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Chapter · February 2021

DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-74336-3_5-1

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Bed Diplomacy



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Keywords

Bed · Conflict · Diplomacy

Introduction

Bed diplomacy is an informal kind of diplomacy where peaceful relationship between two or more parties is hatched, enacted, cemented, maintained, and reenacted through marriage. This form of establishing, maintaining, and reenacting relationships between people of diverse traditions has been part of human interaction from antiquity. Whereas right from antiquity women were blamed for all ills of life, as seen in the writings of the Greek Hesiod in the myth of the great woman “Pandora” – who is believed to have “opened the lid of a jar containing all plagues and diseases of the world and let them out” (Pomeroy et al. 2004, p. 72), they also have invariably been the source of enacting, maintaining, and reenacting peaceful relationships between people who are or would have been enemies.

Besides, marriage is a mark of responsibility and a symbol of maturity, and it has been used over the years as a means of forging political, economic, and military alliances between people

who are not kinsmen (Talbot 1967, p. 193). Although some relationships established based on marriage have failed to achieve the intended goals, it has helped to maintain peaceful coexistence between people. The power of marriage to unite and maintain peace was well understood by ancient Empires, Kingdoms, and Chiefdoms. They have invariably used marriage to build, maintain, and reenact friendships.

This entry on bed diplomacy places the bed at the center of relationship in marriage because it is on the bed that marriage is consummated. This discourse is followed in the entry by a way of analyzing how the application of bed diplomacy during preconflict, active conflict, and post-conflict levels can be used to address conflicts.

Preconflict Bed Diplomacy

The preconflict bed diplomacy is the preemptive approach of dealing with conflicts. It aims at preventing conflicts from occurring once it is detected or its possibility is assumed. The use of bed diplomacy at this level helps to nab conflict in the bud before they surface. This has been done through marrying women from different territories and raising of children who are conscious of the values of peace. This approach of addressing conflicts was well known to Emperors, Kings, and Chiefs. According to McMahan, the acts of marrying many women by sovereigns

...was the rule rather than the expectation in royal courts throughout the world, including China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Siam, Lars, Java, Arabia, Persia, Mongol Central Asia, Mughal India, Ottoman Turkey, Nigeria, Mayan and Aztec regimes, ancient Ireland and Iceland, and ancient Biblical Kingdoms, among others. (McMahon 2013, p. 917)

The above reveals that multiple marriage is not only African, but it is a widespread practice. Peaceful relationships with prospective enemies were neutralized by sovereigns through marriage to women from across their neighboring communities, Empires, Kingdoms, or Chiefdoms as a way of safeguarding their hold to power. In some instances, it might not be the Emperor, King, or Chief, but their children who are made to marry from other royal families for the purpose. Whenever an Emperor, King, Chief, or their children marries from a community, the members of that community know they will benefit from the dividends that come as a result of the marriage. Whenever an enemy attempts to attack, they will all rally their support alongside the Emperor, King, or Chief who married from their community. King Solomon of Israel, a nonmilitary genius unlike his father King David, used marriage to pacify his relations with the neighboring kingdoms and chiefdoms. He married seven hundred wives of noble births and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11: 3; Betzig 2005, pp. 331–332). Although most Biblicists tend to look at King Solomon's marriage to many women in the context of how the women turned his heart away from the Lord, he was strategic in trying to pacify his kingdom with potential enemies. Besides these marriages helped to sustain poor women using state funds, convert gentile women to Judaism, and increase wisdom by having many Jewish families (Cohen 1981, pp. 24–37). By and large, marrying these women helped King Solomon to neutralize the would-be enemies of Israel by building a strong alliance and increasing trade and commercial activities (1 Kings 10, 28–29).

In the sixth century BC when Greek States were tired of fighting each other, they began to earnestly establish formal mechanism of avoiding war. The tyrants who were in charge of these states conducted foreign policy by creating pacts

of friendship or marriage alliance with other tyrants or with the top Aristocrats (Pomeroy et al. 2004, p. 89). Through such marriage arrangements, they were able to abate conflicts with their neighbors through soft power unlike the hard power that men wield. Whereas this form of diplomacy starts as a private affair (Bound et al. 2007, pp. 22–23), it eventually diffuses to become a public diplomacy by subsuming all those within a community in the relationship.

To safeguard relationship between royals, there is formal documentation meant to guide the continuation of the tradition. In 507 AD, for example, when King Clovis of the Franks was preparing to march against the Visigoths under the leadership of King Alaric II, King Theodoric the Great of Italy tried to use their relationship by marriage to mediate. At the center of this marriage relationship was Theodoric the Great. King Clovis' sister married Theodoric and King Alaric married Theodoric's daughter. In a letter to King Clovis, King Theodoric wrote

The holy laws of kinship by marriage [*affivitatibus iura divina*] ties purpose to take root among monarchs for this reason: that this tranquil spirit may bring the peace which peoples long for. For this is something sacred, which is not right to violate by any conflict. For what hostages will assure good faith, if it cannot be entrusted to the affection? Let rulers be allied by family [*sociantur proximitate*], so that separate nations may glory in a common policy, and tribal purposes join together, through special channels of concord. (Crisp 2003, p. 2; cf. Moorhead 1992, p. 186)

Whereas King Theodoric the Great tried to use, “bonds of kinship to control, administer, or influence the diplomatic and military relations among the rulers of Western Europe” – because “kinship both by blood and marriage is an important and meaningful connection that regulate ones' behavior” (Crisp 2003, pp. 2–3), it ended in disaster. King Clovis did not obey the pact, he went ahead and killed King Alaric II. Importantly the existing tradition of kinship bonds shown in the above letter indicates a very strong regard for marriage ties in creating alliances. Perhaps this arrangement did not work because the relationship between King Clovis and King Alaric II was through King Theodoric the Great of Italy but not directly

through marriage between the two kings. If that was the case, the two could have seen and resort to peaceful way of dealing with the crisis, other than resorting to war.

At times relationships could be established when local rulers and very influential persons intentionally contracted and exchanged their children in marriage to concretize their bond. Through such bonds, they will formally establish political, military, or economic link. This help to create alliances that boosts “the political prestige and the military strength of the chief contractors who often were lineage or community heads” (Uchendu 2006).

History has shown that over the years inter royal marriages has been the principle method of establishing and maintaining peace between territories. Such arrangements have assisted in pacifying Europe. This kind of bond is seen in the complex relationship between the premodern European royal families attests to this. For example, Ferdinand III (1201–1254) King of Leon and Castile was the son of Alfonso IX, King of Leon, and his mother was Berengaria, who was the elder daughter of Alfonso III, king of Castile: her mother was a daughter of Henry II of England, and her sister Blanche became the mother of St. Louis of France. The marriage between King John II of Castile and Queen Isabella of Portugal united the two kingdoms (Nykanen 2014, p. ii), and the marriage of their daughter Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon cemented the bond between their kingdoms and made the two monarchs to co-rule their Kingdoms (Nykanen 2014, p. 1), while leaving the inhabitants of each kingdom to maintain their languages.

Further still, the marriage between Princes Catherine of Aragon and Prince Arthur of Britain, and subsequently to King Henry VIII after the death of Prince Arthur (Karlie 2016), notwithstanding the squabbles that followed thereafter, helped King Ferdinand II of Aragon to get the much needed ally with Tudor Britain against France. The marriage of Queen Alexandrina Victoria of Britain to her first cousin Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-German in 1840 and their nine children’s marriages in other European royal families made Queen Victoria to be regarded as the

grandmother of Europe (Veldman and Williams 2018). Although most of these boys and girls are married off, not because they want to, but for the good of their parent’s rule. In all this, we see the power of the bed uniting entities, helping them to create alliances and work towards their joint progress for the good of the citizenry.

Of course, marriage does not only create peaceful relationship between people when royal families are the primary parties to it. At the local levels, the marriage between ordinary people works to unite different ethnicities. Whenever marriage from across borders occurs, even if the communities concerned had some differences, the bond between the couple will unite the communities. This clearly brings to the fore the application of the spirit of Ubuntu since people are people because of others. Through this the negative spirit of the “otherness” is replaced with the positive spirit of “togetherness” imbued in people. This is rekindled as a result of the marriage between their kin. Such a spirit is energized when the couple gets a child. This immediately transforms the woman into being a mother. At the center of this metamorphosis is the bed. As mothers, a women commands respect in the community. Motherhood puts women to be the first teachers of the children they give birth to. As principle parties, they take active role in children upbringing. In case “a woman raises her children well and make them know the value of peace, these children will grow to be peace lovers.” For a woman to raise children well, the bed has to be peaceful. If the relationship between the couple is not cordial, the children will take a negative picture of marriage. And if children grow in an environment where witnessing of violence is the order of the day, they will grow knowing that violence is the only way of relating with others, thus leading to a nonpeaceful society.

The above assertion, therefore, indicates that women’s pacification of communities through positive childcare, responsible mothering, and nurturing of children in ways that prepare and socialize them towards peaceful co-existence is a key aspect of their role (Nwoye 2013). In most precolonial societies, the culture of peace, tolerance, and an antiwar tradition are embedded in

and transmitted through folktales, proverbs, poetry, songs, and dance. Traditionally, women are often seen as the transmitters of these cultural values to their progeny and to future generations through such artistic expressions (Isike and Uzodike 2011, p. 42). Mohamed Abdi Mohamed candidly brought this out by citing a Somali proverb that goes: “The values with which children are brought up precede their actual birth” (Mohamed 2003), because these values “are transmitted by mothers even while the child is still in the womb.” As a result, Somalians believe that, “before becoming adults, we attend a basic school, and that school is mother” (Mohamed 2003, p. 102). Indeed, in different precolonial societies, women used songs, proverbs, and poetry to transmit positive social capital values upon which peace is predicated. These values include patience, tolerance, honesty, respect for elders, communality and mutuality, compassion, regard for due discretion, gentleness, modesty, self-control, moderation, flexibility, and open-mindedness (Nwoye 2013). This can only be possible when the bed is in order. If the bed is hot, it will be difficult to express the value of patience, tolerance, honesty, respect for others, and so forth.

Bed diplomacy also played a pivotal role in securing a smooth and flourishing fur trade in Hudson Bay and Montreal regions of Canada between settlers and Aboriginal Indians. This relationship is well captured by Jay Nelson (n.d.) in a paper entitled “‘*A strange revolution in the manners of the country*’: *Aboriginal-settler intermarriage in the 19th century British Columbia.*” When the London based Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) sent its employees, their initial stand was for these male employees not to intermarry with the aboriginal Indians. Their fear was that intermarriage with non-whites would be like diluting the white race. However, given the lack of white ladies, the men resorted to marrying the local women. The strong stance of the far off executives in London could not be observed because the managers at the plant in Hudson Bay were equally victims of the intermarriage. However, unlike the HBC that discouraged their staff from intermarrying with the Aboriginals, the Montreal based Northwestern Company’s liberality to

allowing their employees to intermarry with the aboriginals worked to their advantage. “Recognizing the values of such union in securing trade ties and acculturation traders with Aboriginal languages and customs” (Nelson n.d., p. 26) assisted them to entrench their business at all levels of the Aboriginal community.

The cordial relationship was not only as a result of a few administrative staff of the NWC, but it was rather entrenched as a result of giving all levels of employees the freedom to intermarry with the local women. This made the NWC to be linked to Aboriginal communities along all levels of the trade hierarchy. The NWC’s graciousness of accepting the responsibility for maintaining the wives of their employees and families further worked to their advantage. As Nelson asserts

Thus, from the ‘mutual beneficial economic symbiosis of the early Pacific coast fur trade, a unique and relatively egalitarian institution of marriage, largely mirroring Aboriginal marriage rites and customs, emerged as the primary economic and social foundation of Aboriginal-settler interaction. The insulated social and economic world of the fur trade, which encouraged and required both Aboriginal and female autonomy, provided an environment in which individual traders were able to transcend racist sensitivity prevailing in their home countries. (Nelson n.d., p. 23)

Indeed, the resort of the settler employees to intermarry with the Aboriginal women helped to secure the necessary peace that was required for mutual interaction and also for the business to boom given that this intermarriage gave them freedom. Using the bed to help hatch and maintain this relationship did help the fur business to progress uninterrupted because both parties knew, apart from the fur business, they had become relatives by blood. The parents of the women who were married to the settlers did also not stand against the fur business because they knew if they did, the survival of their daughters were at stake. More so, the local community also stands to benefit from their sell of fur to the settlers. Hence, the mutual give and take relationship that ensued was as a result of marriage worked to bind these people together for the good of both communities.

Active Conflict Bed Diplomacy

In his antiwar comedy entitled “Lysistrata,” the fifth-century Greek comic playwright Aristophanes cogently describes how Lysistrata, the main character, organized women to barricade themselves in the acropolis and go on a sex strike to persuade their husbands to stop the Peloponnesian war, a war that pitched Athens against Sparta and her allies. Because the pain of erection became unbearable for the men, they agreed to stop the war and sign a peace agreement (Aristophanes 2002; Raghuram 2016). The author seemed to have understood what women are capable of doing to control men’s ego. This could also be true to women from men’s side. Severally some men made their wives to come to order by suspending sexual intercourse with them until to a point when they come to their senses and stop being cantankerous.

There are several modern examples of antiwar/conflict campaign led by women following Lysistrata’s footsteps. For example, in 2003 women in Liberia declared sex strike as part of peace movement to end the second Liberian Civil War (Garau 2017). Many women supported the course and participated in the strike. Most prominent among these women was Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who eventually became President of Liberia. This strike created the required publicity for peace to be realized after heinous years of war in Liberia. In 2006, the women in Colombia organized the “Strike of Crossed Legs” in protest against violence that had made live very difficult for ordinary Colombians (Agbedchin 2014, p. 12; Garau 2017). As a result of this, crime dropped by 26.6% in Colombia (Garau 2017). That aside, the women in Barbacoas- Colombia also declared sex strike from June to August 2011 demanding the road connecting their town to the rest of the country to be paved (Agbedchin 2014, p. 12; Garlow 2011). This strike became unbearable because even the wife of the Mayor of the town decided to leave her matrimonial bed and moved to another room. Even when the authorities agreed to start work on the road, the women did not relent until the actual work started then they went back to their bedroom. This eventually afforded men

the opportunity to resume normal conjugal rights with their wives (Garlow 2011). Similar sex strikes were followed in the Philippines, Togo, and Ukraine (Garau 2017). In the Ukrainian case, women declared sex strike particularly against Russian men in protest to Russia’s attempt to annex Crimea (Engineer 2014; Raghuram 2016). Then in 2009, Kenyan women called for a week long sex strike to protest against the political stalemate between the President Kibaki and the Opposition leader Raila Odinga. These women groups reasoned that “As the politicians argued over policies and procedures, the women and children were the ones being disproportionately affected by corruption and poverty” (Global Nonviolent Action Database. 2009). To this end, the G10 women group directly laid out their demands:

- That the two principals respect the people and nation of Kenya by ending forthwith the little power games that undermine the dignity, safety, and democratic spaces of our country
- That the president and prime minister give respect, full intent, interpretation, and observation to the spirit and letter of the National Accord and reconciliation
- That the two principals show commitment, good faith, and leadership in the implementation of the accord by making the interests of the nation paramount
- A responsive, sensitive, and people-driven leadership and coalition government that is decisive, clear about the country’s priorities, willing to sacrifice individual ambition for the greater good of the nation and which represents a force that inspires confidence among the country’s people
- That the reform agenda be fast tracked and given priority over all else
- That Vice-President Kalonzo Musyoka step aside and refuse to allow himself to be used to defeat the good intentions of the National Accord. (Global Nonviolent Action Database 2009)

Unfortunately, in the Kenyan case when a section of women called for sex strike, another section – the prostitutes – saw this in economic terms and announced they were ready to serve men sexually (Agbedchin 2014, p. 13). In a situation where there is disharmony within a group that is calling strike action, achieving the intended result through a strike of such nature is not easy. In a way of retaliation, men also called for a 30 days' sex strike to protest the pain women caused to them during the seven days sex strike. However, whichever side won, what is clear is that anything to do with the bed can cause a change in action. Indeed after a few days, the principal parties to the crisis were able to sign for peace and normalcy returned to Kenya (Global Nonviolent Action Database. 2009).

The power of women to cause change of direction could further be seen in their action of causing President Lansana Conte of Guinea to accept a meeting with President Taylor. Isike and Uzodike (2011), quoting from Fleshman (2003), observe that when women realized “their strategy of focusing on human insecurity implications of conflict which worked with President Taylor was not working with President Conte, they changed tactics”. Through a representatives, these women emphatically told President Conte:

You and President Taylor have to meet as men and iron out your differences, and we the women want to be present. We will lock you in this room until you come to your senses, and I will sit on the key. (Fleshman 2003, p. 18)

The courage of the women's representative sent a shock wave to President Conte. He could not believe how these women could be so bold to approach him. Isike and Uzodike (2011) report that after “a long silence,” president Conte started laughing and thereafter commented: “What man do you think would say that to me? Only a woman could do such a thing and get by with it.” Indeed it was such a bold and risky stand, though for the sake of peace. “Crediting the women for changing his mind to attend the peace summit, the president said” (Isike and Uzodike 2011): “Many people have tried to convince me to meet with President

Taylor, but only your commitment and your appeal have convinced” (Fleshman 2003, p. 18).

This is a clear indication that women can cause a change in men's attitude regardless of the dangers that comes with it. Indeed across the world women's organization, though limited in scope, has been mobilizing, lobbying, and campaigning against structural violence, unfair and oppressive laws, poverty, discrimination, and domestic violence. Such activities of women have far-reaching potential for peace (Lihamba 2003, p. 127). Through activities as these, women's strong stand against wars and violence of all sorts has yielded great results. The examples of Lysistrata and the women group around the world clearly bring out women's potentiality to propose means to end wars. However, unless women fully understand their power not only for their “personal development but also to fully play their role in the building of a society free of violence” (Lihamba 2003, p. 128), they will continue to leave issues of peacebuilding and conflict resolution to men – who will not find quick solutions unless they are denied that special bed right or conjugal right.

Commenting on what happens among the pastoralist communities in Kenya, Pkyala, Adan, and Masinde (2010) assert that whenever a quarrel or fight erupts among men, an older women would come and either stand in between them or removes her waist band and lays it between the belligerents. Once that happens, the fight or quarrel stops forthwith.

Women have used their position as custodians of the bed to make peace is seen through the Somali women's use of their womanhood to foster peace. To this end, Mohamed Abdi Mohamed asserts

In some areas when war broke out between two clans, women sent envoys to both parties, in order to identify and establish contacts in both camps. And in some regions women organize and financed the bulk of the peace conferences. What is more, they confronted those men who were reluctant to join the peace process and at times even dragged them into the conference hall. Women are able to do

this because of their position in the community as wives, mothers, sisters and artists.

As mothers, women bring up their children, inculcate in them basic decency and tolerance and explain to them the fatality of war. They make every effort to shield their sons from the lure of violence.

As wives, some women try to remove their husbands from the war zone. They even threaten to leave them if they do not sever their links with conflict and war. Even those who are only engaged embrace this tactics with conviction, threatening their- would-be- husbands to dissociate themselves from the conflict or else.

As sisters, there are signs that many women take issues with their brothers and eventually convince them that wars produce only death and destruction.

As artists, women actively contribute to the search for peace by composing poems and songs that discourage violence and promote peace. Sometimes they organize poetic contests with emphasis on themes relating to peace and reconciliation. (Mohamed 2004, pp. 106–107)

Four main issues could be teased from the above excerpt. Firstly, the power of women to cause a change in their husbands is a reality. It is true that men in the quietness of the bed could cause a change in the lives of their wives. So the bed has the power to tame people's characters for the better. Secondly, children heed to their mothers more. Whenever a mother tells a child not to participate in an action, out of respect, the child will not participate. In Africa, people fear to go against the wish of their mothers because they think a mother's curse is terrible. Thirdly, the influence of a sister in the life of her brother is powerful. This is more powerful when the home from which these children grew up is loving and peaceful. A lady's love for her brother would make her do whatever it takes to keep him alive. And fourthly, there is power in music, especially those composed by women to celebrate men's courage or ill manners. Just like how the song composed by women in praise of the young David after killing Goliath caused King Saul to be jealous (1 Sam 17:57–18:16), so is the power of women's peace song to men. Peace songs composed by women like Yvonne Chaka-Chaka, Brenda Facie, and others helped in the fight of Apartheid in South Africa. This, therefore, gives us the say that the power of the bed to cause order in an order-less state is real.

Postconflict Bed Diplomacy

Postconflict bed diplomacy is the application of bed diplomacy for reenacting relationship after conflicts. Given the fragility of the postconflict period because of the loss of trust for each other, cross ethnic or community marriage could help to better resurrect relationship. The marriage relationships that helped to address conflicts described above come after previous conflicts. Before the ancient kingdoms in the Middle/Far East, Asia, Europe, Africa, and America resorted to peaceful relationship, they could have fought deadly wars and thereafter realized the power of marriage in uniting them.

Besides, in some communities, after taking time to settle their disputes, they resort to encouraging intermarriage. If this is done, the women who get married across the board act as envoys of peace. It is understood that through such marriages, those who were killed during the war could/would be replaced through child bearing.

Conclusion

The power of the bed to hatch, cement, maintain, and reenact relationship is a tool that should not be taken lightly. From the foregone discussion, it is clearly revealed that over the years people have used the power of marital relationship to abate war or cause peace between warring parties. This is not just a recent innovation. It is something that humans have been using from antiquity. And indeed, when people marry from across communities, such marriages could help to bind the "would-be" enemies together because the marriage of their kinsmen would unite them and the two communities would benefit from such relationship. We have seen that the marriage of Emperors, Kings, Chiefs, and members of the Royal Families has worked to create peace and unite communities of diverse traditions.

It is also true that when the bed is peaceful, the peace in bed is reflected in the living room, compound, and the community through harmonious living. Through such peace, the children born into these families will grow seeing the value of

peaceful coexistence between people of diverse background and thus making them to be lovers of peace. On the other side, if the bed is not peaceful, the children will grow to know and become violent. It is, therefore, the considered view of this entry that people should be encouraged to allow intermarriage between different communities without restrictions so that the spirit of unity in diversity will be inculcated in children and conflicts avoided. It is also essential in intermarriage that children are brought up in peaceful environment so that they will be peace loving other than violent.

Cross-References

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

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