

African traditions of peace-making¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

Among the societies of the world, African societies have, since times immemorial, particularly excelled in the social technology of reconciliation as applied at the local and regional level. Regrettably there is a flip side to this positive observation: *How can we explain that Africa's social technologies of reconciliation have proven so utterly ineffective, and have so little been applied, at the national and the international level?* My endeavour at vindicating African time-honoured cultural and spiritual achievements does not spring from blind love, or from an ideological position such as often found among authors identifying as Afrocentrist. Although I have often thus identified myself, my position is that 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.

2. RECONCILIATION IN GENERAL²

From 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 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, one of the professors at the Protestant University of Central Africa (Yaounde) has even demonstrated the very close parallels between the Old Testament

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¹ Earlier, more extensive versions of this paper include van Binsbergen 2003b and 2010 , where also full references may be found.

² Cf. Loock 2001; Alpers 2001; van Kessel 1975; Soyinka 1999; Minow 1998; Shriver 1995; Taylor 1960; Wells 1997; Derrida 2001; Doxtader 2002

model of expiation, and that found traditionally among a Cameroonian people, the Fon (Oyono 2000).

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 by means of ritual, prayer and sacrifice.

3. AN ATTEMPT TO DEFINE RECONCILIATION

3.1. Exploratory observations

3.1.1. Recognition of conflict

In the first place, a necessary condition for reconciliation is the following: *explicit recognition by the parties concerned, that there is a specific, explicitly expressed conflict*. This is less self-evident than it appears. Many conflicts and oppositions in society are partially implicit and partially concealed from the actors' consciousness. Many overt conflicts do not in fact revolve around the stakes that are apparently being mediated, but on underlying stakes which remain partially unexpressed and that are unclear to at least part of the combating actors. Reconciliation is only possible if the conflict is clearly and publicly discussed by those involved, and such discussion creates a clarity that may well have a beneficial influence on future relations, also because previously unexpressed contradictions thus find an overt expression that allows them to be taken into account in the social process much more readily than before.

3.1.2. Reconciliation as a creative social act

Moreover, *reconciliation is a creative social act of rearrangement and reinterpretation*.³ This must be understood in the following sense: if available legal rules would have been self-evidently and simply applicable to the case, the conflict would not have arisen in the first place, and there would have been no question of reconciliation. *Probably reconciliation always resides in the recognition that firm rules are not sufficient*. Dropping those rules is an acknowledgement of shared humanity and therefore creates the central condition for community, for society. This means that reconciliation is perpendicular to the normative, the institutionalised: it provides the additional cohesion that makes community and society possible. In this way reconciliation constitutes society. Hence also the fact that a confession of guilt needs cer-

³ Galtung 2009, cf. 1975, 1996, 2008a, 2008b; Galtung & MacQueen 2008.

tainly not always be a condition for reconciliation, or a necessary part of reconciliation.

3.1.3. Reconciliation as transformation of conflict

Reconciliation therefore is not so much the alternative to conflict, but the transformation of conflict, and one that makes it possible both to define clearly the stakes of the conflict and to adopt a relative view of these stakes in the light of a larger good, pointing towards the future and towards a wider community than just the parties involved in the conflict.

3.1.4. Reconciliation not primarily governed by rules

Reconciliation is emphatically not the application of formal normative rules from a society's cultural orientation; it is not the result of a fixed procedure or a fixed scenario, but it consists in the creation of a framework within which those rules can acquire an added value of inclusiveness, flexibility, transcendence.

In this process it becomes manifest what people feel to be the most fundamental basis of their social life. This can be many different things, for instance:

- the recognition of a shared humanity; then reconciliation implicitly implies that a particular conception of the human person is being mediated
- the recognition of the need to terminate the conflict in the interest of future generations
- recognition of a shared identity
- recognition of shared responsibility vis-à-vis the supernatural.

These themes do not in the least rule out an element of self-interest in bringing about, and accepting, reconciliation. On this point, the anthropological discourse on reconciliation may take a distance from the theological discourse, which centres on integrity and authenticity and considers self-interest in reconciliation disqualifying.

The shared humanity that is restored, and expressed, in reconciliation, also makes possible a return to other forms of contact, which in their turn foreshadow again future possibilities of reconciliation. If the reproduction of society, to a considerable extent, takes place by means of reconciliation between groups, then it stands to reason that other reproductive elements may serve as an expression of such reconciliation as is being reached. Much reconciliation is accompanied by the consumption of food and drink, which often may be interpreted locally in terms of a sacrifice to supernatural beings overseeing the reconciliation process, but which may also be simply recognised as the conditions for the maintenance and the reproduction of the human body. Collective consumption in this manner is an expression of the same shared humanity that is being implied in reconciliation. On both sides of the Mediterranean massive annual saints' festivals display such commensality (*i.e.* 'eating together') to a great extent. In practice they constitute a calendrical event of reconciliation in the midst of a year full of violence or the threat of violence between various villages, clans, etc.; during the annual festival the members of these rival social units have sanctuary to visit each other's respective festivals and saintly shrines as pilgrims, *i.e.* in an explicitly ritual context. Also here we see an element of biological reproduction as an extension of the shared humanity as emphasised in reconciliation. For such annual festivals are, among other things, informal marriage markets. And in general, in a large number

of contexts the world over, reconciliation is symbolised by engaging in marital relations. As the Mae Enga people of New Guinea put it (Meggitt 1965, 1977):

‘We marry the people we fight’.

Also, a specifically sexual expression of reconciliation is possible, as is borne out, for example, in the numerous accounts and myths featuring marriages between the victors and the vanquished.

Moreover, reconciliation often involves the explicit verbalisation of the termination of a conflict. Such verbalisation is often public, and often depends on the intercession of a third party in the role of mediator. Reconciliation may be a public event, and important forms of social control derive from the public confession of a state of reconciliation.

However frequent though, neither the public nature of reconciliation nor the intercession of mediators is a universal feature of reconciliation.

3.2. Not always mediators

An oath, such as accompanies many instances of reconciliation in North Africa, may invoke invisible supernatural agents in such a way that formally no specific intercession of mediating humans is required anymore. Here the collective oath is a central mechanism of reconciliation. Taking an oath by reference to a supernatural power (God, or a saint – typically one whose grave is in the vicinity) invokes a super-human sanction in case the sworn statement that is capable of terminating the conflict, turns out to be false or, if it is a promise, not to be honoured. Although the supernatural being and the latter’s sanction are at the centre of reconciliatory oath-taking, such oaths are often taken in front of outsiders invested with religious powers: living marabouts (saints), who are no party to the conflict and who – through their abstention from weapons and violence – have situated themselves outside the dynamics of secular social life. By contrast, ordinary life in that part of the world has tended to consist of a continuous struggle over ecologically scarce goods (land, water, cattle, trading routes), and over persons (women, children, subjects, slaves). Incidentally, the institution of these peaceful marabouts, who through their association with saints’ graves that are fixed in the landscape have a special link with the land, is closely related, both systematically and – probably – historically, to the institutions of earth priests and oracular priests of West Africa, to the leopard-skin chiefs of East Africa, to the oracular priests and heralds of Ancient Greece, Italy and the Germanic cultures; the themes of the herald’s staff and of the Hermes-like mediator are widespread throughout the Old World.

3.3. Not always public

However, different types of borderline situations can be conceived as far as the public and mediating aspects of reconciliation are concerned. The conflict may occur in such an intimate sphere that the admission of outside mediators involves great embarrassment if not shame – this often applies to the conflicts between kinsmen, which one tends to see through within one’s own circle as long as this is still possible. In rural Zambia it is considered indecent to summon a close kinsmen to court – and this of

course applies in many societies, including the North Atlantic one. Much reconciling and therapeutic ritual is in fact private.

There are several types of reconciliation. There is the reconciliation that although publicly confessed allows the conflict to simmer on, and, as a result, at least one of the parties involved continues to seek a genuine termination of conflict through the effective annihilation of the adversary. Then again there is the reconciliation that does constitute a total transformation of social relations in a way which may closely approach the Christian theological definition of reconciliation. The latter type of reconciliation cannot merely be described in terms of law and power politics. It involves nothing less than man's fundamental capability of creating a society out of symbols, and of dynamically guarding and adapting these symbols. The shared humanity that underlies any successful reconciliation does not only resolve the specific conflict that was at hand, but also inspires the people involved to embrace the social in many or perhaps all other contexts in which they may find themselves. It produces a purification (*catharsis*). However, the extent and the duration of such catharsis depend largely on the dynamics of social structure obtaining in that time and place.

In reconciliation, not only society in general is formed or reinforced, but particularly each of the conflicting groups constitute themselves in the process. We should not think of social groups as firm persistent givens that may or may not happen to be engaged in a particular conflict. Many groups have no previous existence before they form themselves in the very context of conflict, through the institutions of mobilisation of group members, through identification with the stakes of the conflict, and through the roles that are defined by these processes both during the conflict and in the reconciliation process. Part of reconciliation is that the conflict is explicitly verbalised; it is then that the conflicting groups need to have a name, a label, an identity. In Central African villages the following situation tends to obtain: any individual has a considerable number of possible group memberships at the same time (of a number of villages, a number of clans), and it is only in concrete situations of conflict and reconciliation, when the social process intensifies, that one commits oneself, temporarily, to one specific group membership, allowing this to define who one is, which side one is on, and what one hopes to get out of the conflict; in a future conflict, however, that individual may turn out to belong to a different group.

3.4. The role of the mediating outsider in reconciliation

In order for someone to be able to play the role of mediator, special characteristics may be needed. Usually the mediators are not themselves party to the conflict. If they are party in one respect, it is likely that in another respect they are between both parties – for instance, as political leader of a group comprising both conflicting parties, or as kinsman of one party but affine (kinsman through marriage) of the other party. ~~We shall come back to this point under the heading of *conflicting loyalties*.~~ High status brings to the mediator authority and also protection. And protection he may well need, for as long as the conflict has not terminated, intercession may not be without risk, certainly not if the conflict in question involves physical violence. Also, a religious status (as prophet, saint, scriptural specialist, priest) may confer authority and protection: the marabout, the griot (West African bard), the priest, the herald, who implicitly or explicitly are under the protection of supernatural forces and thence in a position to effect reconciliation in the lives of others. In addition, class differences may be expressed in the role of mediator: in many societies a high social position

means, in the first place, the responsibility, the duty, and also the right, to bring about reconciliation between others; hence the politician or the boss is often the chairman and initiator of informal palavers, and so is the African village headman especially in East, Central, and South Central Africa. Reversely, however, mediation brings great social status to the mediating outsider.

3.5. The social costs and benefits of reconciliation

The great benefit of reconciliation consists in the fact that society is newly constituted, not only on the concrete basis of the regained unity of parties which before were at daggers drawn, but also on a much more general and abstract level: the reconstitution of the unity of these two parties in a specific conflict, by implication refers to the reconstitution of any social community in terms of shared humanity – it is an affirmation of the principle of shared humanity in general. The expression of shared humanity is the essence of reconciliation. It creates the conditions in which to arrange the concrete practical issues of the conflict, once terminated, on a basis of trust.

But against this social benefit, what is the price of reconciliation? To resign from a conflict that one has once started, may not be totally advantageous. The formal normative structure of the local society may stress peacefulness or prowess, and depending on that context the termination of conflict may be either honourable or shameful, a sign of strength or of weakness. To the extent to which conflict, and the reconciliation that may follow it, have a public nature outside the narrow circle of the parties immediately involved, to that extent any reconciliation will have a social price, positive or negative, or a mixture of both in a plurality of aspects. But reconciliation will also have a price in the case of a conflict that is not public but that is fought out in the inner rooms of a kin group, or other face-to-face relationships. On the one hand, both parties are being glorified by the ritual, abstract, sharing of humanity that is being testified in reconciliation. But, on the other hand, the manifest readiness to accept reconciliation may undermine the credibility of either party in each other's eyes and in the eyes of outsiders; this will particularly be the case in a context where confrontation and conflict are the everyday norm – such as in the segmentary societies to be discussed shortly, or in the world of organised crime, in the context of economic competition in general, or in a bad marriage.

3.6. The symbolic technology of reconciliation

We have seen that it is not enough, in order to reach reconciliation, to bring to the fore the overtly available cultural contents of the situation, such as are manifest and self-evident to all actors involved. The very existence of the conflict pinpoints a contradiction in the social process: positions exist side by side that are each admissible in terms of the prevailing culture and of the system of social control, yet these positions are mutually irreconcilable. For the party occupying a particular position, that position is eminently valid; but to the other party, the opposite position is just as valid. Clearly social systems do not work in the same way as the axiomatic systems of symbolic logic and mathematics: it is common for social systems (as it is for biological systems) to arrive at more or less the same point from different starting points, along different routes, and to invest that point with the conflicting tendencies specific to the various points of departure. Contradiction is an inevitable and necessary condition of

social life; and utopias in which such contradictions have been reduced to a minimum, or have been annihilated altogether, will be unliveable states of terror (cf. Popper 1966). Given such contradictions, it is not enough to summon to the fore what is already understood to be self-evident in the local society; instead, one has to appeal, relatively and selectively, to implicit possibilities that lie hidden in the culture and society. If one does not immediately succeed in making an effective (i.e. conflict terminating, actually reconciling) selection from this shared pool of cultural material, *then the mediator in the course of his attempts at reconciliation, has to selectively reformulate and transform publicly both the conflict and the underlying social and cultural material in such a way that it yet becomes possible, in the end, to come closer to one another and to confess publicly to this rapprochement.*

Here we hit on one of the paradoxes of reconciliation. Although reconciliation (at any rate, in the African societies that have inspired my argument) is perpendicular to institutionalised frameworks and procedures in society, yet reconciliation is unthinkable without all parties concerned recognising a shared basis of communality, something on which they agree. This basis need not be a totally explicit given from the very beginning of conflict and reconciliation onwards. It is ritual that enables us to produce, in preparation of reconciliation, points of view and bases for communality which so far had not been perceived consciously by the parties involved in the conflict. It is the task of the typical outsider who monitors and presides over the process of reconciliation to identify, visualise, and exploit for the ultimate good, such hitherto unsuspected, hidden potential bases for communality. Especially African healers/diviners, whose task it is to bring out interpersonal conflicts and guide them towards reconciliation, tend to be masters in what we could call *praxeological bricolage*. By means of ‘do-it-yourself’ (i.e. French: *bricolage*) they construct a temporary, improvised, action-created (i.e. ‘praxeological’) language of communality, that was not felt to exist before the session started but that is the result of the verbal and non-verbal exchanges during the session, under the guidance of the therapist. And the latter is capable of bringing this about by means of the free use and the reinterpretation of selected symbolic material that, strictly speaking, is available within the local cultural orientation but not exactly in that specific form and combination in which it is summoned up in the divinatory and therapeutic session.

3.7. Reconciliation and time

The time dimension of reconciliation appears to be of great importance.

Reconciliation has the character of a process but also of a moment. The ritual of reconciliation is of a condensed nature, both in space and in time. If the conflict involves large sets of people (for example ethnic groups, nations, creeds), typically only a selection of the members of the groups involved participate directly in the reconciliation process. Reconciliation makes it possible to arrive at a specific transformation of the conflictive matter, which may subsequently lead, in a much more diffuse way, to the reorientation of the everyday life of all group members concerned. Reconciliation, therefore, does not only mean the transformation of conflictive matter, but also means indicating the possibilities for the transfer of conflict-terminating factors from reconciliatory ritual to everyday life. It means, in fact, a transformation of the ongoing social process.

But not only need we make a distinction between reconciliation as a process (the terminal phase of a conflict that has already run a considerable course through time),

and reconciliation as the concrete moment when the viewpoints informing the conflict are particularly clearly expressed, when the parties in conflict concretely constitute themselves, and when these parties do, in fact, arrive at reconciliation by reference to a creatively transformed representation of the conflict matter. It is more important to realise that reconciliation is in itself a thinking about time: the normal time, when conflict is taken for granted, is interrupted, and it makes way for an ideal time, one of reconstruction, purity, clarity, sociability, in which the conflict is no longer capable of occurring; and that moment looks forward to the future, in which the transformation implied by reconciliation, will – ideally – have caused the then normal time to have permanently shifted a bit towards ideal time. Even when reconciliation does not last and new conflict will continue to present itself in future, yet this reordering of time is the central idea of such transformation as is implied in reconciliation. In reconciliation eternity and cosmogony simmers through in a way which – even without Christian inspiration – occurs in African, Asian, Latin American and Oceanic societies just as well as it does in North Atlantic ones.

Another temporal dimension of reconciliation has to do with its possibly cyclic nature. In many African societies reconciliatory events are not so much unique, once for all, but repetitive and circular. This is what Calmettes (1972) and I (van Binsbergen 1981) have pointed out in the context of the cyclical nature of witchcraft eradication movements in the Zambian villages in the twentieth century: these invariably occurred in a cycle of crises, a new crisis occurring once every ten to fifteen years. In my view, this cycle was produced by a combination of ecological and demographic factors periodically causing unbearable strain on the local community's natural and leadership resources. Reconciliation, then, is one of the predictable phases in the social process of the small-scale local community, in a continuous pendulum-swing movement back and forth between the following positions:

- integration after, and through, reconciliation
- erosion of the communality thus produced;
- initial skirmishes;
- conflict

after which the cycle is repeated unless reconciliation proves impossible and the community (village, kin group, congregation, political party) falls apart.

In segmentary, acephalous (chief-less) societies (see below), this repetitive nature of conflict and its resolution is not even distributed over an extension of time, but occurs at one and the same moment of time. There, reconciliation and conflict coincide incessantly, in line with the constantly shifting, kaleidoscopic, segmentary perspective within which an actor in such a society has situated himself vis-à-vis other actors.

In those African societies that have an elaborate political system organised around a chief or king, the cyclic nature of reconciliation goes through a developmental process along with the person of the king himself. As long as the king is alive and well, a condition prevails according to which the political system, the human society in general, the land, the crops, game, the rain, the cosmos in its totality, know the greatest regularity and fertility. However, at the king's death – even when it is only imminent – an interregnum begins during which both the political, the social and the cosmic order is supposed to be fundamentally disturbed, so that illness and drought, infertility, conflict, violence, incest and sorcery may reign supreme. This state can

only be terminated by the accession of a successor, who brings about the reconciliation, both politically, socially and cosmically, through which chaos is turned once more into order.

Conflict, revenge, feud, sorcery are the opposites of reconciliation, but a discussion of these topics is regrettably beyond our present, limited scope.

4. THE DILEMMA: IF AFRICAN SOCIETIES HAVE EVOLVED SUCH EXCELLENT SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES OF RECONCILIATION, WHY ARE THESE USED SO LITTLE AT THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL?

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 uncontrollable, 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.

I have considered this vital question at length elsewhere (van Binsbergen 2010), and must limit myself here to a mere summing up of the various headings under which the answer was given:

1. Modern and traditional power elites, and the crisis of legitimacy
2. Aspects of the political sociology of modern Africa
 - 2.1. The recently-imported, and generally weak, nature of the formal organisation in Africa
 - 2.2. The pitfall of particularist divisiveness
 - 2.3. Failing idioms of universalism
 - 2.4. Intercontinental patterns of hegemonic geopolitics in the field of mineral extraction, trade, control of strategic regions etc.
 - 2.5. The dislocated and alienated African subject
 - 2.6. Christianity and *ubuntu* ('the art of being human') in South African reconciliation
 - 2.7. Transcendentalism and universalism as facilitating conditions for peace – but at a considerable cultural cost for Africa

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, 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 entirely irreversible?

We have identified one obvious way out: strengthening those elements in modern African societies, in the organisational and religious field, that enhance universalism and transcendence as conditions for effective state performance, for the maintenance of peace, and for the re-negotiation of peace once disturbed.

However, such strengthening inevitably implies a loss of historic cultural identity. Moreover, the depressing state of Africa today as far as peace is concerned, suggests that in addition, other, more originally African mechanisms must be mobilised at the same time.

It is my contention 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.

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