

## **Peace Building in Schools Using African Traditional Values: A Case Study of Two Primary Schools in Nairobi-Kenya**

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### **Introduction**

This paper describes and presents the findings of a case study research on how primary school teachers build peace in schools through African traditional values. The study was conducted between September 2005 and January 2006 in Kariobangi and Korogocho in Nairobi, Kenya and sixty primary school teachers participated in the study. The overall picture generated by this research is that peace building through African traditional values cannot be underrated and should be a crucial way forward in all levels of learning in Kenya. A narrow conception of traditional African values and its importance in peace building by teachers could be responsible for the increase of violence in schools and society in general.

## **Background Information**

Cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, is an invaluable resource that can be mobilised as assets for “livelihoods, democratization, truth telling, peace building, nationhood and identity” (Hughes, 2011). Throughout the colonial and post-colonial era communities have continued to use this heritage for peace building. This is evident through research and conference report on the existence and use of cultural heritage in peace building. The solution to humanitarian crisis such as those of Rwanda and Northern Uganda for instance, seems more likely to come from narratives of traditional reconciliation systems. In Rwanda, alongside the work of the tribunal set-up by the International Criminal Court in Arusha (Tanzania), it is the contribution of the narratives of the traditional courts known as *gacaca* (from the name of the grass that is carried as a symbol into the process) that has made a major contribution to healing and reconciliation in the country. As far as Northern Uganda – ravaged for over 20 years by Lord’s Resistance Army of Joseph Kony - is concerned, a solution is yet to be arrived at, but the efforts that so far has come closest to end the violence and bring peace is that of the

Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, which is built on traditional narratives of healing, reconciliation and forgiveness (Carrera 2010, 12-14). The same can be said of Angola, Sierra Leone and Liberia where cultural heritage has played significant role in reconstructing the war-ravaged countries and in reintegration of soldiers returning from war (Wessel, 2009; Comerford, 2005).

An examination of the education system in Kenya reveals there has been considerable discussion about the need to nurture this heritage through the teaching of African culture, history, languages, literature and other aspects of African life. In 1964, the first independent parliament under President Jomo Kenyatta set up a commission to advise the government on the kind of education suitable for Kenya. The Kenya Education Commission Report, often referred to as the Ominde Report, indicated that one of the objectives of the school system should be to foster respect for cultural traditions (Ominde Report 1964). According to Somjee (1996:94) the report emphasized the Africanization of the history and geography syllabi and the promotion of African art, crafts and music in the school system. Kenya's indigenous heritage was further supported by the

Ndegwa Report of 1971, which stated that the educational system must respect, foster and develop the country's rich and varied cultures (Ndegwa Report 1971). The Mackey Report of 1981 strengthened this again through the syllabus developed for the new 8-4-4 system of education (denoting years of primary, secondary and university). According to Bogonko (ibid: 121), more than ever before, the 8-4-4 syllabus aims to make pupils aware that they are Kenyans, initiating them into their culture and place in society, both locally and globally.

With the growing recognition of the important role African traditional values play in peace building, I undertook a study to establish how primary school teachers employ this knowledge in building peace in schools.

### **Research Methodology**

The study was done in two phases. Phase one of the study was conducted using a questionnaire as the main research tool. Phase two of the study used other research tools such as interviews, observation and document analysis. Sixty teachers were issued with questionnaires. A

questionnaire was used because I wanted to see what information was readily/easily available on African peace traditions that could enable me to focus on specific areas for more detailed information (Irwin 2002:5) using interviews and field observation.

Snowball sampling was used in selecting the respondents (Sanders & Pinhey 1974:121). I randomly identified a teacher from each school where I conducted the study. This teacher then introduced me to ten other teachers in their school. Sanders & Pinhey note (ibid: 121) that the method could be used to generate a sample of persons who might not otherwise be easily found. I was interested in teachers who demonstrated both above and below average understanding of African peace traditions. A Likert scale was used to allow teachers to give relative weighting to their perceptions of African peace traditions (Ndaruga & Irwin, 2003:222).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted for the ten teachers who were selected on the basis of their responses to the questionnaire. According to Patton (1990:287-290) and (Ndaruga 2004:131)

semi-structured interviews have the ability to guide the researcher on question sequence using pre-prepared questions but also allowing flexibility to alter sequence and wording in order to probe further. Purposive sampling was used in this phase of the study. This concurs with what Patton (ibid: 171) refers to as the “intensity sampling technique” where cases are selected for being rich in information that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely (but not extremely). Patton refers to the intensity sampling technique as the selection of, for insistence, above average or below average, good or poor teachers and not selecting the exceptional cases. The interviews were used to probe some responses further, which emerged or were generated in the questionnaire.

## **Study Results**

### ***Teachers’ Understanding of Peace***

The first aspect of inquiry in this study was teachers understanding of the term peace. Teachers were asked to explain in a questionnaire their understanding of the term peace. The purpose of this question was to explore the meaning teachers have generated about peace in their experience

with their indigenous traditions in their day to day experiences and misconceptions, if any, they have about peace. The study assumed that because of their position in society teachers experience indigenous traditions through their interaction with the grassroots people; they experience ubiquitous conflicts and participate in building peace in one way or the other. In the process, they participate in generating meaning on what peace entails.

Fifty two teachers responded to the question. Their responses revealed that teachers understand peace in three different ways. To some, peace is absence of violence. By this, they meant absence of overt physical harm to persons and to property which emanates from wars and riots. According to Assefa (1996:43), this conception of peace holds that the maintenance of law and order and the pursuit of stability are primarily objectives of peace. In this understanding of peace, the absence of visible (overt) violence in schools provides an indicator of successful peace and peace building. When there is no violence in schools, then there is peace. Caning and corporal punishments are usually the instruments used to bring about and enforce this 'type of peace' in schools. Regrettably, this is a view held by many teachers.

Assefa (1996:43) however, finds a shortcoming in this conception of peace. It preoccupies itself with controlling overt violence. This may condone or perpetrate more covert violence arising from unjust, repressive and oppressive punishments. According to Dr. Griffin as reported in Daily Nation (August 24, 2000) schools that over-use the cane make students resent the discipline measure and become violent. He attributed good performance of Starehe Boys to freedom of movement and speech. "We ensure an environment in which discipline and punishment are not synonymous and pupils are orderly, happy and free from undue stress", he observed.

For others, peace was viewed as a condition of tranquillity where there is no disagreement or disputes, conflicts and people, individually and collectively, live in calm and serenity. According to Assefa (1996), this conception fails to recognize conflict as a fact of life. He argues that instead of acknowledging its existence and learning to use appropriate mechanisms to deal with it, this conception can lead people into misguided perception that if you avoid conflict, it will go away.

For still others, peace goes beyond a preoccupation with the absence of conflict or



violence. It is seen as the transformation of conflictual and destructive interaction into more cooperative and constructive relationship. This understanding equates peace with conflict transformation and resolution. In this view, peace is not simply a state of general tranquillity or an imposed order that suppress discord, but rather a network of relationships full of energy and differences. According to Assefa (1996:43), in this conception of peace, structures are available through which personal and social differences can be identified and worked out in ways satisfactorily to all involved parties as well as to the society at large. Sometimes in this process, the status quo may be disturbed or long-standing structures may be shaken; but this definition maintains that peace is achieved only when the root causes of the differences or conflictual relationships are explored and resolved. Dialogue is an important ingredient in this conception. Institutions which have embraced dialogue in resolving their internal conflicts have reported few incidents of unrest. This explains why we have reduced cases of unrest in our universities.

Notwithstanding, the responses suggested that teachers are aware of what peace entails. This

is important because teachers cannot champion something that is inadequately understood and conceptualized. Narrow conception of the term may influence the way they build peace in schools.

### ***Teachers' Awareness of Indigenous Peace Knowledge***

The next aspect of inquiry was to establish whether teachers were aware of indigenous peace knowledge. This was done through a questionnaire and the interviews. The aim of this question was to explore whether teachers have some knowledge about indigenous peace traditions which they have acquired through their experience with their indigenous traditions. As I have just noted above, teachers cannot champion something that is inadequately understood and conceptualized. The same applies to indigenous peace knowledge. Teachers cannot employ this knowledge in peace building if they have not adequately understood and conceptualized it. The question assumed that teachers have interacted with their indigenous traditions for a considerable length of time by either being brought up or having lived in rural areas, having participated in indigenous activities such as rituals or ceremonies or having interacted

with the grassroots people in one way or the other and are able to acquire some knowledge about peace through this interaction. Fifty one teachers responded to the question. Their responses revealed that the majority of the teachers are aware of indigenous peace knowledge.

### ***Sources of Indigenous Peace Knowledge***

The study also explored through a questionnaire where teachers learnt these indigenous peace knowledge. Forty three teachers responded to the question. The aim of this question was to establish avenues through which teachers learn indigenous knowledge. Some of the responses included learning institutions, elders, books, church, peers, workshops, community, media, and peace clubs.

Learning institutions were identified as a major source and conduit of indigenous knowledge. By learning institutions, they were referring to schools, colleges and universities. Teachers' responses revealed that there were many opportunities through which teachers as students were exposed to indigenous knowledge. This is because learning institutions bring together people

from various cultural backgrounds and there are numerous opportunities through which these cultural mosaics interact hence transmitting indigenous knowledge. They gave examples of cultural activities such as inter-cultural competitions among pupils, cultural dances and other informal interactions that schools used to organize. This concurs with what Datta (1984:33) observes regarding the role of learning institutions in preserving and passing on of culture from generation to generation. It is also in line with what the Government requires of learning institutions in Kenya.

Elders were ranked second. Teachers were of the view that elders still participate in generating life through their experience, which they pass on to younger ones. They know how life comes about and how it ought to be preserved and passed on. Fugleang (1982:2) describes elders as the “information storage and processing unit” of a society, like the hard drive on a computer. Throughout history, elders have helped communities to build and maintain peace by teaching indigenous values and virtues, which enhanced African morality and community life. Evidence indicates that many cases were (and still

are) resolved and reconciled by elders after other means failed. They are thus accorded maximum respect for their wisdom.

Books were ranked third in the transmission of indigenous knowledge. Teachers cited books such as *Facing Mount Kenya* by Jomo Kenyatta and Ngugi wa Thiongo's *The River Between*. History books were also identified as a source of indigenous knowledge. The reason for this could be that the research respondents are literate and are able to read on their own. At the same time, teachers are expected to be widely well read so that they have the ability to make pupils understand their environment and their cultures as is required by the school curriculum.

One teacher mentioned the media as a source of indigenous knowledge. By this he meant the print media, radio, and television. This underlies the important role media plays in transmitting values within society. As Schultze (1994:17) has noted, media is currently competing directly with parents, pastors and teachers for the job of raising children. At the same time, traditional authority figures are increasingly distraught over the apparent power of the media to shape the youth's values and beliefs.

Five teachers suggested that they learnt these traditions from their peers. They recalled their childhood days and how this came to shape their lives. According to Datta (1984:67), a peer group shelters and protects its members. It gives them psychological sustenance by meeting emotional needs of affection, understanding and acceptance. Peer groups provide an effective learning situation: it transmits the culture of society, teaches certain roles and social expectations and conditions the attitudes and sentiments of its members.

One teacher identified peace clubs as a source of information on indigenous peace knowledge. By peace clubs, he meant voluntary associations or extracurricular movements within school that are aimed at building peace. Through clubs, students learn many things not necessarily about what their teachers intend them to learn. The students can decide on the activities to undertake as well as the timing. There is also minimum external pressure and the activities could be confined to a single theme, usually from the members' interests. He said that the club was initiated by a local NGO and is engaged in a number of activities all aimed at building peace in

their school. The NGO also provided some sporting materials to be used in sporting activities as one way of building peace. The members of the club are also engaged in activities such as discussions, volunteer service, and peace competitions.

### ***Examples of Peace Traditions***

The study went further to explore whether teachers are able to pinpoint some of these indigenous peace traditions. The aim of this question was to explore what aspects of indigenous traditions teachers consider to be of value in building peace in schools. This is important because there are aspects of the indigenous traditions that could propagate and promote violence rather than peace. For instance, some traditions such as the Maasai emphasize warriorhood and strong exercise of patriarchal authority. These may not be oriented towards peace building. The question therefore aimed at understanding the misconception teachers could have on indigenous peace knowledge. What do they consider to be a peace tradition? What values do these traditions promote? These misconceptions may lead to generation of negative meanings about peace. Forty three teachers responded to the question.

Thirteen teachers suggested myths, stories, proverbs and riddles as a source of information on indigenous peace knowledge. They highlighted their entertaining and instructive values which constitute the most popular and most important form of oral literature. They noted that apart from fulfilling the normal artist creativity and aesthetic functions, they have morals to convey to the listeners while at the same time they play important valuable education and informative roles. According to Ociti (1972), in the indigenous setting children learnt by listening to myths, legends, folk-tales, proverbs, riddles and folk songs, rhymes, and other aspects of oral literature. In the deep well of folk-lore were found moral messages, histories, wisdom and philosophy or outlook into life of each clan.

Three teachers suggested indigenous symbols such as peace trees and sacred sites, and their importance in peace building. They recalled a reconciliation meeting held in Kariobangi after the Kariobangi killings in 2002 that claimed over twenty lives (Daily Nation, March 3, 2002). They learnt how peace trees and sacred sites are used in peace building in different ethnic groups throughout Kenya. They said that peace tree seedlings were used as symbols of reconciliation



during this meeting. The survivors from different ethnic groups exchanged peace trees with those believed to be the perpetrators of the massacre. Those who lost their family members took with them peace trees to plant at the gravesite of the deceased as a symbol of reconciliation and forgiveness. They also established a peace tree garden in Kariobangi as a symbol of reconciliation among the Kariobangi community.

Fifteen teachers suggested indigenous songs, dances, and ceremonies as a source of information on indigenous peace knowledge. The teachers were of the view that the songs, the dances and the ceremonies have important peace values they unconsciously instil upon children on listening. The teachers' responses concur with Boulding's (2000:103) observation regarding the role of ceremonies in peace building. She observes that celebrations are the play life of a society, occasions for embodying the experienced beauty of both inner and outer life worlds in song, dance, poetry and the creation of symbolic imagery. They are also occasions for reaffirmation of identity and social values. At their best, feasting and gift giving emphasize sharing and reciprocity, a scene of the community as one family. Celebrations are a powerful reinforcement of peaceful and caring

community relations. It is a time for letting go of grudges, of reconciliation among persons whose relations have become strained. A good example is the bull fighting ceremony among the Luhya people where the entire community comes together to celebrate the winning bull.

Two teachers suggested sporting activities. They observed that sporting activities help in promoting collaboration, cooperation, interdependence, communication skills, fair play and justice and the need to abide by rules. Sporting activities are an ignition of creative imagination which would be the motor of all future thoughts and reason. According to Boulding (2000:105), sporting activities allow the imagination of children to explore alternatives to everyday reality. These alternatives may be thought of as images of possible futures. A society that encourages the play of the mind encourages the exploration of other and better ways of ordering life ways.

### ***How Teachers Employ Indigenous Peace Knowledge in Building Peace in Schools***

The other aspect of inquiry was on how teachers employ indigenous peace knowledge in

building peace in schools. Teachers were asked both through a questionnaire and during the interview to state whether and how they employ indigenous peace knowledge in building peace in schools. The question assumed that teachers respond to conflicts on the basis of the indigenous meaning they have about peace. Having experienced their indigenous traditions for a considerable length of time, the possibilities are that the teachers would respond to conflicts on the basis of the existing 'social meaning' about peace. The social meaning in this case refers to the already prescribed meaning about peace, which as already noted has been passed on from generation to generation. The teacher has internalized this and uses this understanding either the way it is or modifies it to suit the prevailing situations. Thirty nine teachers responded to the question.

The responses revealed that teachers do employ indigenous knowledge in peace building in various ways. For some, they employ this knowledge when resolving conflicts. It emerged that teachers do not simply respond to conflicts because it has occurred but are involved in proactive teaching about how pupils should live in peace with each other. This teaching is not written

down. It is clearly known to both the teachers and the pupils. It is stated everywhere, in every activity, at virtually every hour of the day. It is embedded in the structure of their language.

For others, they employ indigenous knowledge when teaching in class. The responses revealed that teachers do not merely teach for academic purposes. They also pass on life values necessary for keeping conflicts to a minimum. These values not only help pupils in understanding their environment but also direct pupils on what the society considers to be right or wrong so as to build peace. They also direct them on how they should respond to any conflict that does occur. The responses also reveal that resolving conflicts is not merely clarifying what is right and what is wrong. It involves teaching pupils what they should do as members of the society. There may be clarification of what is right and wrong but such clarification seems to be secondary to lessons learnt in practical storytelling about the kind of things that would happen if the pupils continue to do what the school and the society considers as wrong. This confirms that schools play a role in inculcating societal norms to pupils.

Storytelling featured prominently as one way through which teachers employ indigenous peace knowledge in peace building. This could be because storytelling is interesting and persuasive teaching skill whereby teachers create the environment in which the story is told. It also entertains children and is capable of holding children's attention by mirroring real life at the same time teaching important concepts, attitudes and skills. Moreover, it provides opportunities for child participation, for retelling and repetition of the story, and for deeper understanding. Achebe (1987:2) has correctly observed that a storyteller weaves the fabric of the memory so life takes on meaning. According to Ayindo et al (2001:3), we shape our world through stories. We transform not just the narrative but also the world around us. Through the stories of a people you hear the music of their triumphs, failures, frustrations and despair in the quest to make the world more human. It is by telling stories that we become makers of history rather than objects of it. It is through storytelling that we enhance a culture of peace.

### ***Challenges in employing Indigenous Knowledge in Peace Building***

The study sought to identify challenges that hinder teachers from employing this knowledge in building peace in schools effectively. A number of challenges were highlighted. Diversity of ethnic backgrounds was identified as a major challenge in employing indigenous knowledge in peace building. Some teachers explained that different communities have different views regarding peace building. For instance, some communities may consider circumcision as an initiative to build peace in that it makes an individual more responsible and accountable to the society. This may not be so in those communities that do not practise circumcision. What a particular community considers as an appropriate way of building peace may not be appropriate in another community/

Language barrier was also identified as a challenge. At times, it requires one to use an indigenous language to fully approximate the intended meaning latent in an indigenous expression. Many pupils have not mastered their mother tongues well. At the same time, many teachers are limited to one indigenous language –

their mother tongues, hence are unable to employ knowledge from other ethnic groups. This leads to another problem of making the indigenous knowledge of the teacher more superior than other languages.

Pupils' background was also noted as a challenge in employing indigenous knowledge in peace building. One teacher argued that some pupils have been brought up in a Christian background and they consider indigenous practices as 'paganism.' She gave an example of when she was in secondary school. In their school, they used to have inter-house competition where students would organize some cultural dances for competition. She said she normally exempted herself from such activities because they went against her religious beliefs. She however observed that there is much in common between African traditions and Christianity. Traditionally, the teacher noted, if there were problems in the family or the community such as sickness, elders would slaughter a bull and everyone participated in sharing this meal. Women would fetch water, young girls would fetch firewood, and elders would send young boys for errands. Once the meals were ready, the whole community would come together to eat. Elders would then offer prayers for the

whole community. Today, the teacher ensures that a joint prayer is made before she starts the class and before they leave for home.

Parents were also blamed for being an obstacle in employing indigenous knowledge in peace building. Some teachers complained that some parents do not accept that their children are in the wrong. They side with their children thus complicating peace-building initiatives. This denies peace building the relational goodwill that comes about when respect and ties to the family and age comes in as a regulator of peace building. Related to this, some teachers suggested that some parents do not counsel their children. They felt that parents have a role to play in building peace in schools. If parents do not join hands with the teachers then peace building becomes difficult.

Lack of resources was also noted as a major challenge in employing indigenous knowledge. Some teachers complained that there are no adequate learning and teaching materials on indigenous knowledge. They also felt that there is a lack of good resource persons to help in building peace in schools. This has been brought about by the fact that traditional authority figures such as elders and the parents are increasingly rendered



irrelevant by the apparent power of the media to shape youth's values and beliefs.

Frequency of conflicts in schools was also noted as a challenge in employing indigenous knowledge in peace building. Teachers were of the view that peace building is a process that requires a lot of creativity and time to sustain. When many conflicts such as theft, fighting and other wrong behaviours that disturb smooth running of the school occur at the same time, they do not have time to think of the best approach to resolve the conflict. They instead resort to punishment as the only way to deal with a conflict. This denies the peace building process of the values which guide it. A typical statement is that punishment responds to the 'hurt' of wrongdoing with the 'hurt' of punishment. That is, if the wrongdoing was serious, then punishment is serious. A peace building process is however, guided by the value of healing. It removes the offending behaviour of pupils from a criminal framework and places it within an educational or/healthy framework.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, the study reveals that teachers generate meaning about peace through symbolic

interaction. This meaning is derived from their interaction with the grassroots people and their indigenous traditions. The meaning derived is in concord with the existing social meaning about peace. The social meaning in this case refers to the already prescribed meaning about peace that has been passed on from generation to generation. Teachers have internalized these meanings and use this understanding to build peace in schools. This implies that peace building in schools should have a historical vision, building on existing peace building traditions. It also suggests the need for teachers' training institutions to put more emphasis on cultural activities so as to increase the opportunities of learning about indigenous knowledge. In regards to where they learnt this knowledge the analysis revealed that elders are an important source of indigenous peace knowledge. The study points out that there is a place and way that the elders can make a contribution to peace building in schools. Teachers should give the elders a view and a direct experience of the kind of conflicts in which they encounter in schools, give them a chance to explore what is possible; help them do what they think could contribute towards peace building, and perhaps strengthen their capacity to use appropriate tools and skills.

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