African Approaches to Building Peace and Social Solidarity

Tim Murithi*

Abstract

The African continent continues to be faced with the challenge of establishing peace and development. Numerous peace initiatives have been launched on the continent. Vast amounts of resources have been utilised to craft peace agreements which have often collapsed under the weight of competing interests. It is necessary to examine whether there are other peacebuilding strategies that can be adopted to complement existing efforts to promote peace on the continent. This paper examines African indigenous approaches to building peace and promoting social solidarity. It will begin by looking at the reasons why it is necessary to build peace. The paper will then look at the role that indigenous approaches are playing in promoting peace. It will also examine

* Dr Murithi is Senior Researcher at the Centre for Conflict Resolution, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa. This article is based on a paper he presented at an International Conference on Strategies for Peace with Development in Africa: The Role of Education, Training and Research, hosted by the University for Peace and the African Union, and held at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 12-14 June 2006.

how these approaches emphasise the importance of promoting social solidarity. Finally, the issue of how to promote a Pan-African solidarity will be discussed.

To enable culture to begin to play a significant role in the reconstruction of Africa, it will be necessary to establish education and training programmes based on progressive African cultural values for officials, civil society actors and citizens – keeping in mind that not all traditions are empowering, particularly on issues with regard to gender equality. Progressive cultural principles which promote human dignity and the well-being of the individual and society can provide valuable insights into how Africa can be peacefully reconstructed by using its own indigenous value-systems which emphasise promoting social solidarity. Promoting social solidarity in practice means confronting corruption and trying to ensure democratic governance, power sharing, and the equitable distribution of resources among all members of society. The paper will conclude by examining the strategies that can be adopted for increasing the use of indigenous approaches to building peace and social solidarity in Africa.

The Need for Building Peace: Understanding the Sources of Conflict in Africa

At the core of the crisis within Africa's war-affected countries and regions is the desire to acquire power and secure resources for one group of elites or one ethno-national group at the expense of others. In Côte d'Ivoire for example, the country has become virtually split in half with government and armed resistance movements on opposite sides. The issue of identity has mixed with culture, heritage and the control of economic resources to create a cauldron of political tension and violence. In the Darfur region of the Sudan, ethnic militia are now beginning to fight against each other, after having fought since early 2003 against Janjaweed militia, which is alleged to have ties to the government. In Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army continues to abduct children and transform them into soldiers. This activity has undermined the social fabric of societies in the region of Northern Uganda. In Somalia, clan-based militia are now confronting each other. Somalia has effectively become a proxy battlefield for the so-called 'war on terror'.

The effects of conflicts in terms of refugee flows into neighbouring countries and the emergence of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have demonstrated that no African country is an island unto itself. Refugee camps in the Mano River Union region of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone have served as a source of instability for countries in the region. It is estimated that there are close to three million refugees in central Africa alone. The camps in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that resulted from the Rwandan genocide of 1994 remain a source of concern for all the key actors involved in the Great Lakes region. Two hundred thousand refugees have spilled into Chad as a result of the violent conflict in Sudan's Darfur region, creating tension along the border.

In all of these cases, violence has led to the breakdown of societies. Human lives have been lost. Infrastructure has been destroyed, education and health services have suffered, and the environment has been damaged. The ties that link people together have been broken, social solidarity has collapsed and political tension has been generated. In addition, socio-economic development has also been severely retarded as a result of the carnage and destruction caused by conflicts.

If we are looking for reasons why these conflicts have plagued the African continent, we do not need to look any further than the leadership of these countries. Competing self-interested political and military elites have made use of the divisions and legacies of colonialism and the illegitimate nature of the post-colonial African state to exacerbate tension and fuel conflict. Historically, slavery and colonialism destroyed the base upon which Africans could define themselves. Colonialism destroyed or profoundly corrupted the cultural sense of self in Africa. It fostered a sense of separation from one's culture. It promoted the doctrine that the European culture and way of life were superior to the African. The effect of this was to begin the process of dismantling the cultural norms and values which informed African society and thus it begun imploding the social solidarity which existed in most regions prior to colonialism.

The process of modernisation led to the emergence of nation states heavily centralised in the capital city. The populations in the rural areas became marginalised and excluded from benefiting from the wealth and resources of the countries that they live in. Over-centralised post-colonial nation states have not put in place social security systems. The African post-colonial nation states have

not had a good record of promoting social harmony and establishing networks to provide services that people need to survive. When people are deprived of access to resources and education, poverty is widespread. Poverty increases tension within society, generates mistrust, and fosters crime, which further weakens the social fabric of society.

All of the wars which have plagued and continue to affect the African continent are using up resources which could rather be utilised to build schools, clinics and infrastructure for development. It is therefore clear that the link between peace and development cannot be denied.

It is not all bad news from Africa, however. There is enough reason for hope. We have witnessed relative peace, development and economic growth in Mozambique after the peace agreement was signed in 1992. In Angola there is relative peace, but its citizens are becoming impatient with waiting for peace dividends to begin to transform their lives. Recently, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed between the Government of Sudan and the interim government of the South Sudan. After this conflict, which has lasted more than twenty years, there is now an opportunity for ensuring that peace is built, based on a commitment to unity, power and wealth sharing. Sierra Leone is on the road to recovery after ten years of brutal conflict. Liberia has elected Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson as the first woman President in Africa, after a conflict that devastated the country. The arch-perpetrator of violence in the Mano River Union, former president of Liberia, Charles Taylor, is being tried for war crimes in The Hague, Netherlands.

Peacebuilding in Context

In 1992 the United Nations published *An Agenda for Peace*, which argued for proactive peacemaking and humanitarian intervention (Boutros-Ghali 1992). It outlined suggestions for responding effectively to threats to international peace and security in the post-Cold War era. In particular, four major areas of activity were identified, namely: preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peace-keeping and post-conflict peacebuilding.

Preventive diplomacy is 'action to prevent disputes from arising between

parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflict and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur' (Boutros-Ghali 1992: par 20). Peacemaking is 'action to bring hostile parties to agreement, essentially through such peaceful means as those foreseen in Chapter VI of the Charter of the United Nations.' Peacekeeping is the deployment of a United Nations presence with the consent of the parties concerned, and with restraint on the use of force except in self-defence. Peacebuilding refers to efforts in the medium to long-term process of rebuilding war-affected communities. This includes the process of rebuilding the political, security, social and economic dimensions of a society emerging from a conflict. It also includes addressing the root causes of the conflict and promoting social and economic justice as well as putting in place political structures of governance and the rule of law which will consolidate peacebuilding, reconciliation and development.

It is evident therefore that there are numerous challenges to promoting peace in Africa. What do we mean when we refer to building peace? We need to consider that, broadly defined, there are two ways to understand the nature of peace. For most analysts there is a distinction between a condition of negative peace and a condition of positive peace (Lund 2001). Negative peace is the condition that most people refer to when they are discussing issues to do with peace and conflict: it is the condition in which peace is based on the absence of violence. We need to work more towards the notion of positive peace: which means a peace that promotes reconciliation and coexistence on the basis of human rights, social, economic and political justice. In this context, therefore, when we talk about peacebuilding we are referring to the process whereby the goal is to strengthen the capacity of societies to promote a positive peace. Within most of the peacebuilding and development actors and agencies there is increasingly a focus on the importance of promoting positive peace.

The Value of Social Solidarity

An integral part of the process of achieving positive peace is the need to promote social solidarity. In an important sense, peace is not just the absence of violence, but the presence of social solidarity. Achieving social solidarity means

that members of the society once again begin to recognise each other as fellow human beings and begin to share a concern in the common welfare and well-being of each other. Social solidarity makes sense because only by ensuring the security, safety and well-being of other people can we hope to secure our own security, safety and well-being. To emphasise the need to foster social solidarity is to recognise the inter-connectedness of each human being. Later on this paper will argue that only through the promotion of Pan-African social solidarity can African countries achieve development.

Indigenous Approaches to Building Peace and Social Solidarity

Colonialism did not only destroy the basis upon which Africans could define themselves, but where it could, it also co-opted the indigenous structures and mechanisms of governance and dispute resolution to serve the interests of the colonial administration. Indigenous traditions with regard to governing and resolving disputes in African societies were therefore corrupted by the centralising power of colonialism. Africa is not a monolithic continent, there is a multiplicity of ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups, so we cannot generalise the extent to which cultural traditions do or do not have progressive norms and principles which can inform our approaches to building peace and social solidarity.

We do have to be careful not to romanticise indigenous approaches to resolving disputes in particular. This is because as with the rest of humanity African indigenous structures were for the most part exclusionary on the basis of gender. The majority of indigenous women were not included in the primary structures of decision making. This is why we need to combine present notions of gender equality with progressive indigenous norms and principles to create something that is uniquely African. We have to create a framework that is a hybrid between indigenous African traditions and modern principles to ensure the human dignity and inclusion of all members of society – women, men, girls and boys.

The Role of Culture in Peacebuilding

Having said this, we cannot ignore the role that culture can play in enabling people to resolve their disputes and to strengthen the ties that bind them together. People derive their sense of meaning from their culture. What does it mean to be human? What is – or ought to be – the nature of human relations? These notions feed into the attitudes and values that we choose to embrace, which in turn determine how we interact with each other. Cultural attitudes and values, therefore, provide the foundation for the social norms by which people live (See Malan 1997, Abu-Nimer 2000 and Avruch 1998). Through internalising and sharing these cultural attitudes and values with their fellow community members, and by handing them down to future generations, societies can – and do – re-construct themselves on the basis of a particular cultural image.

In order to re-establish social solidarity in war-affected communities, a key step would be to find a way for members of these communities to 're-inform' themselves with a cultural logic that emphasises sharing and equitable resource distribution. This, in effect, means emphasising the importance of reviving progressive cultural attitudes and values that can foster a climate within which peace can flourish.

Illustrations of Indigenous Approaches to Building Peace

Interestingly enough we find that in Africa there are indigenous traditions for peacebuilding that can teach us a lot about healing and reconciliation, which create the basis for re-establishing social solidarity (Zartman 2000). The challenge today is for us to find ways of learning lessons from the local cultural approaches to peacebuilding. In the post-conflict era in Mozambique, traditional healing and reconciliation practices were used to enable combatants, particularly child soldiers, to be re-integrated into their communities. In Chad, Niger and Ghana, traditional institutions have been used in the past in order to address the low intensity conflicts that affected these countries.

For example, in Northern Somalia, also known as Somaliland, traditional leadership institutions and methods for resolving disputes were used to bring

together the clans and create a legislature and government. By drawing upon Somali tradition and combining these traditional structures with modern institutions of governance like the parliament, Somaliland, with its capital in Hergesia, has succeeded in maintaining a degree of relative peace and stability. The self-declared Republic of Somaliland is celebrating its fifteenth year since it declared independence from Somalia. In December 2005, President Dahir Rayale Kahin of Somaliland has made representations to the African Union (AU) for recognition and observer status, and this matter is currently being considered (International Crisis Group 2006). Some have argued that Somaliland might be the first genuine African nation state because it was created using indigenous cultural norms of governance. In this sense, it emerged from the efforts and desire of Somali clans to unify into a state. This is the exact opposite of virtually all of Africa's post-colonial states which were created and established by former European colonial powers, arbitrarily dividing ethnic groups and causing the problems and pathologies that exist today.

Also currently in Rwanda, the government is making use of the traditional justice and reconciliation system known as *gacaca* to enable it to try and judge some of those who are accused of having been among the perpetrators of the genocide in 1994. The interesting lesson to learn from this *gacaca* system is that it is largely organised on the basis of local community involvement. The local community is involved in encouraging the perpetrators to acknowledge what they have done and the victims are involved in determining what reparations need to be made so that the perpetrator can be re-integrated into the community. There have been criticisms of the way that *gacaca* tribunals have been implemented. This is bound to happen because the use of indigenous traditional approaches to administer justice in a modern nation state is uncharted ground. But the fact that the Rwandese government has resorted to using the *gacaca* approach is the most clear illustration that there is a role for African indigenous approaches in efforts to consolidate peace and restore social solidarity.

Ubuntu and Peacebuilding

Among the countries of East, Central and Southern Africa we find a cultural world-view known as *ubuntu*. In terms of its definition, *ubuntu* tries

to articulate what it means to be human. In the societies found in these regions of Africa a person who possesses *ubuntu* is a person who is considered to be generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. The idea behind this world-view of *ubuntu* is that 'a person is a person through other people'. We are human because we live through others, we belong, we participate and we share. A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others and does not feel threatened when others achieve because he or she recognises that they belong to a greater whole (Tutu 1999). The lesson for peacebuilding from this tradition is that by adopting and internalising the principles of *ubuntu*, we can contribute towards creating healthy relationships based on the recognition that within the web of humanity everyone is linked to everyone else. The principles of forgiveness and reconciliation, which this tradition advocates, provide us with strategies for peacebuilding. In his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu suggests that these principles helped to guide the thoughts and actions of some of the perpetrators and victims who came before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to confess and forgive (Mani 2002, Villa-Vicencio & Verwoerd 2000, Graybill 1998). There is indeed much that we should be learning from African indigenous approaches to peacebuilding. However, there are persistent challenges for mobilising resources for such an initiative.

While indigenous approaches and institutions provide us with many lessons which we can incorporate into ongoing peacebuilding processes, it is important for us to also recognise that some traditions have not always promoted gender equality. Therefore, what we need to do is to combine the best lessons that tradition has to offer with progressive modern norms and standards for the protection of human rights. In this way a combination of tradition and modernity can enable Africans to reconstruct their continent by drawing upon their cultural heritage (Wa Thiong'o 1993, Salih 2001).

As Chairman of the South African TRC, Tutu (1999) reflects that he drew upon both his Christian values and his cultural values. In particular, he highlights that he constantly referred to the notion of *ubuntu* when he was guiding and advising witnesses, victims and perpetrators during the Commission hearings.

Ubuntu is found in diverse forms in many societies throughout Africa. More specifically among the Bantu languages of East, Central and Southern

Africa, the concept of *ubuntu* is a cultural world-view that tries to capture the essence of what it means to be human. In Southern Africa we find its clearest articulation among the Nguni group of languages. In terms of its definition, Tutu (1999:34-35) observes that:

> *Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When you want to give high praise to someone we say, '*Yu, u nobuntu*'; 'Hey, he or she has *ubuntu*'. This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. They share what they have. It also means my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life. We say, 'a person is a person through other people'. It is not 'I think therefore I am'. It says rather: 'I am human because I belong'. I participate, I share. A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good; for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes with knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.

As a 'human being through other human beings', it follows that what we do to others feeds through the interwoven fabric of social, economic and political relationships to eventually impact upon us as well. Even the supporters of apartheid were, in a sense, victims of the brutalising system from which they benefited economically and politically. It distorted their view of their relationship with other human beings, which then impacted upon their own sense of security and freedom from fear. As Tutu observes: 'in the process of dehumanising another, in inflicting untold harm and suffering, the perpetrator was inexorably being dehumanised as well'.

This notion of *ubuntu* sheds light on the importance of peacemaking through the principles of reciprocity, inclusivity and a sense of shared destiny between peoples. It provides a value system for giving and receiving forgiveness. It provides a rationale for sacrificing or letting go of the desire to take revenge for past wrongs. It provides an inspiration and suggests guidelines for societies and

their governments, on how to legislate and establish laws which will promote reconciliation and peacebuilding. In short, it can 'culturally re-inform' our practical efforts to build peace and heal our traumatised communities. It is to be noted that the principles found in *ubuntu* are not unique; as indicated earlier, they can be found in diverse forms in other cultures and traditions. Nevertheless, an ongoing reflection and re-appraisal of this notion of *ubuntu* can serve to re-emphasise the essential unity of humanity and gradually promote attitudes and values based on the sharing of resources and on cooperation and collaboration in the resolution of our common problems (Khoza 1994, Maphisa 1994).

How then were the principles of *ubuntu* traditionally articulated and translated into practical peacebuilding processes? *Ubuntu* societies maintained conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanisms which also served as institutions for maintaining law and order within society. These mechanisms pre-dated colonialism and continue to exist and function today. *Ubuntu* societies place a high value on communal life, and maintaining positive relations within the society is a collective task in which everyone is involved. A dispute between fellow members of a society is perceived not merely as a matter of curiosity with regard to the affairs of one's neighbour; but in a very real sense an emerging conflict is seen to belong to the whole community. According to the notion of *ubuntu,* each member of the community is linked to each of the disputants, be they victims or perpetrators. If everybody is willing to acknowledge this (that is, to accept the principles of *ubuntu*), then people may either feel a sense of having been wronged, or a sense of responsibility for the wrong that has been committed. Due to this linkage, a law-breaking individual thus transforms his or her group into a law-breaking group. In the same way a disputing individual transforms his or her group into a disputing group. It therefore follows that if an individual is wronged, he or she may depend on the group to remedy the wrong, because in a sense, the group has also been wronged. We can witness these dynamics of group identity and their impact on conflict situations across the world.

Ubuntu societies developed mechanisms for resolving disputes and promoting reconciliation and peacebuilding with a view to healing past wrongs and maintaining social cohesion and harmony. Consensus building was

embraced as a cultural pillar with respect to the regulation and management of relationships between members of the community. Depending on the nature of the disagreement or dispute, the conflict resolution process could take place at the level of the family, at the village level, between members of an ethnic group, or even between different ethnic nations situated in the same region.

In the context of the *ubuntu* societies found in Southern Africa, disputes would be resolved through an institution known as the *inkundla/lekgotla* which served as a group mediation and reconciliation forum (Nomonde 2000). This *inkundla/lekgotla* forum was communal in character in the sense that the entire society was involved at various levels in trying to find a solution to a problem which was viewed as threatening the social cohesion of the community. In principle, the proceedings would be led by a Council of Elders and the Chief or, if the disputes were larger, by the King himself. The process of ascertaining wrong-doing and finding a resolution included family members related to the victims and perpetrators, including women and the young. The mechanism therefore allowed members of the public to share their views and to generally make their opinions known. The larger community could thus be involved in the process of conflict resolution. In particular, members of the society had the right to put questions to the victims, perpetrators and witnesses as well as to put suggestions to the Council of Elders on possible ways forward. The Council of Elders, in its capacity as an intermediary, had an investigative function and it also played an advisory role to the Chief. By listening to the views of the members of the society, the Council of Elders could advise on solutions which would promote reconciliation between the aggrieved parties and thus maintain the overall objective of sustaining the unity and cohesion of the community.

The actual process involved five key stages:

- Firstly, after a fact-finding process where the views of victims, perpetrators and witnesses were heard, the perpetrators – if considered to have done wrong – would be encouraged, both by the Council and other community members in the *inkundla/lekgotla* forum, to *acknowledge responsibility or guilt.*
- Secondly, perpetrators would be encouraged to *demonstrate genuine remorse or to repent.*

- Thirdly, perpetrators would be encouraged to *ask for forgiveness* and victims in their turn would be encouraged to *show mercy*.
- Fourthly, where possible and at the suggestion of the Council of Elders, perpetrators would be required to *pay an appropriate compensation or reparation* for the wrong done. (This was often more symbolic than a re-payment in kind, with the primary function of reinforcing the remorse of the perpetrators). Amnesty could thus be granted, but not with impunity.
- The fifth stage would seek to consolidate the whole process by encouraging the parties to commit themselves to reconciliation. This process of reconciliation tended to include the victim and his or her family members and friends as well as the perpetrator and his or her family members and friends. Both groups would be encouraged to embrace coexistence and to work towards healing the relationship between them and thus contribute towards restoring harmony within the community, which was vital in ensuring the integrity and viability of the society. The act of reconciliation was vital in that it symbolised the willingness of the parties to move beyond the psychological bitterness that had prevailed in the minds of the parties during the conflict situation.

To be frank, this process was not always straightforward, and there would naturally be instances of resistance in following through the various stages of the peacemaking process. This was particularly so with respect to the perpetrators, who tended to prefer that past events were not re-lived and brought out into the open. In the same way, victims would not always find it easy to forgive. In some instances forgiveness could be withheld, in which case the process could be held up in an impasse, with consequences for the relations between members of the community. However, forgiveness, when granted, would generate such a degree of goodwill that the people involved, and the society as a whole, could then move forward even from the most difficult situations. The wisdom of this process lies in the recognition that it is not possible to build a healthy community at peace with itself unless past wrongs are acknowledged and brought out into the open so that the truth of what happened can be determined and social trust and solidarity renewed through a process of forgiveness and reconciliation. A community in which there is no trust is ultimately not viable and gradually

begins to tear itself apart. With reference to the notion of *I am because we are* and that of *a person being a person through other people*, the above process emphasises drawing upon these *ubuntu* values when faced with the difficult challenge of acknowledging responsibility and showing remorse, or of granting forgiveness.

As mentioned earlier, this indigenous peacemaking and peacebuilding process covered offences across the board – from family and marriage disputes, theft, and damage to property, to murder and wars. In the more difficult cases involving murder, *ubuntu* societies sought to avoid the death penalty because, based on the society's view of itself – as *people through other people* – the death penalty would only serve to cause injury to the society as a whole. Though it would be more difficult to move beyond such cases, the emphasis would still be on restoring the broken relationships caused by the death of a member of the community.

The guiding principle of *ubuntu* was based on the notion that parties need to be reconciled in order to re-build and maintain social trust and social cohesion, with a view to preventing a culture of vendetta or retribution from developing and escalating between individuals and families, or in the society as a whole. We continue to observe how individuals and sections of society in the Republic of South Africa, epitomised by Mandela and Tutu, have drawn upon some aspects of their cultural values and attitudes to enable the country to move beyond its violent past. The South African TRC, which has as many critics as it has supporters, also relied on the willingness of victims to recognise the humanity of the perpetrators, and there are documented cases of victims forgiving particular perpetrators. Tutu himself would always advise victims – if they felt themselves able to do so – to forgive. His guiding principle was that without forgiveness there could be no future for the new South African republic.

Ubuntu Lessons for Promoting Peacebuilding and Social Solidarity

Four key lessons are:

1. the importance of public participation in the peacemaking process, since social solidarity is strengthened if members of the society take part in building the peace;

2.   the utility of supporting victims and encouraging perpetrators as they go through the difficult process of making peace;

3.   the value of acknowledging guilt and remorse and the granting of forgiveness as a way to achieve reconciliation; and

4.   the importance of referring constantly to the essential unity and inter-dependence of humanity, as expressed through *ubuntu,* and living out the principles which this unity suggests, namely; empathy for others, the sharing of our common resources, and working with a spirit of coopera-tion in our efforts to resolve our common problems (Collin Marks 2000).

Restoring Social Solidarity in Northern Uganda

In Northern Uganda the government is in conflict with a resistance movement calling itself the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which continues to make incursions from the neighbouring country of Sudan. In Uganda, the rebel movement has been known to carry out abductions of innocent civilians including children. The Sudanese government is itself embroidered in a conflict situation with a rebellion movement in the south of the Sudan, being conducted by the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) which has bases in Uganda. Both of these conflicts form part of the same conflict system (Conciliation Resources 2002). In both of these conflicts, the social provisions which normally would have been provided for by the state are also lacking. The majority of the peoples from this region are from the Acholi ethnic group. Many Acholi have found themselves divided by their different loyalties: many support the rebellion due to grievances that they hold against regimes which have ruled over them; others remain neutral; and others support the govern-ment due to the rebel incursions and its practice of abducting children to join the ranks of its soldiers. Social cohesion is fragmented and the persistence of violence and abductions has thoroughly undermined the levels of social trust and solidarity (Govier 1998). From this complex matrix of factors brought about by violent conflict, there has been an urgent need to identify mechanisms and institutions for conflict resolution which can achieve the medium to long-term goal of re-building social trust, solidarity and reconciliation.

Reconciliation remains essentially contested in terms of what it is and how it can be brought about. There is much debate as to whether institutions can play a significant role in fostering reconciliation. Part of the problem lies in the fact that most of the institutions that exist in the realm of international and domestic politics were not designed with a view to fostering reconciliation or re-building social solidarity. Many of these institutions, such as international and sub-regional organisations and courts play more of a conflict regulation and conflict management role. Whether we can re-structure international and domestic political and legal institutions to promote reconciliation raises the much larger issue – which is beyond the scope of this essay – of how it is possible to promote closer ties and even an inter-penetration between law, politics and morality.

To help us shed more light on this challenge, some of the features of the reconciliation mechanism found among the Acholi may be informative (Pain 1997). The Acholi have maintained their conflict resolution and reconciliation mechanism called the *Mato Oput* which also served as an institution for maintaining law and order within the society. This mechanism pre-dated the colonial period and is still functioning in some areas. The Acholi place a high value on communal life. Maintaining positive relations within the society is a collective task in which everyone is involved. A dispute between fellow members of the community is perceived to belong to the community itself. Each member of the Acholi community is in varying degrees related to each of the disputants. On this basis therefore the Acholi society developed the *Mato Oput* process or mechanism for resolving disputes and promoting reconciliation which is based on the principle of consensus building. Consensus building is embraced by the Acholi as a cultural pillar of their efforts to regulate relationships between members of a community.

The Acholi leadership structures are based on models designed to build consensus. There are Councils of Elders or community leadership councils made up of both men and women. All members of the society have a say in matters affecting the community. With the passage of time, however, colonialism and the onset of post-colonial regimes have undermined the adherence to this value-system among most of the population. Today, there are on-going efforts to revive this way of thinking as a means to promoting more sustainable peace by using

consensus to determine wrong-doing as well as to suggest remedial action.

The peace process in the Acholi context, therefore, involves a high degree of public participation. As noted earlier, under the timeless Acholi world-view a conflict between two members of a community is regarded as a problem which afflicts the entire community. In order to restore harmony and re-build social solidarity, there must be a general satisfaction among the public, in particular the disputants, with both the procedure and the outcome of the dispute resolution effort. The *Mato Oput* process therefore allows members of the public to share their views and to generally make their opinions known. Through a public assembly known as the *Kacoke Madit* those supervising the reconciliation process, normally comprised of the Council of Elders (who have an advisory function with respect to the Chiefs), would listen to the views of the members of the society who have a right to put questions to the victims, perpetrators and witnesses as well as make suggestions to the Council (Kacoke Madit 2000).

Due to the emphasis placed on inclusion and participation in the peace process, it can at times be a lengthy affair. The victims, perpetrators or disputants have to undertake certain commitments. The process generally proceeds through the following five stages, which are essentially the same as the set of key stages listed above:

1. Perpetrators are encouraged to acknowledge responsibility or guilt for the wrongs done following the presentation of evidence by witnesses and the public and investigation by the Council of Elders.

2. Perpetrators are encouraged to repent and demonstrate genuine remorse.

3. Perpetrators are encouraged to ask for forgiveness from the victims and victims are encouraged to show mercy and grant forgiveness to the perpetrators.

4. If the previous stage is carried out satisfactorily, perpetrators, where possible and at the suggestion of the Council of Elders, pay a compensation to the victims (this in many instances is a symbolic gesture that seeks to reinforce the genuine remorse of the perpetrator).

5. The process concludes with an act of reconciliation between the representatives of the victims and the representatives of the perpetrators. This act of

reconciliation is conducted through the ceremony of *Mato Oput* which is the drinking of a bitter tasting herb derived from the *Oput* tree. The bitter *Oput* drink symbolises the psychological bitterness that prevailed in the minds of the parties during the conflict situation. The act of drinking it was an indication that an effort will be made to transcend this bitterness in order to restore harmony and re-build trust.

In Acholi society, the *Mato Oput* process covers offences across the board from minor injustices like theft, to more serious issues involving violence between members of a society, the taking of the life of a person, even accidentally, and conflict situations. The Acholis avoid resorting to retributive justice and, in particular, the death penalty, because of the way the society views itself and the value that it attaches to each of its members. Even though the sense and demand for vengeance may be great among some of the victims, the death penalty for murder would only serve to multiply the effects of suffering in other parts of the society and ultimately undermine any possibility of re-establishing harmonious coexistence at a future stage.

Depending on the level of the offence, the *Mato Oput* reconciliation act is followed by two other ceremonies. In all dispute situations the community leaders or Council of Elders of both genders – the male leaders are referred to *Rwodi Moo* and the female leaders are known as the *Rwodi Mon* – give a final verbal blessing to mark the end of the conflict. In the case of a murder, or warring situation, there is the 'bending of the spears' ceremony done by the two parties to symbolise the total end to the conflict and the disposal of the instruments of its execution.

It is evident then that the guiding principle and values are based on the notion that the parties must be reconciled in order to re-build social trust and maintain social cohesion and thus to prevent a culture of vendetta or feud from developing and escalating between individuals, families and other parts of the society. This is one reason why the *Mato Oput* act of reconciliation always includes the disputants, victims, perpetrators and their representatives. Public consensus also plays a significant role in the post-conflict situation, particularly when social pressure is utilised to monitor and encourage the various parties to implement peace agreements. Any breach of the act of

reconciliation by either side would represent a far worse offence than the original offence because it would set a precedent that could eventually lead to the fragmentation of communal life.

In sum, the Acholi method for resolving disputes provides us with some practical insights as to how we can refer to culture in our efforts to establish mechanisms for promoting reconciliation and re-building social trust, across Africa as well as in other parts of the world. Civil society groups, religious leaders, parliamentarians in the Acholi community of Northern Uganda together with Acholis in the diaspora have been advocating the revitalisation and integration of the *Mato Oput* into current peace initiatives. The process is being utilised in various local efforts within the region with significant results in terms of the termination of violent conflict and the healing of communities. Many believe that by drawing upon certain elements of the *Mato Oput* mechanism it can also contribute towards healing tensions between the LRA and the Government of Uganda. There are also efforts through a Government Amnesty Bill to bring aspects of the *Mato Oput* mechanism into the reconciliation and pardon initiatives to re-integrate perpetrators, some of whom are still children, into society. As with any political process, there are of course obstacles with regard to policy implementation which undermine the use of these mechanisms in current peace efforts. Continued leadership and vision on all sides will be required to see some of these initiatives through.

The recent inroads made by the Acholi system of reconciliation into government policy suggests that there is an opportunity based on this model for promoting the legal acceptance within national constitutions of alternative forms of restorative justice. The inter-penetration or cross-fertilisation between law and politics, and morality or social values is indeed possible, but beyond that it is also necessary and desirable in the interests of building sustainable peace and democratisation through reconciliation. One key inference that we can draw from the Acholi system of reconciliation and the cultural wisdom handed down to generations of these people, is that punitive action within the context of retributive justice may effectively decrease social trust and under-mine reconciliation in the medium to long-term and therefore such action is ineffective as a strategy for promoting social cohesion.

Strategies for Developing Education, Training and Research on Indigenous Approaches to Building Peace

To enable culture to begin to play a significant role in the reconstruction of Africa, it will be necessary to establish education and training programmes for officials and civil society actors, based on African cultural values, but keeping in mind that not all traditions are empowering – particularly on issues to do with gender equality. Progressive cultural principles which promote human dignity and the well-being of the individual and society can provide valuable insights into how Africa can be peacefully reconstructed by using its own indigenous value systems which emphasise promoting social solidarity. In practice, this means confronting corruption and promoting power sharing, inclusive governance and the equitable distribution of resources among all members of society.

The wisdom of Africa is in the process of dying out with the elders who were familiar with traditions (Murithi & Pain 1999). Future generations have to be given the opportunity to learn about these traditions. Several strategies are required to ensure that this indigenous wisdom does not disappear completely from the face of Africa.

- To conduct the necessary interviews and research to document these traditions.
- To prepare teaching and training material and develop curriculum on how indigenous approaches will be transmitted in educational programmes.
- To train, where necessary, qualified teachers and trainers who can facilitate learning on indigenous approaches.
- To establish partnerships between organisations (the AU, the University for Peace, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), educational institutions, professional teachers associations and non-governmental organisations which are working in this field of peace education to disseminate and share the training material and curricula.
- To disseminate and operationalise educational and training programmes on indigenous approaches to building peace.

Ideally, these strategies have to also target the young Africans across the continent, since it is they who will secure a more peaceful future for the continent. At present, there is an urgent need to disseminate this knowledge on indigenous approaches to building peace and social solidarity. Therefore, strategies need to reinforce work that has been done in the past as well as develop and introduce innovative ways of disseminating and transmitting this knowledge.

At the level of governments, efforts have to be made to include in the policy-making and policy implementation process the positive role that indigenous approaches can fill in resolving disputes and building peace. A media strategy that promotes the awareness and reflection on how indigenous traditions can inform efforts to build a more peaceful society is necessary. More Africans, including those in rural areas, are increasingly able to access newspapers and radios, so this should be considered as a means to buttress the dissemination of knowledge on indigenous approaches.

Towards a Pan-African Solidarity

The AU came into existence as a result of the efforts of the leaders of Africa. The idea was first expressed at the AU Summit in Sirte, Libya, in 1999. Following a transitional phase, the AU was established in July 2002, in Durban, South Africa. Today, the AU is up and running and active in trying to promote peace in various parts of Africa, notably in the Darfur region – through the peace talks in Abuja and the presence of AU peacekeeping troops on the ground. There is a fundamental problem, however, with the establishment of this Pan-African project of continental integration. For the time being, it is only being implemented at the level of the political and business elites in the society. There is a need to establish a foundation for Pan-African solidarity at the level of grassroots communities across Africa.

Concretely, during the AU Summit of July 2005, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union began exploring possibilities of facilitating travel between countries (Konare 2006). Our educational, training and research initiatives in peace and development would be greatly enhanced if Africans could travel across countries, without the tedious and absurd visa

processes that they have to go through. We cannot promote Pan-African solidarity if at a very basic level Africans are unable to travel, to meet, to strategise and to implement their ideas. We are citizens of Africa and the policies to institutionalise this have to catch up with this reality (Kornegay 2006:3-6).

The AU, its member states and societies need to work towards raising the awareness of the AU and its Pan-African objectives among all of Africa's peoples. African citizens need to be provided with the opportunity towards fostering greater social solidarity and greater Pan-African solidarity. Various structures such as the Pan-African Parliament might provide a forum through which the views of Africans can be expressed, but more needs to be done to interface directly with civil society and the grassroots communities who may not have access to the means of communication to establish a dialogue with the African Union.

Ensuring International Support for African Approaches to Peacebuilding

The AU needs to identify ways to begin to partner and work more effectively with the recently established United Nations (UN) Peacebuilding Commission (United Nations General Assembly 2005). The UN Peacebuilding Commission has the mandate to work with countries emerging from violent conflict. If it is appropriately utilised, it can enhance the continent's efforts to promote peace. The AU and its partners need to make the case for the inclusion of the use of indigenous approaches to building peace in the work of the UN Peacebuilding Commission. The UN Peacebuilding Commission might gain some useful insights from the work that is being done at the grassroots level and can also contribute towards strategies to disseminate the knowledge about indigenous approaches to building peace.

Conclusion

In an important sense, peace is not just the absence of violence but the presence of social solidarity. In Africa there are indigenous traditions for

peacebuilding which can teach us a lot about healing and reconciliation, and can create the basis for re-establishing social solidarity. While indigenous approaches and institutions provide us with many lessons we can incorporate into ongoing peacebuilding processes, it is important for us to also recognise that some traditions have not always promoted gender equality. Therefore, what is required is to find a way to combine the best lessons that tradition has to offer with progressive modern norms and standards for the protection of human rights. Progressive cultural principles which promote human dignity and the well-being of the individual and society can provide valuable insights into how Africa can be peacefully reconstructed by using its own indigenous value systems which emphasise promoting social solidarity. In practice, promoting social solidarity means confronting corruption and promoting power sharing, inclusive governance and the equitable distribution of resources among all members of society. To enable culture to begin to play a significant role in the reconstruction of Africa, it will be necessary to establish education and training programmes for government, officials, civil society actors and other citizens.

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