

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341150942>

I Indigenous Peacebuilding

Chapter · May 2020

CITATIONS
0

READS
652

1 author:



David Andrew
Uganda Christian University (UCU)

52 PUBLICATIONS 592 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Orbital [View project](#)



diplomacy and international relations; peace and conflict studies [View project](#)

Indigenous Peacebuilding



David Andrew Omona
Uganda Christian University, Mukono, Uganda

Keywords

Conflict · Indigenous · Peacebuilding

Introduction

Conflict, “the pursuit of incompatible goals by different groups” (Miall et al. 2005, p. 22), has been part of humanity from antiquity. Given its destructive nature, every human society has an imbued mechanism to address conflicts using principles and practices central to the support of reconciliation and amnesty.

Indigenous peacebuilding mechanisms are approaches of peacebuilding “inherent in a given society following years of tradition” (Murithi 2006, p. 17) so as to restore order and relationship during or after conflicts (Faure 2000, p. 163). As a mechanism “borne out of a community’s tradition” (Kibwanga 2009, p. 17), it effectively helps “to overcome the contradictions which lie at the root of the conflict” (Galtung 1996, p. 112). Given its cultural context, it is a bottom-up approach where issues of conflicts are addressed holistically at the grassroots with active involvement of local people (Brock-Utne 2001, p. 4; Omona 2015, p. ix). The decision in indigenous peacebuilding is consensus based (Boege 2006,

pp. 8–9) and arrived at in a “we group” (Boege 2006, p. 15).

Central to indigenous peacebuilding mechanism is taking seriously the context of the conflicts. Since conflicts take place between people who live adjacent to each other (Malan 1997, p. 19), understanding the context of a conflict reduces the hustles of peacebuilding within the family, clan, or ethnic groups and/or between neighboring ethnic groups. In other words, it is a communally grown approach directed toward building sustainable, durable, and peaceful coexistence within communities and among individuals. Its main objective is restorative justice where reconciliation and forgiveness are paramount for peaceful coexistence (Omona 2015, p. ix). Whereas the practices within this bracket vary from community to community, they are generally respected and are influenced by the values of the communities in question.

Whereas to many, talking about traditional mechanism is synonymous to the Global South, all pre-modern societies used it, and some of these mechanisms are used across the world to date.

Forms and Application of Indigenous Peacebuilding Mechanisms

The commonly used forms of indigenous peacebuilding mechanisms for addressing conflicts within communities include fights, elders and the community members, women, and

traditional rituals of reconciliation. The practical applications of these are explained briefly below.

(a) *Peacebuilding through the use of fights.* The natural response to any conflict is “fight or flight.” According to Jannie Malan (1997, p. 10), fights are a predominated method of conflict resolution in ancient times. Though with possibilities of talks, fights were effectively administered. Although Malan’s description is more of a conjecture of the ancient past, his mental configuration of how people lived sheds light in our understanding of the probable mechanism that was used to address conflicts. He based his analysis on the premise that such conflicts could have been occurring between people who lived within the same environment. Whether Malan’s depiction of the past was a true reflection or not, the resort to fight by ancient communities does not mean they were savage who did not know how to amicably handle conflicts. It rather shone light on how the ancient people settled conflicts in a way that made people respect each other. It was designed in a way that the conflicting parties would tussle their differences by testing their strength.

Whereas De-Bono (1985) discouraged fights as an ideal means of settling conflicts claiming they are not a beneficial, sound, or gratifying approach, many communities have tasted its innumerable contribution. The traditional intent to address conflicts through fights served as a deterrence mechanism. Implying that, if each of the conflicting parties tested what their opponents are capable of doing to them, they would stop the fights and start to cooperate. Indeed, some of the inter-community fights have helped to calm conflict situation when conflicting parties have tested each other’s ability to cause harm.

(b) *Peacebuilding through the use of elders and community members.* While fights were the first reaction to conflicts in the traditional context, peaceful means of ending conflicts were also devised to avoid conflicts from breaking down human fabrics. Given that human relations is taken to be above all else

in the traditional context, in some instances when conflicts emerged – mediation, negotiation, arbitration, adjudication, and reconciliation were arrived at by elders and the community members assisted in peacebuilding. In the pre-modern Greek societies, as it is in most African societies, many disputes have been resolved by the local chiefs and simple courts of village elders. Unlike in African societies where such village courts settled every conflict, among the pre-modern Greek societies, homicide was taken as a private matter and could “be settled by the families involved, either through material compensation or exile of the offender”. In most cases, during the meetings where elders and community members sit to address issues of conflicts, the main intention was to soothe the feeling that were hurt and lead the conflicting parties to amicably address the contradictions that set them apart. During such meetings, the talks usually cover a range of relevant issues covering the thoughts and intentions of others. In the process, the community members concentrate on values, perceptions, visions, and aspirations of the people, and decisions are arrived at by consensus. Among other things, the elders come up with a compensation scheme to appease the affected party. The scheme served as a preventive measure to help people from participating in future conflicts. This process affords the opportunity for healing strained relationship, rectify wrongs, and serve justice to the community. Consequently, the offenders are restored into full fellowship and accommodated by the cooperate life of the community.

In most African societies, elders are respected because of the authority they command. Their authority is derived from the position they hold in society. They control resources, marital relations, and networks that go beyond the clan boundaries, ethnic identity, and generations. They are believed to hold and control supernatural powers reinforced by the belief in superstitions and witchcraft (Pkyala et al. 2004, p. vi). This

authority makes them effective in maintaining peaceful relationships and communal way of life. Hence, once a group of elders reach a compromise, it is required that the community pays attention to whatever decision they have reached. It is because of such respect for elders and community processes that the *Gaada* in Ethiopia, *Gacaca* in Rwanda, and *Mato Oput* in northern Uganda, to mention but a few, have registered tremendous results in spite of some challenge.

The reason why the elders and community members are privy to address conflicts is because they know that whatever affects an individual affects the community. As Professor John Samuel Mbiti argues:

The individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes this existence to the other people including those of the past generation and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual, for the individual can depend on the cooperate group. ...whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group. (Mbiti 2008, p. 106)

This is a clear indication that the turbulent state of an individual resonates to the whole community. To this end, the assertion of Mbiti that “I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am” (2008, p. 24), and as Gathogo says “people are people through other people,” (2007) gives a clear explanation that no one is an island. Getting the attention of the elders and community members to settle conflicts between people in their community is indicative of their concern for the community’s wellbeing. They know if the conflict between their kinsmen is not sorted, the affect will be felt by the whole community.

- (c) *Peacebuilding through the use of women.* Whereas history has blamed women for all the ills of the world, as seen in Greek mythology of the great woman “Pandora” who is said to have “opened the lid of a jar containing all plagues and diseases of the world and let them out”, women have been at the center of peace processes from antiquity. Their role in addressing conflict spans before, during, and

after conflicts. In other words, they can be initiators of preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, and peacebuilding (Isike and Uzodike 2011, p. 33). According to Christopher Isike and Ufo Okeke Uzodike (2011), “women’s peace agency in society can be located in their cultural and socio-political roles as well as their contribution to the overall wellbeing of the society.” These roles have been buttressed by “societal perception that stereotyped women as natural peacemakers, and being more pacific than men” (p. 33). To that extent, women were symbolized as paragon of morality, sacredness, goodness, and tenderness.

The peaceful character of women is rooted in their nature as mothers. Most women are tolerant, nonviolent, collaborative, and peaceful. Whereas scholars might think such characteristic of women is only true to Africa and somewhat Asia, reading world history helps one to locate the validity of the centrality of women in peacebuilding across cultures. For example, in a typical pre-modern Greek village, as elsewhere, “communities were closely knit through generation of intermarriage with other families within the village and in other villages of the same demos”. Through such marriage alliances, communities identified with each other in times of peace and war.

In many societies, women’s role as mothers bestows upon them great responsibilities. The Igbo, for example, says the “mother is supreme” (*Nyeka*). Such reference is very central to women’s role in addressing conflict. This confers upon women the title of sustainer and healer of human relationships. This assertion is candidly illustrated in Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* when he says:

...when a father beats his child, it takes sympathy in its mother’s hurt. A man belongs to his father when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. (Achebe, cf. Brook-Utne, p. 13)

The consoling power of mothers, as reflected above, usually makes people to cry in the names of their mothers whenever they

get hurt. This therefore makes women to have absolute say in whatever men do. In Karamoja women are consulted before a child is encouraged by elders to go and raid. When the mother says no and they force themselves to go, many who go will not come back. And in the circumstance that men decide to settle their differences through fights, they consulted with female elders. In case these female elders are opposed to such erratic decision, the men will abandon their plan even at the very last moment. In case the men insist, the women will block the path for the men with their hands raised in the air. Such spectacle will definitely be an embarrassment to the men, and they will abandon their intention to war (Brock-Utne 2001, p. 14).

Since mothers bare the brand of the disaster of war, Athenian and Spartan women decided to do something so as to stop the Peloponnesian war. This is depicted clearly in Aristophanes's comic *Lysistrata* where Athenian and Spartan women barricade themselves in the Acropolis and orchestrate a sex strike in order to force their husbands to vote for peace with Sparta (Aristophanes 2002). Women have discovered that sex strike is a powerful tool to cause order in men. The Liberian women used the same strategy in 2003 to secure the much needed peace during the second Liberian Civil war. In 2006, the Colombian women used the same approach which they referred to "Strike of Crossed Legs" in protest to rampant violence, thus making crime to drop by 26.5%. Women in the Philippines, Togo, and Kenya did the same (Garau 2017). Men in Kenya also reciprocated by calling a 30-day sex strike against their women for having declared sex strike. Whereas sex strikes have proved effective in bringing conflict to an end, in some instances when the parties calling for the strike are not of one mind, the impact of the strike will only be felt by a section of the community. For example, in the Kenyan sex strike case by married women, the prostitutes took advantage of it and called for Kenyan men to go to

them for service. Nevertheless, the peace that was sought for was achieved.

In a research funded by UNESCO conducted in Somalia, Tanzania, Cameroon, Central Africa, Namibia, and Burundi (Muñoz 2003), women's role in peacebuilding is applauded. In each of these countries, women are portrayed playing a key role in bringing about peace in their local communities. These roles include instilling the culture of peaceful living in the children through good upbringing and advising their husbands whenever there is apparent state of conflict (Ntahobari and Ndayiziga 2003, pp. 13–21). They also mediate within the family between husbands and wives, and the community (Ngongo-Mbede 2003, pp. 28–34), and act as peace envoys through marriages (Mathey et al. 2003, pp. 40–44).

Through marriage women also act as bridge builders. Their position as bridge builders helps them to participate actively in negotiation during conflicts. A good example of this was their participation in the peace process of Puntland (Mohammed 2003, pp. 97–106; Dirie 2000, pp. 1–7) and among pastoralist communities in Kenya (Masinde et al. 2004, pp. 3–8). Through such acts, women have been able to reconcile communities and also work toward keeping the peace. Furthermore, women, through spiritual healing, have participated actively in bringing peace during and after civil wars in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Angola (Becker 2003, pp. 51–61, cf. Lihamba 2003, pp. 119–124).

In many African traditional settings, whenever men sit to discuss during conflict settlements, women of character were called to witness the proceedings. This was done purposely to help these women neutralize men's tempers during the talks. In case women heard about such conflicts before they are brought to be addressed by the community, they will talk to their husbands during bed time. Hence whenever their husbands join to participate in settling conflicts, they would have had a wind of it from their wives, so they approach

the issue from an informed perspective (see “► [Bed Diplomacy](#)”). During the conflict that pitched the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda, Betty Bigombe led a mediation team. The result of this was reaching a cease fire, and after about 3 years, LRA lost the war in Northern Uganda.

In case where people decide to take to a fight during such session, women who are present could stand between them, and the fight would not take place. At family and community levels, women have invariably been used to solve simple conflicts among fellow women since it is believed that a woman is more likely to open up to another woman (Odedo 2005, p. 14). Also whenever a conflict is between brothers in a family, the intervention of an auntie is sought for.

In a study carried among the Zulu and Xhosa of South Africa on “women and peace,” Christopher Isike and Uzodike (2011, pp. 21–52) observe that women act as human shield. Indeed, over the years women have acted as human shields to men and boys. As mothers, their humane heart forces them to protect people who are tortured. These women could fall on the victims of torture, regardless of whether the person who is being beaten is known to them or not. In most cases when this happens, the aggressors stopped their aggression, and the conflict ceases.

- (d) *Peacebuilding through the use of traditional rituals.* Rituals have been part of conflict management at local levels from time immemorial. They form part of a community’s culture. Given that most communities in Africa have a communal view on crimes, it is understood that the offense committed by one person can resonate to the whole community. Since there is a thin line between the sacred and the ordinary, whenever conflicts occur, reconciliative rituals were performed to bridge the gap between the conflicting parties.

While writing about rituals of reconciliation, Coleman (2007, pp. 55–62) and Pajibo

(2008, pp. 18–22) describe the Palava, sharing of cola nuts, and sassywood or trial by ordeal used by local communities in Liberia. These are rigorous processes that involve appealing to the divinities and the ancestral spirits. The fact that most Africans consider the spiritual world as important aspects of the present, whenever people are subjected to such processes, they fear to repeat the offenses. Coleman (2007) and Pajibo (2008) argue that during the aftermath of the brutal conflict in Liberia, these rituals were effectively used to heal rifts of relations at community level.

Another good example where rituals are used in conflict management is described by Akeme among Nigerian communities. According to him the Yoruba concept of *omoluabi*, the Hausa concept of *mutum-kirki*, and the Igbo concept of *ezigbu-nwa* introduced the relevance of ontological capacity for peacebuilding by cultured individuals (Akeme, n. d, pp. 127–135). In the same way, in Angola and Namibia the ritual of *conceloh* has been applied by the local communities to sort issues among them. Then, in Northern Mozambique and Zimbabwe, the Magamba spirit is effectively used to bring conflicts to an end (Igreja and Dias-Lubranca 2006, pp. 68–70). Such endogenous mechanisms have proved viable in intra- and inter-community conflict management other than the enforced peace by the government – use of modern mechanisms.

Looking at the management of the circles of conflicts among pastoralists in Western Kenya between the Pokot, Turkana, and Marakwet, Pkyala et al. (2004) made a good analysis on how traditional rituals are effectively used to address conflicts and thereby restore peace among the local people. At the epitome of such rituals, the parties share a meal and drinks. Besides, the party in the wrong is required to pay some fine in the form of heads of cattle. When such rituals

are performed, whoever will break it does it at his or her own peril.

In a working paper for the Ugandan Coalition for the International Criminal Court (UCICC) on approaching national reconciliation in Uganda, Stephen Arthur Lamony (2008) highlighted several rituals of reconciliation among the different communities in Uganda. He looked at the rituals of reconciliation among the Acholi, Teso, Madi, Lango, Lugbara, Banyakigezi, Ankole, Jopadhola, Baganda, Bagisu, Basamia, and Banyole. In most of these communities, the rituals of reconciliation are usually performed when the parties concerned have felt the brunt of conflict. Given the elaborateness of the rituals performed, no one would love to be the first to break the pact because the consequences that come with such are so dire. It suffices to conclude from his analysis that these rituals have been effectively used to manage conflicts at local levels in these communities.

The Importance of Indigenous Peacebuilding

Yonas Berhe (2012) argues the Indigenous peacebuilding mechanism uses “a range of processes fashioned structured to meet the specific needs of parties in a conflict” and peace is easily restored even after conflict has taken place. The process nature talked about here includes elements such as (a) honest acknowledgment of harm/injury each party has inflicted on the other, (b) sincere regret and remorse for the injury done, (c) readiness to apologize for one’s role in inflicting the injury, (d) readiness of the conflicting parties to let go of the anger and bitterness caused by the conflict and injury, (e) commitment by the offender not to repeat the injury, (f) sincere efforts to redress past grievances that caused the conflict and compensate the damage caused to the extent possible, and (g) entering into a new mutually enriching relationship (Paffenhulz and Reychler, n.d., p. 340).

Conclusion

Notwithstanding some of its short falls like it does not terminate violence in the long term, may contradict universal standards of human rights, has a limited sphere of applicability, is geared toward the preservation of the “good old” order, and is open to abuse (Boege 2006, p. 15), by and large, indigenous peacebuilding mechanism is greatly valued for addressing communally based conflicts because it is an open process, inclusive, and cheap and the decisions taken are binding since it is done in the “we” context and sealed by performance of elaborate rituals that act as deterrent measure to avoid relapse into conflicts.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Bed Diplomacy](#)
- ▶ [Peacebuilding](#)
- ▶ [Women, Peace, and Security](#)

References

- Aristophanes. (2002). *Lysistrata and other plays* (trans: Sommerstein, A. H.). London: Penguin Classics.
- Becker, H. (2003). Women, politics and peace in Northern Namibia. In E. C. Munoz (Fwd.), *Women and peace in Africa: Case studies on traditional conflict resolution practices*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Boege, V. (2006). *Traditional approaches to conflict transformation – Potentials and limits*. Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. <http://www.berghof-handbook.net>
- Berhe, Y. (2012). An assessment of indigenous conflict resolution mechanism of Mezard in rural Alamata Wareda Tigray National Regional State, Ethiopia. MA Thesis: Mekelle University.
- Brock-Utne, B. (2001). Indigenous conflict resolution in Africa. A draft presented to the week-end seminar on indigenous solutions to conflicts held at the University of Oslo, Institute for Educational Research, 23–24 February 2001.
- Chinwe, N. M. A. (2007). *Role of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in African traditional societies: A selective review*. <http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/chinwenwoye.htm>
- Coleman, F. (2007). Existing informal/traditional justice mechanisms in Liberia. In T. V. Geinanth & T. Jaye (Eds.), *Post conflict peace building in Liberia: Much remains to be done*. Accra, KAIPTC/ZIF.

- De-Bono, E. (1985). *Conflicts: A better way to resolve them*. London: Penguin.
- Dirie, A. G. (2000). The struggles of Somali women for peace. In a report on the workshop on conflict transformation in Africa: African women's perspectives, Dakar, Gorée Institute, 23–26 May 2000, pp. 14, 51–55. <http://www.internationalalert.org/sites/default/files/library/workshop.pdf>. Accessed 21 Jan 2012.
- Faure, G. O. (2000). Traditional conflict management in Africa and China. In I. W. Zartman (Ed.), *Traditional cures for modern conflicts. African conflict "Medicine"*. Boulder, Lynne Rienner, pp 153–165.
- Galtung, J. (1996). *Peace by peaceful means: Peace and conflict, development and civilization*. Sage, London.
- Garau, A. (2017). "Sex Strike" may happen in Kenya to make men vote. <http://allthatsinteresting.com/kenya-sex-strike>. Accessed 13 Apr 2018.
- Igreja, V., & Dias-Lambranca, B. (2006). The social world of dreams and nightmares in a post-conflict setting. *Intervention* 4(2):145–147.
- Isike, C., & Uzodike, U. E. (2011). Towards an indigenous model of conflict resolution: Reinventing women's roles as traditional peace-builders in neo-colonial Africa. In J. Malan (Ed.), *African journal on conflict resolution* (Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 33–58). Durban: ACCORD.
- Kibwanga, A. R. M. (2009). *Rediscovering traditional peacebuilding practices in post-war Northern Uganda*. Master of Arts Program in peace, development, security and international conflict transformation dissertation, University of Innsbruck.
- Kumar, K. (2010). *Women and women's organizations in post-conflict societies: The role of International Assistance Center for Development Information and Evaluation*. Washington, DC: USAID.
- Lamony, S. A. (2008). *Alternative forms of traditional justice in Uganda*. Draft manuscript, Kampala: Uganda Coalition for the ICC.
- Lihamba, A. (2003). Women's peace-building and conflict resolution skills, Morogoro region, Tanzania. In E. C. Munoz (Ed.), *Women and peace building in Africa: Case studies on traditional conflict resolution practices*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Malan, J. (1997). *Conflict resolution wisdom from Africa*. Durban: ACCORD.
- Masinde, I., Adan, M., & Ruto, P. (2004). *Indigenous democracy: Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. In Pokot, Turukana, Samburu and Marakwet*. In B. Rabar & M. Karimi (Eds.), Nairobi: Intermediate Technology Development Group-Eastern Africa.
- Mathey, M. J., Dejan, T., Deballe, M., Sopio, R., Koulaninga, A., & Moga, J. (2003). The role played by women of the Central African Republic in the prevention and resolutions of conflicts. In E. C. Munoz (Ed.), *Women and peace building in Africa: Case studies on traditional conflict resolution practices* (pp. 35–46). Paris: UNESCO.
- Mbiti, J. S. (2008). *African religions and philosophy*. Harlow: Heinemann.
- Miall, H., Ramsbotham, O., & Woodhouse, T. (2005). *Contemporary conflict resolution: The prevention, management and transformation of deadly conflicts* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Mohammed, A. (2003). The role of Somali women in the search for peace. In E. C. Munoz (Fwd.), *Women and peace building in Africa: Case studies on traditional conflict resolution practices*. UNESCO, Paris.
- Muñoz, E. C. (Ed.). (2003). *Women and peace in Africa: Case studies on traditional conflict resolution practices*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Murithi, T. (2006). African approaches to building peace and social solidarity. In J. Mallan & R. Kamidza (Eds.), *African journal on conflict resolution* (Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 16–17). Durban: ACCORD.
- Ngongo-Mbede, V. (2003). The traditional mediation of conflicts by women in Cameroon. In E. C. Munoz (Fwd.), *Women and peace building in Africa: Case studies on traditional conflict resolution practices*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Ntahobari, J., & Ndayiziga, B. (2003). The role of Burundian women in peaceful settlement of conflicts. In E. C. Munoz (Ed.), *Women and peace building in Africa: Case studies on traditional conflict resolution practices*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Odedo, R. (2005). *Study of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution among Local Communities in Yumbe & Koboko Districts, West Nile Region*. Kampala: Tropical Business Research.
- Omona, A. D. (2015). *Management of postcolonial intra-state conflicts in Uganda: A case of Northern Uganda*. Ph.D. Thesis, Kenyatta University.
- Oywa, R. (2002). Women's contribution to peace building in northern Uganda. In O. Lucima (Ed.), *Protracted conflict, elusive peace initiatives to end the violence in northern Uganda* (pp. 60–61). London: ACCORD.
- Pajibo, E. (2008). Traditional justice mechanisms: The Liberian case. In L. Huyse & M. Salter (Eds.), *Traditional justice after a violent conflict: Learning from African experience*. Stockholm, IDEA.
- Pkyala, R., Adan, M., & Masinde, I. (2004). In B. Rabar & M. Karimi (Eds.), *Indigenous democracy: Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms; Pokot, Turukana, Samburu and Marakwet*. Nairobi: Intermediate Technology Development Group-Eastern Africa.
- Reychler, L., & Paffenholz, T. (2001). *Peacebuilding: A field guide*. New York: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Further Reading

- Francis, D. J. (Ed.). (2008). *Conflict and peace in Africa*. London/New York: Zed Books.
- Kumar, K. (2010). *Women and women's organizations in post-conflict societies: The role of International Assistance Center for Development Information and Evaluation*. Washington, DC: USAID.

- Lederach, J. P. (2004). *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*, Sixth Printing. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- Luc, H., & Mark, S. (Eds.) (2008). *Traditional justice after a violent conflict: Learning from African experience*. Stockholm: IDEA.
- Malan, J. (1997). *Conflict resolution wisdom from Africa*. Durban: ACCORD.
- Munoz, E. C. (Ed.) (2003). *Women and peace building in Africa: Case studies on traditional conflict resolution practices*. Paris: UNESCO.