

Practical Peacemaking Wisdom from Africa: Reflections on Ubuntu

by

Timothy Murithi, Ph.D.

Senior Researcher

The Policy Development and Research Centre for Conflict Resolution
University of Cape Town, South Africa

This study examines the cultural world-view known as Ubuntu which highlights the essential unity of humanity and emphasizes the importance of constantly referring to the principles of empathy, sharing and cooperation in our efforts to resolve our common problems. The discussion will focus on how Archbishop Desmond Tutu utilized the principles of Ubuntu during his leadership of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This study will also outline the five stages of the peacemaking process found among Ubuntu societies, including: acknowledgement of guilt, showing remorse and repenting, asking for and giving forgiveness, and paying compensation or reparation as a prelude to reconciliation. Potential lessons for peace and reconciliation efforts are highlighted with the premise that the Ubuntu approach to the building of human relationships can offer an example to the world.

Timothy Murithi (tmurithi@ccr.uct.ac.za) is a Senior Researcher at the Policy Development and Research Centre for Conflict Resolution at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, and formerly Programme Officer for the Programme in Peacemaking and Preventive Diplomacy at the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) in Geneva, Switzerland. His current interests focus on culture and conflict resolution; forgiveness and reconciliation.

Culture and Peacemaking

There has been an increasing interest in the role that culture plays in determining human relations, and in the social sciences we are beginning to witness a growing focus on the impact of a culture of peacemaking (1-4). Every society since the beginning of time has developed its own mechanisms and institutions for managing disputes in a way that preserves the integrity and fabric of the society. It should come as no surprise therefore that cultural approaches for managing disputes around the world will play a vital role in promoting peace and social order within communities and even nations. In the case of South Africa, a difficult political situation was addressed through various peace-building institutions and mechanisms for governance.

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These helped the people of this country to transcend the bitterness, hatred and suspicion of the past and to make the transition to a more stable - albeit still imperfect – political order. There has been a growing interest in the cultural values and attitudes held by South Africans that enabled a spirit of forgiveness and a willingness to move beyond the legacy of the apartheid state. From the outset, Desmond Tutu was of the conviction that as far as South Africa as a nation-state was concerned, there could be ‘no future without forgiveness’ (5). Informed by his own adherence to the African world-view of Ubuntu, Tutu, as Chairman of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was able to provide leadership, advice and guidance to his fellow countrymen and women in the difficult and precarious transition through which the country was passing.

What are the lessons that can be drawn from this notion of Ubuntu? In particular, how can Ubuntu contribute towards the ongoing debates among practitioners and researchers of peace as to how culture can also inform our efforts to implement practical and effective conflict resolution initiatives?

Conflict and the Revival of Values for Peacemaking

People derive their sense of meaning from their culture. What does it mean to be human? What is – or ought to be - the nature of human relations? These notions feed into the attitudes and values that we choose to embrace, which in turn determine how we interact with each other. Cultural attitudes and values therefore provide the foundation for the social norms by which people live. Through internalizing and sharing these cultural attitudes and values with their fellow community members, and by handing them down to future generations, societies can - and do - re-construct themselves on the basis of a particular cultural image.

When we survey various parts of the world we are confronted with images and cultures of violence. Societies appear to be tearing themselves apart and the attitudes and values in these societies seem to be based on self-interest, private accumulation and the competitive drive for power and resources. This ‘cultural logic’ promotes exclusion on a fundamental level and feeds a cycle of poverty, debt and economic marginalization. By extension, this logic also generates and regenerates the vicious cycles of perpetual violence that we are currently witnessing. Any effort to arrest these vicious cycles requires an intervention at the level of culture, with specific reference to how people perceive themselves and their responsibilities, in relation to others. Until significant steps can be taken to reduce the adherence to a culture of violence and exclusion, we will continue to postpone genuine peace. But where do we begin in our attempts to reverse this persistent and pernicious culture of violence?

In order to initiate the social reconstruction of war-affected communities, a key step would be to find a way for members of these communities to 're-inform' themselves with a cultural logic that emphasizes sharing and equitable resource distribution. This, in effect, means emphasizing the importance of reviving cultural attitudes and values that can foster a climate within which peace can flourish.

Values for Peacemaking in South Africa: Archbishop Desmond Tutu on Ubuntu

The world recently witnessed the example of the South African transition towards democracy based on universal suffrage. It goes without saying that this process of change was marred by instances of violence between members of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) - as well as by the general violence perpetrated by the then South African Defense Forces on sections of the population. However, most observers were nevertheless surprised by that fact that the entire country was not plunged into a violent and devastating confrontation engulfing all sectors of the population (6). The prevailing view is that the transition was 'relatively' peaceful. How was it possible for such a social and political transformation to be achieved? The authoritarian apartheid regime had fostered, over a period of several decades, a culture of violence and brutality built upon attitudes of hatred and fear, and embracing negative values of social and political exclusion and economic marginalization. Thus, the ability of the country to move beyond the conditions created by this legacy, without a culture of vendetta and revenge taking over the minds of the oppressed, remains a key lesson for the rest of humanity. As Nelson Mandela observed: *'time and again the prophets of doom have been confounded by the capacity and determination of South Africans to resolve their problems and to realize their shared vision of a united and peaceful and prosperous country'* (7).

The social and economic project is by no means complete and indeed the situation can only be described as one in which a fragile reconciliation exists. The economic well-being of large sections of the population remains to be addressed if a more sustainable reconciliation process is to be consolidated. For the purposes of this study the focus will be on the cultural attitudes and values that enabled the country to move forward with progressive change. What are the cultural values underpinning this 'capacity' for transformation that Mandela refers to? Can these values also contribute towards 're-informing' other communities across the world that are struggling to make peace between their members? It has been common practice for certain South African leaders to be invited to go to places such as Northern Ireland and the Middle East, as well as around Africa, to share with these societies the practical wisdom which can be derived from the South African experience (5).

South Africa is a model of unity in diversity, and has been referred to as the 'rainbow nation'. It is clear that different groups and individual members of the society would have drawn from aspects of their own cultures when dealing with the process of transition. Many drew upon their own family values and their religious background. An analysis of all the different cultural backgrounds and belief systems is beyond the scope of this study; rather the focus will be on Ubuntu; an African way of viewing the world which a significant number of ethnic groups and individuals adhere to, some of whom were involved in guiding the nation through its troubled phase.

As Chairman of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Tutu reflects in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, that he drew upon both his Christian values as well as his cultural values (5). In particular, he highlights that he constantly referred to the notion of Ubuntu when he was guiding and advising witnesses, victims and perpetrators during the Commission hearings.

Ubuntu is found in diverse forms in many societies throughout Africa. More specifically among the languages of East, Central and Southern Africa the concept of Ubuntu is a cultural world-view that tries to capture the essence of what it means to be human. In southern Africa we find its clearest articulation among the Nguni group of languages. In terms of its definition, Tutu observes that:

'Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks to the very essence of being human. When you want to give high praise to someone we say, "Yu, u Nobuntu"; he or she has Ubuntu. This means that they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. They share what they have. It also means that my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "a person is a person through other people" (in Xhosa Ubuntu ungamntu ngabanye abantu and in Zulu Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye). I am human because I belong, I participate, and I share. A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good; for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes with knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when other are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.' (5, pp34-35).

As a 'human being through other human beings', it follows that what we do to others feeds through the interwoven fabric of social, economic and political relationships to eventually impact upon us as well. Even the supporters of apartheid were in a sense victims of the brutalizing system from which they benefited economically and politically: it distorted their view of their relationship with other human beings, which then impacted upon their own sense of security and freedom from fear. As Tutu observes, 'in the process of dehumanizing another, in inflicting untold harm and suffering, the perpetrator was inexorably being dehumanized as well' (5).

This notion of Ubuntu sheds light on the importance of peacemaking through the principles of reciprocity, inclusivity and a sense of shared destiny between peoples. It provides a value system for giving and receiving forgiveness. It provides a rationale for sacrificing or letting go of the desire to take revenge for past wrongs. It provides an inspiration and suggests guidelines for societies and their governments, on how to legislate and establish laws which will promote reconciliation. In short, it can 'culturally re-inform' our practical efforts to build peace and heal our traumatized communities. It is to be noted that the principles found in Ubuntu are not unique; as indicated earlier, they can be found in diverse forms in other cultures and traditions. Nevertheless, an ongoing reflection and re-appraisal of this notion of Ubuntu can serve to re-emphasize the essential unity of humanity and gradually promote attitudes and values based on the sharing of resources and on cooperation and collaboration in the resolution of our common problems (8, 9).

The Ubuntu Approach to Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation

Hence, how then were the principles of Ubuntu traditionally articulated and translated into practical peacemaking processes? Ubuntu societies maintained conflict resolution and reconciliation mechanisms which also served as institutions for maintaining law and order within society. These mechanisms pre-dated colonialism and continue to exist and function today (10, 11, 12). Ubuntu societies place a high value on communal life, and maintaining positive relations within the society is a collective task in which everyone is involved. A dispute between fellow members of a society is perceived not merely as a matter of curiosity with regards to the affairs of one's neighbor; in a very real sense an emerging conflict belongs to the whole community.

According to the notion of Ubuntu, each member of the community is linked to each of the disputants, be they victims or perpetrators. If everybody is willing to acknowledge this (that is, to accept the principles of Ubuntu), then people may either feel a sense of having been wronged, or a sense of responsibility for the wrong that has been committed. Due to this linkage, a law-breaking individual thus transforms his or her group into a law-breaking group. In the same way a disputing individual transforms his or her group into a disputing group.

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It therefore follows that if an individual is wronged, he or she may depend on the group to remedy the wrong, because in a sense the group has also been wronged. We can witness these dynamics of group identity and their impact on conflict situations across the world.

Ubuntu societies developed mechanisms for resolving disputes and promoting reconciliation with a view to healing past wrongs and maintaining social cohesion and harmony. Consensus building was embraced as a cultural pillar with respect to the regulation and management of relationships between members of the community (12). Depending on the nature of the disagreement or dispute, the conflict resolution process could take place at the level of the family, at the village level, between members of an ethnic group, or even between different ethnic nations situated in the same region.

In the context of the Ubuntu societies found in southern Africa, particularly among the Xhosa, disputes would be resolved through an institution known as the Inkundla/Lekgotla which served as a group mediation and reconciliation forum (10). This Inkundla/Lekgotla forum was communal in character in the sense that the entire society was involved at various levels in trying to find a solution to a problem which was viewed as threatening the social cohesion of the community. In principle the proceedings would be led by a Council of Elders and the Chief or, if the disputes were larger, by the King himself. The process of ascertaining wrong-doing and finding a resolution included family members related to the victims and perpetrators, including women and the young. The mechanism therefore allowed members of the public to share their views and to generally make their opinions known. The larger community could thus be involved in the process of conflict resolution. In particular, members of the society had the right to put questions to the victims, perpetrators and witnesses as well as to put suggestions to the Council of Elders on possible ways forward. The Council of Elders in its capacity as an intermediary had an investigative function and it also played an advisory role to the Chief. By listening to the views of the members of the society, the Council of Elders could advise on solutions which would promote reconciliation between the aggrieved parties and thus maintain the overall objective of sustaining the unity and cohesion of the community.

The actual process involved five key stages: first, after a fact-finding process where the views of victims, perpetrators and witnesses were heard, the perpetrators - if considered to have done wrong - would be encouraged, both by the Council and other community members in the Inkundla/Lekgotla forum, to acknowledge responsibility or guilt secondly, perpetrators would be encouraged to demonstrate genuine remorse or to repent thirdly, perpetrators would be encouraged to ask for forgiveness and victims in their turn would be encouraged to show mercy; fourth, where possible and at the suggestion of the Council of Elders, perpetrators would be required to pay an appropriate compensation or reparation for the wrong done.

(This was often more symbolic than a re-payment in-kind, with the primary function of reinforcing the remorse of the perpetrators.) Amnesty could thus be granted, but not with impunity, and the fifth stage would seek to consolidate the whole process by encouraging the parties to commit themselves to reconciliation.

This process of reconciliation tended to include the victim and his or her family members and friends as well as the perpetrator and his or her family members and friends. Both groups would be encouraged to embrace co-existence and to work towards healing the relationship between them and thus contribute towards restoring harmony within the community, which was vital in ensuring the integrity and viability of the society. The act of reconciliation was vital in that it symbolized the willingness of the parties to move beyond the psychological bitterness that had prevailed in the minds of the parties during the conflict situation.

To be frank, this process was not always straightforward, and there would naturally be instances of resistance in following through the various stages of the peacemaking process. This was particularly so with respect to the perpetrators, who tended to prefer that past events were not re-lived and brought out into the open. In the same way, victims would not always find it easy to forgive. In some instances forgiveness could be withheld, in which case the process could be held up in an impasse, with consequences for the relations between members of the community. However, forgiveness, when granted, would generate such a degree of goodwill that the people involved, and the society as a whole, could then move forward even from the most difficult situations. The wisdom of this process lies in the recognition that it is not possible to build a healthy community at peace with itself unless past wrongs are acknowledged and brought out into the open so that the truth of what happened can be determined and social trust renewed through a process of forgiveness and reconciliation. A community in which there is no trust is ultimately not viable and gradually begins to tear itself apart. With reference to the notion of *I am because we are* and that of a person being a person through other people, the above process emphasizes drawing upon these Ubuntu values when faced with the difficult challenge of acknowledging responsibility and showing remorse, or of granting forgiveness.

As mentioned earlier, this traditional peacemaking process covered offences across the board from family and marriage disputes, theft, and damage to property, murder and wars. In the more difficult cases involving murder, Ubuntu societies sought to avoid the death penalty because, based on the society's view of itself - as people through other people - the death penalty would only serve to cause injury to the society as a whole. Though it would be more difficult to move beyond such cases, the emphasis would still be on restoring the broken relationships caused by the death of a member of the community.

The guiding principle of Ubuntu was based on the notion that parties need to be reconciled in order to re-build and maintain social trust and social cohesion, with a view to preventing a culture of vendetta or retribution from developing and escalating between individuals, families and the society as a whole. We continue to observe how individuals and sections of society in the Republic of South Africa, epitomized by Mandela and Tutu, have drawn upon some aspects of their cultural values and attitudes to enable the country to move beyond its violent past. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which has as many critics as it has supporters, also relied on the willingness of victims to recognize the humanity of the perpetrators, and there are documented cases of victims forgiving particular perpetrators (13). Tutu himself would always advise victims - if they felt themselves able to do so - to forgive. His guiding principle was that without forgiveness there could be no future for the new Republic.

Ubuntu Lessons for the Global Village

It is evident then that Ubuntu approaches to conflict resolution and reconciliation can offer some important lessons as we continue to work towards world peace. Four key lessons are: the importance of public participation in the peacemaking process; the utility of supporting victims and encouraging perpetrators as they go through the difficult process of making peace; the value of acknowledging guilt and remorse and the granting of forgiveness as a way to achieve reconciliation; and the importance of referring constantly to the essential unity and interdependence of humanity, as expressed through Ubuntu, and living out the principles which this unity suggests, namely; empathy for others, the sharing of our common resources, and working with a spirit of cooperation in our efforts to resolve our common problems. Susan Colin Marks, a South African conflict resolution practitioner, in a chapter entitled Ubuntu, the Spirit of Africa: An Example for the World makes an important point: the question that faces us today in the context of our globalized world, is whether we can draw from the lessons of 'Ubuntu forms of peacemaking', and with this recognition of our essential unity, work towards 'Ubuntu forms of governance' with public participation and 'Ubuntu economies' that emphasize fair resource distribution and thus the sharing of the earth's resources for the benefit of all (14).

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