocation. In contemporary African communities that are significantly polarized along class, gender, age and ethnic, religious and clan

lines, the phenomena that shape peacebuilding are complex. The historical idea of an outcome-based peacebuilding actuated by shared collective values is particularly difficult given that certain values in society are severely contested. Indeed, society within Africa is now divided along several ideological asymmetries. These define different conceptions of conflict, power, poverty and inequality, as well as the most appropriate or preferred solutions to the same.

Educating or ensiling individuals does not necessarily translate into community mobilization and empowerment around a common peacebuilding concept or outcome. The social organization at the grassroots level dominated by traditional authorities, religious orders, pervasive political party structures, civil society organizations (CSOs) and/or social media shapes, distorts and enables the doing of peacebuilding, both in its practice and ideation, in contemporary Africa.

## **ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF VIOLENCE AND RECONCILIATION**

The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr) is a non-governmental organisation which envisions societies that are peaceful, equal and free from violence. CSVr aims to understand and prevent violence, heal its effects and build sustainable peace at the community, national and regional levels. We do this through collaboration with and learning from the lived and diverse experiences of communities affected by violence and conflict to inform innovative interventions, generate knowledge, shape public discourse, influence policy, hold states accountable and promote gender equality, social cohesion and active citizenship.

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