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Preface

The present book brings together the papers of the 2009 International Yaounde Colloquium on *The dynamics of conflict, reconciliation and peace in African societies: From the local to the national level, and beyond.* The colloquium, splendidly organised at the Université Protestante de l' Afrique Centrale / Protestant University of Central Africa (UPAC), marked the founding, at Yaounde, Cameroon, of the African Institute for Peace Communication and Development (AIPCD), under the leadership of the conference's convenor Prof. Célestin Tagou, in close association with the radical peace activist Johan Galtung and his organisation *Transcend International: A Network for Peace and Development.* All participants have particularly welcomed this timely opportunity to come into contact with peace researchers and peace activists from Africa and beyond, foremost with Johan Galtung himself, whose insightful digest of a life of conflict mediation deservedly opens this collection.

This is an illuminating and wide-ranging book on peace, conflict and reconciliation in Africa today. As far as peace and conflict are concerned, there is a remarkable contradiction to be noted in African societies ever since the establishment of modern state bureaucracies (mainly in the 19th century AD).

> On the one hand, extensive studies of the social and judicial processes at the local level (village, urban ward) have highlighted the exceptionally effective practices and institutions African societies have developed in the field of conflict regulation and reconciliation. The occurrence of socio-political conflict is probably at the very heart of human group formation, whenever and wherever, but local-level African communities have usually been remarkably effective at the containment of conflict through communal rituals, therapeutic rituals, the judicial process, the intermeshing of social groups through kinship and marital arrangements, shared environmental interests, etc. *If one had only experience of local-level African life, one would be tempted to claim that, by comparative world-wide standards, Africans are specialists par excellence in non-violent peace-keeping.*

Some of the skills needed and socially facilitated in this connection are displayed, in modern times, by African leaders who have made an impression on the global scene: Julius Nyerere, Nelson Mandela, Kofi Anan, to mention only the most obvious and least controversial cases. Throughout Africa, many thousands of community leaders have displayed similar skills, both in modern settings (as trade unionists, managers, local-level politicians) and in more traditional roles as male and female elders in kin groups, village headmen, chiefs, traditional healers, court assessors etc.

> On the other hand, however, especially in recent, post-colonial decades African states have displayed conflicts at the national and international level, with such devastating violence, and with such failure of arriving at reconciliation and peace, as to

make the African continent one of the main trouble spots in the world today, at a par with the Middle East, the Balkan, and South East Asia.

Why is it that the peace mechanisms that work so admirably well at the African local level, cannot exert their wholesome effects at the national and international level? Why is it that Africans cannot use their unmistakable resources of conflict resolution so as to solve their national and international problems today? The question presses all the more, since, in recent decades, and for reasons whose investigation is largely beyond our present scope, African conflicts have turned out to be explosive and uncontainable, to such an extent that a dozen African states have been relegated to only a chimerical existence, incapable of controlling their territories and of protecting their citizens. We need to understand why the unmistakable potential of African forms of reconciliation has been so little applied in concrete African conflict settings of the last few decades, before we can pinpoint what changes are needed in order to make the full potential of these African social technologies of reconciliation available at the level where they are currently most needed: within African states at the national level, and between African states.

If the answer to these questions were simple and straightforward, the present International Colloquium would never have taken place. However, if yet the beginning of an answer could be found, we would be one major step closer to effectively mobilising the time-honoured, and comparatively rich, human, institutional and spiritual resources of Africa for the continent's own benefit – for the peace it needs more than ever to develop, and to regain its rightful place among the world's regions.

Many of the contributions in this book show peace, as the outcome of reconciliation, to be a creative process in which people who are out of the ordinary (elders, community leaders, religious leaders, but often also outsiders), seek to find a solution for a situation in which two or more conflicting parties all believe to have the right and the truth on their side.

Some contributions particularly highlight the role of modern churches in this respect. Admittedly, the link between the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic cluster of monotheistic world religions, and reconciliation, is manifest. On the basis of the Jewish-Christian orientation of North Atlantic culture, a specific, and historically important interpretation has been given to the concept of reconciliation. Yet reconciliation is very far from primarily or exclusively a Christian concept. The society of Israel in the late second and in the first millennium BCE reflected in its social organisation, in many respects, the societies of other Semitic-speaking peoples and of the Ancient Near East in general. The patterns of conflict settlement that have been sanctified in the Jewish-Christian tradition have more or less secular parallels in the Near East and North Africa. In a remarkable study soon to be published, Marcel Oyono, one of the professors at UPAC and a vocal participant at the conference on which this book is based, has demonstrated the very close parallels between the Old Testament model of expiation, and the model found traditionally among a Cameroonian people, the Fon. We could go even further and claim that reconciliation is an essential aspect of all human relationships, both in primary human relations based on face-to-face interaction, and in group relationships of a political, religious and ethnic nature that encompass a large number of people. As in the Christian theological conception of reconciliation, in the religion of many societies the theme of interpersonal reconciliation is complemented by that of the reconciliation between man and God, or the Gods, by means of ritual, prayer and sacrifice.

Therefore it would seem to be too facile to attribute the relative success of Christian-inspired modes of conflict regulation in modern Africa to the people involved having deeply internalised the Christian model of reconciliation. If Christianity had that kind of total impact on people's attitudes and behaviour we would be at a loss to explain why the modern conflicts to be resolved could ever become so vicious in the first place. Rather, we may see Christianity as a persuasive idiom of both *transcendentalism and universalism*, in the light of which each conflicting party may be more readily persuaded to take a relative view of its concerns and grievances, and can be shown a honourable way out of the conflict. In other words, Christianity reminds the humans involved in the conflict, of their fundamental equality in the face of their Creator, and of the universal and eternal claims attending its truth, compared to which the conflictive issues at hand may be relativised as merely parochial and ephemeral. The promise that worldly, temporal issues can be overcome lies particularly in the belief that, by comparison, the divine nature presence and truth transcend all human measure of space and time, dwarfing the conflictive issues at hand to their true, merely human, proportions. Similar exhortations to universalism and transcendentalism are to be found, by definition, in all world religion, not least in Islam, whose very name contains the notion of peace and acquiescence, and whose Supreme Being, Allah, being *merciful* and *compassionate*, is particularly endowed with the characteristics needed for reconciliation. Other, more secular appeals to universalism and hence to identification between the conflicting parties beyond the specific conflictive may be found in the idea of the modern state, in that of the rule of law, of human rights, of truth and justice, in formal organisations, in formal education. In peace, these are among the central factors to make modern societies tick.

As far as Africa today is concerned, part of the widespread failure to attain and restore peace under modern, large-scale conditions, and to engage in effective reconciliation in the light of an ulterior interest shared by the conflicting parties, seems to lie in the relatively superficial and imperfect installation, in African societies, of these very notions of transcendence and universalism.

Imported legal and statal systems, formal education, world religions such as Islam and Christianity, did bring these notions, but these have been, by and large, insufficiently embedded in the underlying worldview, cosmology, all-overriding notions of personhood, agency and legitimacy, of many Africans also today.

The underlying worldview informing much of African life also today has tended to immanentalism and personalism – as the opposites of transcendentalism and universalism. Informed by dominant trends in modern African political culture, the idea of the state tends to be personalised into the person of the head of state in the light of which impersonal and universal rules becomes flexible. By the same token, in Africa (like elsewhere in the world, but even more so), the formal organisation tends to come to life not through the disinterested celebration of its abstract, universal and transcendent rules, but through the selective and creative personal use that may be made of the formal organisation by the persons who constitute the formal organisation's personnel. It is only in the last few centuries that the great achievements of the Ancient Near East's First Knowledge Revolution (writing, the state, organised religion and science) have touched African life massively, beyond isolated centres of royal and sacred (especially Islamic) power, and have begun to transform general notions of personhood and power in the direction of transcendence and universalism. Enhanced formal education, more effective formal organisations including a more effective state but especially including persistent forms of self-organisation (as in trade unions,

churches, media, sports, credit organisations etc.) that can hold their own in the face of an encroaching but eroded and bankrupt state, are likely to have a lasting effect on this point; however, in many African contexts today, this is rather a dream for the future, or a nostalgic memory from the recent past. World religions such as Islam and Christianity – in whose context transcendence and universalism are taken for granted, and the power of the written word is central – have made a crucial contribution in effecting such a shift, and continue to do so. *For Africa to survive in the modern world, as a viable bundle of communities and identities, economies and nation-states, there seems to be no alternative but a much more radical shift towards universalism and transcendence, as preconditions for lasting peace.*

Yet such a shift risks to go at the expense of the informality, flexibility, self-evident symbolic and musical competence, person-centeredness, and humanist orientation of African life. Although such a shift will no doubt boost the performance of African bureaucracies and economies, it is likely to negatively affect essential intangible qualities of African life, and may therefore mean that we are throwing away the child with the bathing water – resulting in an Africa that does work, that has enough to eat, and where formal organisations work well enough so as to enhance peace at the regional, national and international level, but that is no longer truly recognisable as its own historic self.

Perhaps we must simply accept this cultural shift away from historic cultural identity as a fact of life, more precisely as a an inevitable and in many ways desirable result of the globalisation process that has dominated the entire world, and not just Africa, in recent decades. Due to the technological reduction of the costs of space and time (through digital information and communication technologies (ICT), but also through the massive availability of long-distance travel and transport), and its effects on world politics, world economics, the world of the media, music and video, eroding notions of home, identity, and boundary, everyone over forty years old, wherever in the world, today faces the dilemma of having to live in a very different world from where she or he was born and received early childhood socialisation. Beyond the facile stereotypes of Mcdonald-isation, Cocacola-isation etc., it is an unmistakable fact that we are witnessing the birth of a viable world culture, which is also increasingly the cultural space to which African youths and middle class aspire and in which they increasingly at home.

However, when we look at the worldwide selection of items that are admitted into this emerging world culture, what is striking is that most cultural themes have come from the North Atlantic region and especially the USA, just like most material products come from East Asia. In this respect globalisation is a further move away from Africa and its historic achievements and cultural riches. Globalised world culture would greatly benefit if more of these African cultural achievements could be mediated towards it and be incorporated in it. Among these achievements the social technologies of peace through reconciliation certainly have pride of place. They should be taken seriously and be applied, also at the national and international level. That this is already being done in practical settings of peace negotiation in Africa today, is highlighted in some of the contributions to the central Part of the present book, where Fabius Okumu-Aiya, Lioba Lenhart and Abi Abekyamwale sketch viable structures of regional-level peace negotiation today.

We are facing a situation where peace is further away than ever in recent African history, and where the global mechanisms that have shaped modern Africa, have also

eclipsed any traditional focus on conflict resolution. Is this situation entire irreversible?

One of the strengths of the present book is that it shows that in-depth investigation and application of the *socio-cultural technologies of meaning, reconciliation and peace* (technologies that have been at the heart of local-level African societies since times immemorial) can help us to find new solutions and to limit the costs and risks attached to the imported solutions such as effective formal organisations, and excessive text-based universalism and transcendence. Thus this book can help to indicate the way to African peace: offering theoretical perspectives from sciology, history and psychology (Part I); taking stock of what has already been achieved or is in the process of being implemented (Part II); and exploring the wider background of leadership, the world economy, and environmental issues, against which peace processes in Africa are set (Part III).

The convenor and editor Prof. Tagou, and his dynamic and excellent university UPAC, are to be congratulated with this tangible contribution to the future of Africa, and of the world.

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