

From warriors to peacemakers: people-to-people peacemaking in southern Sudan

by Michael Ouko

The People to People Peace Process, an initiative of the New Sudan Council of Churches, has been using traditional methods of conflict resolution to secure sustainable peace, return and integration for people caught up in the fighting in southern Sudan.

The world's longest-running civil war has pitted the largely Arab northern half of Sudan against the black African south on and off for over 40 years. More than two million people have been killed and over four million displaced.

However, conflict in Sudan is older than the independent state. Individual tribes have fought over cattle and grazing land for centuries, settling scores at the point of a spear. Pre-modern conflict in southern Sudan was characterised by restraints and obligations. The casualties were almost always men. Fighting for water points, grazing, fishing grounds, food supplies and cattle took place far away from villages. Children, women and the elderly were not targeted. Women were permitted on the field of battle to retrieve the wounded and could gather food and water from enemy territory. Enemies raiding food stocks would not take everything. Unarmed opponents were spared.

According to tradition, causing a death created spiritual pollution. A bit of the blood of any man speared to death was thought to be in the slayer and had to be bled out of the upper arm by a spiritual leader. Ghosts were believed to haunt anyone who killed in secret. However, death by bullets carries no such sanction. When one kills with a foreign weapon the ghosts of the dead will not haunt you. Rebel commanders argued to chiefs that a gun death carried no individual responsibility. Once removed from its moral consequences, killing became easier. Traditional cultures and livelihoods in the south have been devastated by modern warfare, conflict-induced famine, armed militia groups and proliferation of small arms and light weapons. When the southern rebel movement, the Sudan Peoples Libera-

tion Army, fragmented in the early 1990s inter-factional and inter-ethnic conflict erupted over much of southern Sudan. Weapons used against the northern army were turned on fellow southerners. Cattle raids spiralled into a cycle of attack, retaliation and revenge. Arguments formerly settled by fighting with sticks were decided with assault weapons. It is estimated that women now comprise 80% of the victims of conflict.

Resurrecting traditional conflict transformation systems

Since the late 1990s the Nairobi-based New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) and the Khartoum-based Sudan Council of Churches (which operates in government-controlled areas) have worked together to promote local peace building. NSCC has a deep religious commitment to justice and peace and believes that there is no conflict, whether latent or violent, which is so small that it can be ignored. The people-to-people peace initiative is a locally-owned process based on traditional methods of reconciliation in an environment where formal institutions are non-existent. Since the late 1990s locally-convened conferences have resolved a series of ethnic and communal conflicts and brought hope and stability to some of the areas most affected by hostilities. Formerly hostile communities have realised that peaceful coexistence promotes the establishment of sustainable livelihoods that create hope for a better future where the economic, political, social and cultural contribution of every citizen is valued and treasured. The first success came in November 1999 after six months of intensive work by the NSCC to challenge the Nuer and the Dinka to resolve their internal difficulties. Following a seven-day conference in Wunlit, peace was established between the Dinka and the Nuer. A Peace and Governance Council was formed to rebuild

the civil administration and police system, empower the traditional court system of chiefs, demobilise all children under 15 and establish water resources, schools, health facilities and food security to enable communities to sustain themselves.

Subsequent conferences have followed a similar pattern. NSCC support from foreign churches and donor agencies is used to facilitate construction of a peace village with accommodation for several hundred people who arrive at the site by plane, car and on foot. The conferences are open to anyone committed to peacemaking. To symbolise commitment to peace and unity a white bull is slaughtered at the beginning of each conference. The bull is believed to take a message to the spirit world announcing peace between the tribes. Spiritual leaders dance as they point sharp spears and shout directions to the animal about its mission.

Dialogue, ceremonies, prayer, storytelling, exchange of riddles, singing, dancing, cooking sessions, feasting and recounting of atrocities and



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violence continue for several days. All those who have been wronged are given time to share their story. Prior to departure, another bull is slaughtered. The peace village is left standing as a symbol of reconciliation.

After each conference, local abductions and raids have stopped, stolen goods and abducted people have been returned, trade between ethnic groups has resumed and intertribal courts have been set up to deal with treaty violators. Conferences, and the ongoing work of the peace councils they have spawned, have fundamentally contributed to the renaissance of notions of restorative justice, reconciliation, forgiveness and ethnic co-existence in southern Sudan.

In African jurisprudence you must restore harmony including the ritual calling on God and our ancestors to restore the relationships. When you fight with strangers you forget and go on. But when you fight with family it is very bitter. The Dinka and Nuer are one family. So the feud is bitter and it is very important to resolve.

Francis Deng, UN Secretary General's Representative on Internally Displaced Persons.

People-to-people peacemaking is a peace and reconciliation process between peoples with oral traditions which incorporates elements of Chris-

tianity and modern techniques of diplomacy and problem solving and reconciliation. People-to-people peace differs from arbitration, litigation and the formal court system as it:

- prioritises restoration of broken relationships and rejects 'modern' methods of coercion, imprisonment and execution
- does not permit a small elite group of representatives to articulate problem on behalf of aggrieved parties
- gives people affected by the conflict an opportunity to personally articulate their concerns in the presence of a facilitator who guides them to a mutually agreed outcome to restore broken relationships
- does not condemn law breakers to jail or death but provides them space for introspection and self-analysis
- provides a ritual environment which people in conflict can use to interact physically and emotionally and empathise with the worldview of the other
- commits offenders to providing compensation, paying fines and remaining outside the community until cleansed of wrong doing
- provides powerful constraints on future breaches of agreements: individuals fear being expelled and ostracised by councils of elders and spiritual leaders.

A calabash of water was brought with sesame seeds floating in the water. The seeds represent new life. Each person spits ritually into the gourd bowl. This symbolises the joining of life fluids with one another. The fine spray spittle represents the coolest part of the hot tongue that can be the root of conflict or contribute to healing and peace. We all came forward and washed our hands in the water. Then we took water in our cupped hands and threw water over each other. We were being sprinkled clean from the past sins and conflict and enabled to start anew.

There are now many committed individuals and civil groups articulating the significance of social harmony and peaceful coexistence among various and diverse communities in southern Sudan. Peace constituencies have played a major role in bringing southern and northern leaders round the peace table in the Kenyan city of Naivasha. The violent intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts that have decimated the social, economic and cultural foundation of south Sudanese communities have been transformed into spaces for mapping out opportunities for peace.

Though the north-south peace process is nearing completion, southern Sudan is still awash with weapons, many local conflicts and ethnic tensions remain unresolved and the unfolding humanitarian disaster in Darfur shows the intransigence of the Sudanese government and the extent to which it will go in bringing suffering on its own people. However the people-to-people peace process gives reason for hope. NSCC will continue to organise and facilitate more people-to-people peace conferences and lobby for the cessation of human rights abuses against the Sudanese people.

Community-supported peace structures to monitor and implement peace agreements offer excellent opportunities for affected communities to consolidate their own peace initiatives. Civic education and training on conflict transformation skills are valuable tools for internalising peace values and concepts in the hearts and minds of the people of southern Sudan.

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