

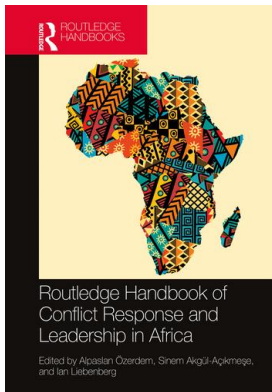
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### **Community Leadership and Alternative approaches to Western Conflict Resolution Models**

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# COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO WESTERN CONFLICT RESOLUTION MODELS

*Bezen Balamir Coşkun*

## Introduction

Culture is one of the often analysed variables in both conflict and conflict resolution. In the literature, Moore (1974) and Gilady and Russett (2002) discussed the parties' political cultures during conflict resolution processes. Bercovitch and Elgström (2001) evaluated the national culture in their analyses of conflict resolution in a similar vein. Generally, culture appears as a primary variable in different parties' perceptions of conflict and conflict resolution. There is also a general agreement over the importance of cultural differences in conflict resolution and negotiations. In their studies, Katzenstein (1996), Barnett and Finnemore (1999), and Kier (1995) discussed the role of culture in national security perceptions and the states' approaches towards the issues of security, conflict, and cooperation in international affairs. In a more recent study, Jeong (2008) evaluated the parties' approaches to conflict and conflict resolution within the context of low-context culture–high-context culture (Jeong 2008: 29–30). According to Jeong, actors who socialize in high-context cultures tend to behave within social constraints and socially attributed attitudes. On the one hand, people from low-context backgrounds are inclined to follow institutional restraints and laws and rules to solve the problems (Jeong 2008). Jeong's differentiation between low and high context not only determines parties' approaches to conflict resolution but also the methods they choose for conflict resolution. According to Lederach (1995), parties from low-context cultures prefer formal mediation models in mediation processes, whereas the ones from high-context cultures prefer informal mediation methods. In high-context cultures, mediators have to be chosen wisely from those who can have authority over conflicting parties and are respected by society.

Furthermore, Geertz (1983) argued that in order to understand a particular conflict, we need to understand the socio-political structures of the given system. He underlined the distinction between cephalic (hierarchical) and acephalic (communal) societies to solve a conflict. In this context, complex intersectionalities between culture and politics have their particular ways and means for conflict resolution.

Against this background, scholars from non-Western contexts often criticize sociological and political analyses of the conflicts in non-Western contexts as being biased and orientalist. The

near-impossibility of explaining non-Western social and cultural dynamics with Western analytical and theoretical frameworks is the other line of criticism often expressed by the scholars and decision makers from the South. On the other hand, as the Western concepts of mediation and conflict resolution are part of the social construction of conflict, including theories about the “human nature” and “natural human relationship”, these culture-specific social constructions of conflict may themselves be objects of intercultural conflicts. In this regard, cultural mediation or operationalization of culture-specific conflict resolution strategies could solve the problems that result from the imposition of Western frameworks to resolve conflicts. In his seminal book on conflict resolution, Ramsbotham (2005) took non-Western methods and models for conflict resolution as an indispensable part of intercultural dialogue and understanding. Following Ramsbotham et al.'s (2005) lead, here it is argued that we need authentic conflict resolution, mediation, and negotiation, as well as community leadership models, as state-society relations and complex socio-political dynamics of African societies are very different from the Western ones.

As experienced during and after the Cold War, international and domestic attempts for reconciliation of conflicts in Africa failed due to the foreignness of the resolution methods, which largely ignored the wisdom of traditional African conflict resolution practices. Here, it is argued that, in order to reduce the likelihood of violence and to prevent a return to conflict, the engagement of the community in post-conflict resolution efforts is required. In this context, community leadership plays a vital role in effective conflict resolution. Thus the chapter focuses on community leadership. Therefore, this chapter reviews selected conflict resolution strategies from African communities and discusses anthropological contributions in our Western-centric understanding of conflict resolution. Throughout the chapter, the following conflict resolution strategies to resolve conflicts within society from African communities are reviewed: Ubuntu, a South African philosophy to deal with conflicts of all sorts, and Gacaca, a grassroots strategy from Rwanda.

### **Community leadership in Africa and communal approaches to conflict resolution**

In its classical sense, leadership refers to the activity of leading a group of people or an organization or the ability to do this. According to this definition, leadership involves “establishing a clear vision, sharing that vision with others so that they will follow willingly, providing the information, knowledge, and methods to realize that vision, and coordinating and balancing the conflicting interests of all members and stakeholders” (BusinessDictionary 2020). Yukl et al. (2009) defined leadership in three ways: leader as a person, leadership as a role, and leadership as a process.

In the local government context, Leach and Wilson (2000: 49) defined leadership as “the ability to overcome resistance to particular courses of action, notably to cause others to agree to something they were not necessarily initially predisposed to”. However, this traditional leadership definition does not cover the idea of community leadership. Leadership has to be considered a collective relational phenomenon that is also cultured (Kirk and Shutte 2004). In this line of thinking, leadership grows out of and is a product of the socio-cultural setting.

Concerning the concept of community leadership, it does not mean leadership over communities. Earlier literature on community leadership suggested that it is a collaborative, ongoing, influential process based on the relationships between people (see Northouse 1997; Price and Behrens 2003). There are also views on community leadership that highlight the need for citizens' participation in shaping policies that affect their lives (see Robinson 1994; Langone

and Rohs 1995). The term ‘community leadership’ refers to “the local authority as community leader act[ing] as an agent of its local communities” (Sullivan et al. 2006: 492). However, the authority of community leaders does not come from a process of election. The authority requires the unwritten consent of the local community itself. Community leadership begins with identifying community needs and demands; then community leaders try to broker an agreement among conflictual parties. They also facilitate collaboration within the community to achieve longer-term public good. According to Kirk and Shutte (2004), community leadership offers communities of difference an opportunity for effective integration.

Community leadership plays a crucial role in acephalic (communal) and high-context culture of African societies. A Shona proverb illustrates the African communities’ communal characteristics: “*Chara chimive hachitswane inda*” (“A thumb working on its own is useless”). In this view, a finger has to work with other fingers to function (Mbigi and Maree 1995). However, there is a need for a leader to influence individuals and groups and help the community to effectively perform (Masango 2002). In this context, traditional African models of community leadership, such as Ubuntu, have insights to offer for the process and the conduct of community leadership (Mbigi and Maree 1995).

Given the two imperatives of connective leadership, authenticity, and accountability, the notion of connective leadership appears to be the more comfortable leadership style regarding African perceptions of community, as illustrated by the concept of Ubuntu (Kirk and Shutte 2004: 242). Lipman-Blumen (2000) defined authenticity as a leader’s dedication to the group’s goals and welfare and accountability as a leader’s efforts to achieve transparency and truth-telling. According to Lipman-Blumen (2017), connective leadership enables individuals and groups with diverse backgrounds to live and work together in harmony. The findings of Bolden and Kirk’s (2005) project on Leadership in Africa are that the application of leadership in Africa shows characteristics of connective leadership: “leadership begins with accepting and taking up one’s role within a community (or social) context, by viewing the concept of ‘self in community’ as the essential building block” of leadership (Bolden and Kirk 2005: 13).

Resolution of conflicts in high-context and communal contexts, like African communities, require community-based approaches. The majority of Western top-down conflict resolution models and strategies are based on the low context, culture, and hierarchical society type. Thus they have slim chances to reinforce positive peace in high-context, communal contexts; there is always a chance to return violence and conflict. Lederach (1995, 2003) proposed that we need community engagement in conflict resolution for positive peace. The best way for community engagement in resolving conflict is to find methods and models conducive to the community to lead the process. To define the range of measures necessary to transform conflict towards sustainable, peaceful relations and outcomes for communal societies, Lederach developed a community-based approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Community-based processes and participatory community forums are often used “to build social capital in divided societies by providing safe spaces for interaction, communication, and joint decision-making” and “to overcome mistrust and set a precedent for peaceful and constructive management of local disputes” (Haider 2009).

Lederach’s framework (2003) identified three dimensions that peace should be embedded in: (1) justice, (2) the building of right relationships, and (3) social structures that respect human rights. In this context, he argued for the need for constructive responses to violent conflict that seek constructive change. In this context, community-level conflict resolution approaches and community leadership in conflict resolution processes also help us to seek answers to the normative question of whether post-conflict justice and reconciliation should be determined at the global, national, or local level.

At the core of community-based approaches lie community institutions such as associations, cooperatives, civic associations, community-based organizations, and community leadership. Notably, community leadership provides an environment conducive to discussion, decision making, and implementation of decisions. The community leader acts as an intermediary between the community and local and national authorities and between the community and external agencies (Haider 2009).

Many communities in Africa have traditionally inherited community-based approaches and community leadership in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In Africa, there are indigenous traditions for peacebuilding, healing, and reconciliation. In the next sections of the chapter, two of the conflict resolution strategies from African communities are reviewed with a particular emphasis on the role of community leadership.

### **Ubuntu: “I am what I am because of who we all are”**

“Jacob, it does not matter, the color of your skin,” Banks said. “The fact that we’re human beings, shouldn’t that be enough that we treat each other with respect? It’s what we Africans call ubuntu”.

*(Lief and Thompson 2015: 38)*

Ubuntu, which is an intrinsic part of African cultural heritage, is the crucial pillar of the African worldview, which emphasizes the sacrality of life and thus respect for the human person. As stated by Mbiti (1969: 109), the cardinal belief of Ubuntu is that a person can only be a person through others. Thus the main motto of the Ubuntu philosophy is, “I am what I am because of who we all are”. It is a philosophy of coexistence, whereby a person can only be conceived of in relation to others.

Ubuntu represents the embodiment of the political, cultural, economic, and social dynamics of African society. Ubuntu is about the wholeness of humanity that is realised in and through other people. The Ubuntu worldview is based on the belief in interconnections and relationships. Ubuntu says, “I am human only because you are human. If I undermine your humanity, I dehumanise myself. You must do what you can to maintain this great harmony, which is perpetually undermined by resentment, anger, desire for vengeance”. That is why African jurisprudence is restorative rather than retributive (Wilson 2001). The core philosophy of Ubuntu resonates Bankowski’s view of reconciliation as starting from the recognition of common humanity and equality in pain (Bankowski 2007). Ubuntu views a community which is based on the principles of reciprocity, respect for dignity, cohesion, and solidarity. Ubuntu inspires human beings to expose themselves to others, to recognize the differences in their humanness. Ubuntu unites the self and the world, respect for the articulation of beliefs and practices of others – reflection developed into co-reflection (reflecting with one another). Louw (2002) argued that Ubuntu brings the infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and reconciliation. In this sense, Ubuntu is the essence of democracy with pursuing an effort to reach agreement or consensus. As Ubuntu constitutes personhood through other persons and appreciates other persons’ points, it is considered as an appropriate response to intercultural conflict.

Retributive justice is a Western approach. The African understanding of justice is more retroactive than retributive justice. Thus, in contrast to the vengeance-based retributive justice approach, African retroactive-based reconciliation combines human rights and Ubuntu. The final clause of the 1993 Interim Constitution of South Africa stated that the legacy of hatred, fear, guilt, and revenge “be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not

for vengeance, a need for reparation but not retaliation, a need for Ubuntu but not for victimisation” (Krog 2002: vi). In a similar vein, the Preamble of 1995 National Unity and Reconciliation Act, which established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was based on the idea that Ubuntu as an indigenous South African value and as a multicultural unifier, a golden thread, runs across cultural lines (Wilson 2001). According to this view, reconciliation becomes possible when people connect through their humanity and when they manage to formulate a morality based on their common humanity (Krog 2002: 45).

Ubuntu embraces spiritual and material elements of human existence, which is unified, interconnected, and integrated. To be out of harmony is harmful to the well-being and survival of the whole. The entire society involves the resolution of the conflict in their respective communities. Such an approach assumes that conflict is resolved by re-including the offending member within the community. Harmony is a universal goal, and African conflict resolution methods seek to restore peace by integrative, inclusionary, and reconciliatory methods (Zartman 2000). In the African mediations, the sentence is nested within an integrative set of payoffs concerning the reinsertion of the offender back into the community and its values. Justice is part of this exercise as compensation for loss, not as retribution for an offence. It is the essence of customary law in South Africa. Traditional courts sought to arrive at a settlement rather than hand down a judgement. The emphasis is on rehabilitation and reconciliation and on restoring harmony in the community rather than punishment. Thus the primary aim of Xosa law is to preserve tribal equilibrium as its practices can be extended outside the community to ethnic and racial groups – the Ubuntu worldview reflected in the post-apartheid-era peacebuilding efforts in South Africa.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to heal the wounds of those who lost their loved ones during the apartheid period. By telling the truth and revealing the cruel acts committed, perpetrators were told: “never again”. Truths brought atonement, reconciliation, and forgiveness to rebuild the nation. In an interview, then Minister of Justice Dullah Omar said that “we put our country on a sound moral basis. . . . South Africa needs a mechanism that would open up the truth for public scrutiny. However, to humanize our society, we had to put across the idea of moral responsibility” (Krog 2002: 5). Cockrell sees Ubuntu as “the saccharine assertions of rainbow jurisprudence” (1996: 12). Post-apartheid nation-building in South Africa required the authentic principles of Ubuntu, namely honest appreciation of differences and authentic respect for human, individual, and minority rights (Louw 2002).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission collected 20,000 statements from victims; 2000 of them were collected in public hearings. In her book, *The Country of My Skull*, Antjie Krog (2002) shared many excerpts from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission statements and her interviews with victims. Many excerpts, such as the following quotation from a mother whose son was one of the seven young boys who were killed by the police in Guguletu, hinted at a common agreement among victims and community leaders as essential in Ubuntu for reconciliation: “This thing called reconciliation . . . if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, . . . becomes human again, this man is that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back . . . then I agree, I support it all” (Krog 2002: 109).

Naturally, the principles of Ubuntu as a leadership philosophy emphasize collectivism, seeking consensus, and mutual understanding. Thus community leaders must maintain harmony through leadership, healing skills, and interpersonal processes. Leadership with Ubuntu principles acknowledges the importance of respecting the individual and encourages the members of the community to support one another (Nzimakwe 2014). Community leaders with Ubuntu recognize their interconnectedness. Thus they follow a connective leadership style in their community which is a more cooperative and participatory conflict resolution and reconciliation process. Community leaders who have Ubuntu are considered as natural healers to deal with

collective vulnerability and encourage true collaboration (Nzimakwe 2014). Given the listed characteristics of a community leader with Ubuntu, the name that comes to mind is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Desmond Tutu's reconciliation theology has changed the way in which we view reconciliation and peace. Tutu Africanized the concept of reconciliation by harming Christian beliefs with Ubuntu philosophy. Tutu's Ubuntu theology has formed the ideational bases of post-apartheid reconciliation efforts in South Africa.

### Justice on the grass: Gacaca courts in Rwanda

The 1994 genocide in Rwanda affected the lives of more than one million people, including 250,000 women who were raped. The genocide left Rwandans traumatized. After the genocide, a justice and reconciliation process was initiated. The peace and reconciliation process aimed for all Rwandans to live side by side in peace. As part of the process, a three-level judiciary system was established to deal with the perpetrators of genocide: the international level (the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda), the national level (the national court system), and the community level (the Gacaca courts). In 2005, the Rwandan government re-established the traditional community court system to bring about justice and reconciliation at the grassroots level. More than 12,000 community-based courts tried more than 1.2 million cases (Outreach Programme on the Rwanda Genocide and the United Nations 2014).

The Gacaca trials served to promote reconciliation as victims learnt the truth about the deaths of their family members and relatives throughout the Gacaca courts, where perpetrators had the opportunity to confess their crimes and to ask for forgiveness in front of their community. The Gacaca courts gave lower sentences if the person sought reconciliation with the community (Outreach Programme on the Rwanda Genocide and the United Nations 2014). Human Rights Watch (2009: 1) defined this as "one of the most ambitious transitional justice experiments in history, blending local conflict resolution traditions with a modern punitive legal system to deliver justice". Rwandan President Paul Kagame argued that the Gacaca courts system was an "African solution to African problems" (Kagame 2009). Hundreds of reports, scholarly studies, and newspaper articles exist on the success and failure of the Gacaca courts. This chapter does not repeat the arguments about the legacy of the Gacaca courts in Rwanda but attempts to understand the Gacaca courts as a community-based conflict resolution process.

In the Kinyarwanda language, Gacaca means 'a bed of soft green grass'. In ancient tradition, community leaders gathered on Gacaca to discuss and resolve conflicts among the members of the community. The origins of this conflict resolution model can be traced back to the 15th century. As Molenaar (2005) stated, there are few certainties about the origins of the Gacaca court. It is believed that it was organized among families to settle their minor disputes that the official elite could not deal with. In early versions of Gacaca courts, respected community members were chosen as the *inyangamugayo* (people of integrity or judges). Generally, the *inyangamugayo* were not professional judges. As argued by Eramian (2008: 10), "[A] fundamental assumption behind the Gacaca process was that disputes adversely affected the entire society and that everyone had a vested interest in their peaceful settlement". Eramian's assumption pointed out an awareness of "how the collective is implicated in disputes and grievances" (Eramian 2008: 10).

In its traditional context, people of integrity facilitated a discussion among community members. They were usually older men of the community; thus *inyangamugayo* were respected for their wisdom. In Gacaca courts, each party had the opportunity to be heard. After all had explained their position, the *inyangamugayo* reached a decision about the resolution of the problem. However, their decision needed to be approved by all members of the community. When

the community members had approved the decision, the meeting was closed by sharing a drink as a sign of reconciliation. If the parties were not happy with the decision of *inyangamugayo*, they had the right to take their case to a higher authority. In traditional Gacaca, it was believed that the Gacaca court's decision impacted the entire community, not just the individual in question.

Later on, the colonial administration introduced a Western-style justice system in Rwanda, but the tradition of Gacaca courts remained as the primary system in resolving inter-community-level conflicts. Gradually, colonial administration weakened the tradition by appointing administrative officials to the Gacaca court proceedings. The Gacaca courts system began to be used only in a small village for domestic conflicts and petty crimes, while Western-style courts prevailed in the judiciary system in Rwanda (Gacaca Community Justice 2018). Standards of Gacaca courts were revised in the postcolonial period to restore the system. During the postcolonial period, the Gacaca courts were employed as an administrative tool in determining the seriousness of a case. The *inyangamugayo* (people of integrity), who are local government officials, were introduced to attend Gacaca court proceedings to analyse the levels of importance of the cases and to process transfers (Gacaca Community Justice 2018).

In January 2001, Organic Law No. 20/2000 reintroduced a modernized version of Gacaca as a recognized system of conflict resolution. The modernized version of Gacaca included some traditional features of the system such as the *inyangamugayo* (people of integrity/judges) of the Gacaca. The *inyangamugayo* were selected from respected members of the community. Also, a large General Assembly of community members attended the hearings (Republic of Rwanda 2012). As pointed out by Clark (2010: 70), both traditional and modern Gacaca courts placed a high value on “public perception and the linkage of Gacaca and notions of social cohesion and reconciliation”.

In initiating the Gacaca process, Rwanda followed a path similar to many post-war African contexts. In this regard, truth and reconciliation commissions became essential tools of peace-building (Lederach 1999; Rotberg and Thompson 2000; Hayner 2001; Kotzé 2002; Brounéus 2003; Bar-Siman-Tov 2004; Stover and Weinstein 2004; Borer 2006). The common argument, as well as the political rhetoric, is that “truth-telling is cathartic or healing and will thereby advance reconciliation” (Brounéus 2008). In this sense, Gacaca was a combination of a trial and a truth commission. The Gacaca court aimed to decide the guilt or innocence of the accused. At the same time, the purpose of the Gacaca courts was to uncover the truth of what happened during the genocide. Throughout this process, the *inyangamugayo* (people of integrity/judges) played significant roles not just as judges but also as community leaders in providing an environment conducive to discussion, decision making, and implementation of decisions during the Gacaca court sessions.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, two of the African communal approaches to conflict resolution and the role of community leadership were reviewed as alternatives to Western conflict resolution approaches. Ubuntu, a philosophy of life in South Africa, might be considered an alternative approach for resolving conflicts at all levels. On the other hand, Gacaca courts provided a communal approach to inter-community disputes. They both employed model national- and international-level negotiations and conflict resolution. Gacaca courts were part of justice and reconciliation attempts in Rwanda, and Ubuntu was the main philosophy behind the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in post-apartheid South Africa.

By employing all three levels of judgement, the case of Gacaca courts in Rwanda and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's conduct provided insights for two interdisciplinary



theoretical debates: the anthropological and philosophical question of relativism versus universalism and the socio-legal question of retribution versus restoration. All of the three cases indicated the existence of complex relationships between approaches to conflict resolution adopted at each level.

From an anthropological perspective, disagreements exist over the efficacy of traditional community justice as a result of the problematic relationship between memory and reconciliation observed in smaller communities. On the other hand, some therapist-clinicians like Herman (1992) argued that testimonies in front of community courts like the Gacaca courts cause individual psychological healing. Individuals achieve catharsis by narrating their experiences, and gradually testimonies lead to collective-level healing.

Lastly, it is essential to note that we should not be romantic about the communal approaches to and community leadership in conflict resolution as being organic and decentralized. We should be sceptical of characterizations of those models when they are exploited as merely another means for states to reinforce their influence among those communities.

Here it is suggested that the conflict resolution approaches that originated from meso-level community practices could provide blueprints for the resolution of macro- and international-level conflicts and disputes too. However, the following questions still remain to be answered before deciding the usefulness of communal models in resolving international conflicts. What kinds of conflicts did communal conflict resolution practices and community leadership handle best? Can community leadership and communal practices give us insights that enrich global efforts of international peacebuilding and reconciliation?

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