Women
and Peace in Africa

*Case studies
on traditional conflict
resolution practices*

Foreword

The collection of case studies that follows results from work undertaken during the mid-nineties within the framework of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Women and Culture of Peace Programme (1996-2001). They vary in length and depth of analysis, and reflect the styles of the various authors. This variation is also reflected in the use of different methodological approaches to evaluate the role of women and peace in the six African cases and so present an interesting collage of traditional conflict resolution and peace-building practices.

Words of thanks must be said to all those who collaborated on this work, especially Mr Anatole Ayissi, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), whose editing skills and knowledge of traditional conflict resolution practices used in Africa helped harmonize the case studies. This publication is a good example of inter-agency cooperation within the United Nations System, which can only serve to strengthen our relevance and capacity for action in Member States.

It is hoped that the case studies will provide useful insights into the relevance of traditions as well as inspire positive social change that promotes women's role in peace-building at the community, national, regional and international levels.

<div align="right">

Eduardo Cifuentes Muñoz
Director
Division for Human Rights and the Struggle against Discrimination

</div>

Table of Contents

Introduction

These case studies on women's contribution to a culture of peace in Africa were initiated and undertaken as part of the UNESCO Culture of Peace Project, more specifically by the Women and the Culture of Peace Programme which had a special focus on Africa.

UNESCO and UNIDIR are proud to be joining hands in publishing these case studies during this first decade of the millennium, declared as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World, to help give voice to women who want to be equal partners in formal and informal conflict resolution processes and peace negotiations.

The case studies confirm the different and essential roles women from Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Namibia, Tanzania and Somalia have played and can play in preventing and resolving conflicts and promoting a culture of peace using traditional methods of conflict resolution and peace building.

Despite their different geographical locations and cultural backgrounds, the case studies present some universal trends underlying women's contribution to peace-building and conflict resolution. We are, therefore, confident that these case studies will be useful not only for African women but also for women and men from other continents who are courageously and creatively struggling for alternatives to violence and war.

In these case studies women are often seen as the transmitters of cultural values to their progeny and to future generations, including through the use of artistic expressions such as song, dance and folk tales. They act as intermediaries in conflict situations, undertaking reconnaissance missions to assess possibilities for peace and subsequently facilitating communication and peace negotiations. They are also used (or accept to be used) as 'bridge-building' blocks between hostile or fighting communities, notably through 'inter-community marriage' whereby a daughter of one community is given in

marriage to a son of another community as a way of sealing an alliance for peace and reconciliation.

These women are stereotyped as peacemakers, thought of as being more pacific than men and often symbolized as paragons of goodness and tenderness, even where they have been known to be actively engaged in wars for independence and other types of struggles. This stereotyping is reinforced through socialization patterns that promote women primarily as childbearers and good wives, caregivers, arbitrators of conflict and peace promoters in the family and community.

Although women possess a wealth of experience and insight, often accumulated informally, the case studies remind us of their marginalization in formal decision-making fora beyond the community level. This is contrary to the policy purported in the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (October 2000) on Women, Peace and Security. In many African societies as in other countries and societies, after the fighting and conflicts have ended, and despite their active participation in bringing the conflict to a halt, women are often relegated to the background and marginalized both in formal peace negotiations and in the rebuilding of war-torn societies. A fact sheet circulated by the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, (NY, October 2002) highlighted that in recent years, women had been involved in very few peace negotiations. The report of the Group cites only Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, just two of fourteen African countries currently in conflict or post-conflict situations.

Women also have a vested interest in preventing violent conflicts, as these tend to have gender-specific consequences. In addition to the injuries and deaths suffered by all segments of the population during periods of violent conflicts and war, existing inequalities between women and men are exacerbated. Women and girls are often forced to migrate and subjected to gender-based crimes such as rape and other violations of their human rights and dignity. It is not coincidental that women and children account for more than three-quarters of the 40 million persons displaced as a result of violent conflicts around the world.

At the Pan African Women's Conference for Peace and Non-violence organized by UNESCO (Zanzibar, 1999), women from 53 African countries issued the Zanzibar Declaration, regretting the fact that peace negotiations were male-dominated, regardless of women's efforts and initiatives to resolve conflicts and promote peace on the continent, notably through consensus-building and dialogue. They committed themselves to engage in consultations, research and networking to develop a comprehensive and gender sensitive view of conflict prevention, management and resolution, whilst calling on various institutional bodies, regional and international, to give support to women's peacemaking and peace-building efforts.

9

Through this collaborative endeavour, UNESCO, UNIDIR and African women working for the establishment of a culture of peace on the continent hope to share knowledge on traditional conflict resolution and peace building practices. The aim is to strengthen the capacities of the 'children of the world' to prevent disputes from developing into violent conflicts, existing conflicts from further escalating, simmering conflicts from reigniting and increase the availability of alternative, gender-sensitive and peaceful solutions.

The role of Burundian women in the peaceful settlement of conflicts

Josephine Ntahobari
Basilissa Ndayiziga

The main purpose of this study is to highlight the role of women in conflict prevention and in the peaceful settlement of conflicts in Burundi. We hope that our analysis will help in the search for lasting solutions to the crisis in Burundi and towards re-establishing peace and social harmony. The principal aims of the study are:

▷ To show the part played by women in conflict prevention and the peaceful settlement of conflicts in traditional Burundian society.

▷ To examine the role Burundian women can have today in the search for a peaceful solution to the current crises.

▷ To put forward recommendations enabling Burundian women to make a contribution to the peaceful settlement of conflicts.

In order to gain a better understanding of the role of women in conflict prevention and the peaceful settlement of conflicts, it is important first to describe the traditional social organization of Burundi and its structure and machinery for the prevention and settlement of disputes. This will involve, in particular, providing some answers to the following questions:

▷ How was Burundian society traditionally organized?

▷ What were its distinctive cultural values?

▷ What were its social constituents and how did they interrelate? What was the role of the family in the transmission of cultural identity and behaviour?

We shall also be looking at the conflicts that arose in this traditional society and how they were managed.

As a background to these topics we shall in each case seek to identify:

▷ The place women occupied in traditional society and the esteem in which they were held by that society.
▷ The role women traditionally had in preventing violence, managing crises and resolving conflict.
▷ The values relevant to conflict prevention and the peaceful settlement of conflicts traditionally embodied by women, the extent of the regard in which they are held by modern women and their degree of acceptability to them. This will enable us to consider whether women today are in sympathy with traditional values and willing to integrate them into their daily lives.
▷ The way in which Burundian women today might contribute towards resolving the present crisis, in the light of the part played by women in traditional society.

Lastly, this study will draw conclusions and make recommendations on ways of enhancing and strengthening women's role in the peaceful management of conflicts.

The methodology used in this study combined a questionnaire with interviews. Our target group was made up of some people who could read and write and others who could not. We used the questionnaire with the first group, while interviews were preferred in the case of the second.

The organization of traditional society

We now propose to analyse the structures of traditional society and to examine the role and the place occupied by certain groups and individuals within it. We shall also focus on the relationships between those groups and individuals. For the purposes of our study those relationships will be regarded as 'interrelations'.

In our study, this term refers to the codes of conduct conveying those moral values, characteristic of traditional Burundian society, which underpinned young people's upbringing and made them worthwhile, responsible adults. In traditional society, the role of handing down what was of inestimable value in the culture fell to the family in particular and the community in general. Both family and society were there to help children internalize the values of humanism (*ubuntu*), goodwill (*umutima mwiza*) and social responsibility, based on such virtues as justice, truth, honesty and fairness (*Ubushingantahe*).[1] Within this

---

1. Barbara Ndimurukundo and Marcienne Mujawaha, « Le rôle da la famille dans la promotion et la consolidation de la paix au Burundi » in *Actes du Colloque national pour une culture de paix au Burundi*, 1994, p. 114.

system of education women, as wives and mothers, were among those mainly responsible for the perpetuation and transmission of those positive values contributing to the perfection constantly sought, first and foremost, in the home, and then in the local community.

1. The structure of traditional society

Traditional society revolved around two pivots: religious and political.

In terms of their religion, the Barundi believed in one God, *Imana*, master of all living things on earth. *Imana* was the source of all blessings, prosperity in terms of material wealth, progeny and the like. Traditional Burundian society also practised ancestor worship, building *indaro* (little straw houses) for deceased forebears, within the family compound. Food and drink were put there to symbolize sharing with them, for, according to popular belief, ancestors did not die but maintained a benevolent watch over their families.

Politically, Burundi was run as a monarchy until the end of the nineteenth century. The king (or *Mwami*) given to the Barundi by Kiranga was the incarnation of the whole nation (*Sahwanya*). Known as *Sebarundi* (father of all the Barundi), the king did not belong to a particular ethnic group and it was not known where he came from. He had a duty to protect his people, to keep them safe and to dispense justice. He was universally respected and all-powerful, with complete authority over all things (including the lives of individuals). The king's authority was sacred: collective memory saw him as an exceptional being.

For his government, the king had recourse to various types of administrative authorities, ranked here in descending order: the *Baganwa*, *Banyamabanga*, *Bishikira*, *Inkebe*, *Ivyariho* and *Bashingantahe*.

The *Mwami*, as 'commander-in-chief of the forces', was responsible for the sovereignty of the nation and its territorial integrity. He upheld the social order and guaranteed social peace.

The various administrative authorities mentioned above were regarded, in their various spheres of responsibility, as the king's 'eyes, ears and mouthpiece'. They settled social conflicts and maintained the peace. They reported back regularly to the king on the state of the country.

The relationship between the various hierarchies was typically one of authority and respect for hierarchical power. Mobility within the hierarchy could be upward or downward, inasmuch as an individual could be promoted on merit and those who were unworthy could lose office.

Given the importance of the arbitral authority of the *Bashingantahe* in traditional society, and the current interest in possibly reviving this institution, it may be appropriate to discuss it here in more detail.

The *Bashingantahe* would settle the various conflicts that broke out in villages and make sure peace and harmony reigned among the people. They were greatly respected in society, being noted for such qualities as wisdom, devotion to truth, decency, dignity, integrity and a sense of justice. Therefore, particular requirements for being appointed a *Mushingantahe* were: 'maturity, an instinct for truth, intelligence, and a sense of justice and of family responsibility'. These virtues all contributed to a *Mushingantahe* being a factor conducive to peace wherever he happened to be.

By way of illustration, when a *Mushingantahe* arrived at the scene of a conflict, he would be heard to shout: 'Stop, stop your quarrelling! You have a decent man among you! Where such men (in other words the *Bashingantahe*) are, disaster cannot strike!' This clearly demonstrates the prestige such individuals enjoyed in resolving conflicts, since their presence alone often sufficed to put an end to the dispute. The *Bashingantahe*, then, were a powerful body, to which even the king quite rightly paid due respect. Hence the saying: 'the king rules the country and is in turn ruled by men'.

Lastly it is important to emphasize the role of the clan. Traditional society, while organized around religious and political power, also had a clan structure. Clan membership was a mark of personal identity. Alliances existed between families but daily life revolved around the family and the community, uniting everyone in the common struggle for survival – without ethnic distinction.

2. The traditional organization of Burundi through its social constituents

All our respondents were emphatic that in pre-colonial Burundi, *Batutsi* and *Bahutu* had always lived together in the hills, off farming and livestock-rearing, forging close friendships through inter-ethnic marriages, in obedience to the same king and believing in the same God. The *Batwa* lived apart but in mutual harmony and complementarity with the other groups. The *Batwa* were not deliberately marginalized but, given their distinctive way of life, tended to withdraw of their own accord from the rest of the community. For the most part, they were engaged in making pots, which they traded for produce or cash.

Therefore, relations between *Bahutu*, *Batutsi* and *Batwa* were characteristically complementary and interdependent, consisting of horizontal ties between different groups of equal rank, not relationships of dependency or oppression founded on the superiority of one or other ethnic group. In practice, the relationship varied according to the socio-economic status of the Hutu, Tutsi or Twa and their intrinsic worth as individuals. Everyone knew and conformed to their rank. It carried no ethnic connotation as such.

Living in peace was a state much sought after by the various social constituents of traditional Burundian society, as can be seen from the events of their daily lives. Some of our respondents referred to ritual ceremonies at which, for them to be valid or conclusive, both Hutus and Tutsis had to be represented. This was true, for example, of the practice of *Kubandwa* (or the cult of *Kiranga*), which brought everyone together, each with their own specific role to play. There are other examples too of celebrations which unite the people of Burundi together, as a homogenous group, in a shared destiny.

This social categorization as Hutu, Tutsi or Twa existed, but did not lead to ethnic conflict. Such conflict as might arise related in most cases to material wealth, such as, for example, land ownership. This might set Hutu against Tutsi, but equally members of the same family, or neighbours. When a dispute arose between two chieftains (*Bagwana*) their *Bahutu* or *Batutsi* fought one another, but there is no record of pitched battles between ethnic groups.

In any event, the political order of the time sought to unify society, and social stability was guaranteed through a tireless endeavour, founded upon cultural social values, to settle conflicts peaceably.

3. Cultural values characteristic of traditional Burundian society

Education in traditional social values was of prime importance. Children's education took place within the family through 'evening school'. Here, through the medium of stories and proverbs, and as the occasion presented, children were taught the virtues necessary for living together peaceably under one roof. These included in particular: moderation, solidarity, respect for the truth, a willingness to work and strive, respect for authority, a sense of honesty, decency and modesty, tolerance, a sense of goodness and kindliness, love of one's neighbour, respect for life, and so on.

The education of children was the preserve of women and consequently it was they who played the greater part in transmitting such values to future generations.

Harsh punishments were meted out to those whose bad behaviour disrupted the peace and harmony of the community. Such punishments might range from payment of a fine to expulsion from the community or, very exceptionally, the death penalty.

It can be observed today that most of these values have either collapsed or been abandoned. Many respondents spoke of the 'deterioration and breakdown of positive values' and of the growing lack of restraint, intolerance and violence in Burundian society.

That being the case, it has become a matter of urgency to rehabilitate the culture of Burundi and restore its prestige so that it contributes today, as it did in the past, to making a balanced and cohesive society. The first step towards rehabilitation should be to redefine the role of the family. The family must return to being what it was in traditional society, namely, the framework for perpetuating the society's cultural identity and positive values, and the custodian of that identity and of social behaviour.

The family is first and foremost an institution providing a frame of reference for each individual. It is also a child's first place of learning about life. It is where children first come to understand what society holds dear and what it condemns. It is where the basis of their identity is formed.

Traditionally, the family also had the role of consolidating harmony and unity among its members and with the immediate community. It was likewise responsible for everyone's subsistence and for protecting them. Everyone was born into, and grew to achieve their full potential, within a family, which, at the end of the day, played such a major part in the construction of the personality that personal failure was attributable to the family and reflected badly on the whole community. Within the family, women played a crucial part. As a child's first teacher, a woman was expected to possess a range of moral strengths.

Conflict and conflict resolution in traditional society

Although traditional society was organized and structured in ways that encouraged cohesiveness and peaceful coexistence, from time to time, like any other human society, it experienced conflict. Conflicts arose between individuals, within a family, between different families or between the inhabitants of different territories.

To manage such conflicts, traditional society had well-organized regulatory machinery in which women generally played a major part. Under this system a woman was recognized as having an advisory role, behind the scenes, mainly where her husband was concerned, and as playing an active part in strengthening solidarity and social harmony generally.

The actual process of conflict resolution proper was the prerogative of the *Bashingantahe*, who were venerable and respectable notables of unchallenged authority.

Before induction as a *Mushingantahe*, the candidate was subjected to the closest scrutiny. Only after demonstrating exceptional honesty, social skills and humanism could one aspire to this calling.

The peaceful settlement of conflicts was the norm. A number of methods might be used, depending on the circumstances. Initially an amicable settlement

(*kwumvikana*) would be sought. Next, an emissary would be sent to try and obtain reparation (*kumutumako umusingantahe*). Acting through an emissary made it possible to avoid direct confrontation between the parties. If a settlement could still not be reached, recourse would then be made to the *Bashingantahe*. On the whole, the verdicts given by the *Bashingantahe* were accepted because they were recognized as fair and honest. In the rare cases where one of the parties did not accept the judgement handed down, an appeal would be made to a higher authority. It was, however, extremely rare for decisions to be referred to the royal court. This might happen in cases of serious conflict, such as those involving murder.

It is important to note that, traditionally, there was a concern to bring together the parties to the conflict and achieve reconciliation, rather than just handing down judgement, as is the case today. The aim was first and foremost to reunite and reconcile, not to punish.

If we compare conflict resolution in traditional and modern societies, we find that the situation has worsened at every level. The table below serves to illustrate this.

Conflict resolution in Burundi: traditional and modern societies

Traditional society	Modern society
Judgement handed down by *Bashingantahe* selected on their merits	Judgement handed down by judges whose office is conferred on them through formal qualifications
Peaceful resolution and recourse to justice	Frequent recourse to revenge and violence, without waiting for justice
Concern to reconcile the parties in conflict (by prevailing upon them to drink together)	Judgements are categorical. There is no concern to bring together the parties to the conflict, nor for any later outcome
The *Bashingantahe* acted out of a spirit of honesty, impartiality and fairness	Bureaucratic and (at times) corrupt mentality
The *Bashingantahe* offered their services voluntarily	Paid work
Justice by the people involving everyone (everyone would come to listen and give an opinion)	Justice is the province of a particular group of people (those with formal qualifications)
Disputes settled quickly	Lengthy judicial process
Moral and social sanctions	Physical punishment and material fines
(Divesting individuals of their functions as *Ubushingantahe*)	Torture and imprisonment
Being discredited in others' eyes	Paying fines
Being marginalized	Once the penalty has been paid, no further reference made to offences committed

In conclusion, traditional society was more humane. Conflict was avoided where possible and settled peacefully. Within this structure, women played the more unobtrusive yet leading substantial role, both in their families and within their own circle.

Women and the prevention and peaceful settlement of conflicts in traditional society

1. The role of women in the education of children

Women played the greatest part by far in the education of children, the management and organization of everything connected with the home (property and, to some extent, people). They were regarded as the driving force behind the family's relationship with its neighbours. Seen as the mainstay of the family, a wife was selected only after a slow, protracted process, where every precaution was taken to avoid choosing the wrong person. This is reflected in the saying: 'wretched the man that makes a poor choice of wife'.

It was primarily the mother that had responsibility for the upbringing of the children. Children, especially when very young, remained with their mother, who would look after both boys and girls until they reached a given age (for boys, until the time when their father took over the responsibility). There were strict rules to be complied with on how to dress, speak, eat and even walk and sit (especially girls).

Disciplinary measures existed, even for the very young, to set them on the right road at an early stage. In the interests of a stable society, parents had a duty to be examples to their children. As one observer notes:

> *Children live in the home of their birth, observing what is done, watching their parents and elders and following their example. This period of extended observation is supervised by the mother, who has her young children constantly at her side, setting them punishments scaled to their years, so that from an early age, children come to acquire an appetite for those human qualities, immensely valuable to the society, that denote a good upbringing.*[2]

The education of a daughter who had reached the age of puberty was a matter of ongoing concern for her mother, who had to prepare her properly for

2. Nizigiyimana B.: « L'éducation des enfants comme préparation au mariage » in AVS, No. 29, 1977, p. 2.

marriage, so that, once a wife herself, she too would become a factor for stability and peace in her husband's family.

Girls' education was based on practical and moral training, and their mothers were expected to be particularly careful about it. It was a source of special pride to a mother when a daughter was prized for her qualities. When, on the other hand, she was denigrated, the mother felt the disappointment keenly, as it was her training that was being criticized.

A young woman would learn at her mother's side about all the household tasks and about keeping livestock and working in the fields. A girl who was lazy and unruly would find it hard to find a husband, or if she did, would be repudiated almost immediately when her shortcomings came to light. Generally speaking, there was no hesitation about getting rid of a wife who was obviously an unsuitable choice or had a hand in sowing mayhem in a family. The choice of a wife depended on a young woman's diligence at work and her behaviour generally. J. B. Ntahokaja recalls that in traditional Burundian society 'a woman might be repudiated for her bad manners, if she were dirty, impolite or greedy'.[3]

Consequently, a mother's advice to her daughter was calculated to reinforce and strengthen those values that would help her make a success of her married life.

2. Women and social peace in traditional Burundian society

By and large, Burundian women traditionally did not hold public office of any kind. Men dealt with matters outside the home, while the woman was mistress of the hearth. However, even if women were not publicly visible, they took part indirectly, and very much behind the scenes, in the smooth running of public affairs.

Some respondents nevertheless made reference to women in traditional society who had played an important part in the political arena, for example Nteturuye, also known as Nzirikane. Such women took on political and administrative responsibilities within the country when their husbands and brothers went to war or to make their reports to the king, or quite simply when they themselves held chieftainships.

From a structural and institutional point of view, a woman's calling in marriage was to be the tie, knot or link binding two families, two clans, two ethnic groups or even two nationalities. From an early age, therefore, girls were

---

3. Ntahokaja, J.B., *Imigenzo y'ikirundi*, UB, Bujumbura, 1978, p. 26.

taught to be open-minded, adaptable and tolerant. A girl, or a woman, was held to have no family, since she was destined to live and fulfil herself within someone else's, which she would regard as her own. Similarly, in traditional society, girls were considered not to belong, strictly speaking, to an ethnic group. They married men, and gave birth to children, of other ethnic groups. Thus a girl, by her marriage, forged alliances between two families and was consequently the symbol of the unity between them.

Because they were called upon to strengthen family unity and create a bond between families, women naturally had to have the essential qualities to carry out that task. They were supposed to embody such virtues as compassion, patience, discretion, gentleness, modesty and self-control. These were considered inherent in womanhood, but required reinforcement through upbringing, so that women could fulfil their role as peacemakers.

Women were expected to set an example, within their families and in their immediate circle. Their role in relation to their husbands was an important one: they were to advise them and be a constructive influence on them in any decision that was to be taken. If there was dissension in the neighbourhood, or when conflict threatened to break out, a woman would act in her advisory role in order to prevent its coming to a head. She would counsel her peers, where the matter involved women, or act through her husband in a disagreement between men.

Women made their most significant contribution to facilitating peace within the female community. They in fact set up their own council, similar to the *Bashingantahe* among men. A group of wise and respected women of experience known as *Inararibonye* ('those who have seen many things') intervened whenever women were in conflict. The *Inararibonye* were selected for their leadership qualities and integrity. When a dispute arose, they held a hearing of the parties in an isolated spot – known as *mukatabesha*, literally, 'the place where no lies are told' – and, after deliberation, passed judgement. They mediated between both sides and would lay down a course of behaviour, particularly for the party in the wrong.

The *Inararibonye* took on a similar role when a woman behaved badly in wider society, in cases of insolence, drunkenness, delinquency, and the like. She would be taken to the *katabesha* and receive advice from the *Inararibonye*.

Women's role in settling armed conflicts was secondary. More often than not they remained in the background, intervening in an advisory capacity through their husbands. There are many accounts of women rubbing their husbands with oil on the eve of battle, so they would be supple and able to vanquish the enemy. This attitude can be understood in light of the traditional belief that honour and bravery augured well for a successful outcome of the war (in terms of lands conquered or number and status of enemy prisoners taken), the goal of

the war being not to take human life, but rather to pit one's strength against that of another king or *Muganwa*.

There are, however, reports of women (queen mothers) who acceded to high office, acting as regent, for example, when the king was still too young to reign (or when he was away) or as chieftains in their own right. People also speak of Ririkumutima and Inagiswaswa who are said to have played a part in the regional administration during the colonial period. One famous woman who stood out for her active contribution to the settlement of conflicts was Ririkumutima, the queen mother, who by all accounts helped a man threatened with eviction by king Mwezi, under the sway of evil courtiers. Ririkumutima insisted that the case go before the *Bashingantahe* and, at the end of the day, Mwezi lost.

The breakdown of traditional values and the nature of the present crisis in Burundi

A fair number of our respondents on this point acknowledged that the present crisis in Burundi is complicated and difficult to sum up in a single sentence. They see it as multifaceted and multiform. Described as political, and supposedly originating in forms of social exclusion and the protection of selfish, sectarian interests, the crisis that exploded in 1993 was the result of the catastrophic collapse of the moral and social values which had been the foundation of Burundian society since the dawn of time. Among the significant values swept aside were *Ubushingantahe*, mutual help and solidarity, respect for the sanctity of life and the secular unity of the Barundi, to mention but a few.

In traditional society, the most damaging anti-value, the one to be avoided by the chief and by every *Mushingantahe*, was the lure of ill-gotten gains. Unfortunately, yesterday's anti-value threatens to become the watchword for social success today. For some, to gain power nowadays is clearly an opportunity for raking in money and lining one's pockets. Those who have not yet made it to the top seek to do so at any price and to grab their share of the cake by fair means or foul. Poverty, which is relatively widespread among the people, and the spiralling cost of living in a socio-economic context where solidarity and mutual help are increasingly losing ground to unbridled individualism, put many people in the way of all kinds of temptation. This is illustrated in everyday expressions – for example it is readily and commonly admitted that 'honesty doesn't pay' in Burundi today.

Mass illiteracy is another major stumbling block, for it deprives the vast majority of people of the ability to see through political wheeling and dealing.

Having no understanding of the issues, they are taken in at every turn. Consequently, in addition to any political solutions that may be put forward to help resolve the crisis, there is a need to think about restoring essential moral, cultural and social values, by theoretical and practical means that meet with the approval of Burundians themselves, thus making it possible to achieve a lasting solution.

Women in Burundi and the search for a solution to the present crisis

Although they took no part in the events that led to its outbreak, Burundian women and their children were the war's principal victims. This is why, for about ten years now, women have thrown their efforts into seeking a peaceful outcome to the violence that is tearing the country apart.

At the regional level, Burundian women, especially in the countryside, moved by feelings of solidarity with their sisters from other ethnic groups, have come to their aid, at times putting themselves at risk. Cases were reported to us of women sheltering orphans and breastfeeding very young children whose mothers had been killed, and of some women hiding others to protect them from harm.

At the national level, educated women have, in turn, been at the forefront of debate and discussion about the return to peace and have highlighted the essential role that women must play. A rising tide of awareness has therefore provided the impetus for the founding of large numbers of voluntary organizations run by women to help other women in displacement camps, by providing them with food, clothing and medicines and by setting up income-generating activities.

In some people's view, there is not enough contact nowadays between parents and children. Parents leave for work early in the morning, while children go off to school. In the evening, both children and parents return home tired. The children do their homework, or engage in some form of play, while their mothers work in the home, cooking and doing household chores. It is easy therefore to see how, over time, physical contact between mothers and children has been greatly reduced. While, traditionally, women always had their children with them, modern women are constantly torn between the need to eke out a living and manage the home. Once things have got to this stage, it is difficult to integrate traditional positive values into a child's upbringing in a relaxed, natural and, above all, sustained way.

Another major obstacle thrown up by the new social context is the fact that children who should be brought up within this system of values follow other examples and ideas that are disseminated by the mass media.

A communal education, where children were supervised by and received correction and discipline from a parent, or a neighbour or other adult in society, is virtually impossible today. And yet, here was a form of education that made it possible for every child to regard any adult as a parent. Today, most women consulted would like to see it revived.

All of our respondents felt that modern women did not sufficiently embody values conducive to the consolidation of peace and social harmony and the prevention and peaceful settlement of various forms of conflict, especially the current crisis.

In the 'peace negotiations' in progress, the women in the official delegations (if at all present) are regarded as 'stopgaps' or tokens, when they should instead be essential partners. There is a current of female opinion that holds that women, like men worthy of the honour, should be appointed *Mushingantahe*, so that they can speak for those who have no say and thus make a real contribution to laying the foundations of a peaceful society.

That being said, women today are determined, in cooperation with other parties concerned, to find peaceful, just and equitable solutions to the socio-political crisis that has rocked Burundi. To do so, there is a need to reinstate the values associated with reinforcing peace and social harmony characteristically embodied by women in traditional societies, since these genuinely offer some possible answers to the crisis.

A return to communal education and reinstatement of the values that women traditionally embodied within their homes and communities would appear to be the only way forward towards building a healthy society, at peace with itself, and able to find appropriate responses to the massive peace and security challenges facing Burundian society today.

While recognizing that reviving the values essential for conflict resolution and prevention by women today is obviously the right path, it is, however, no easy task to determine where to begin and how to proceed. Possibly, there is a need, as Liboire Kagabo would argue, to work on what really counts – that is to say 'reason'. When faced with the challenge of the 'deterioration in values', Kagabo suggests 'the question is therefore how to make Burundian society see reason'.

Care of children ought to be of essential concern to modern Burundian women. It would be preferable for it to follow the pattern of traditional society. In that society, boys and girls trod a well-defined, admittedly rigid, educational path, but one that guaranteed harmony within the family and their integration in the community. A boy or girl seeking to depart from the straight and narrow was punished. Such sanctions acted as safeguards, preventing children from going further astray and enabling them to correct their course whenever necessary.

Nowadays, even though there have been changes to our way of life, making it impossible for modern women to be with their children constantly, it is essential that the inculcation of positive values should play a significant part in a child's upbringing.

Burundian youth behaved badly during the crisis because so many had not been taught the traditional values. Besides, 'there's no getting blood out of a stone', or so the saying goes: present-day society itself does not always live according to those values or integrate them into everyday behaviour. Consequently, in order to wean today's young people, who have been involved in killing and looting on a grand scale, away from violence, parents, especially mothers, must reinforce children's basic education, in the family, in the community, in formal and non-formal schooling and in the various centres taking care of young people.

In fact, many of those interviewed reiterated the wisdom of a return to communal education, the advantages of which have already been mentioned. The most important of these is that children should know they are able to turn to any adult for guidance. As children and parents move in different circles throughout the day, it would be of enormous benefit to children, wherever they are, to feel that there is someone present at all times whose place it is to encourage them when they do well and correct or discipline them when they go wrong. An education like this would have the advantage of not leaving children to their own devices.

Had it been far more prevalent, this communal education might have helped prevent young people from being drawn back once more into the bloodbath that plunged our country into mourning in the early stages of the crisis. For, whether out of indifference or because of the prevailing climate of fear, adults allowed themselves to be led by young people often bent on destruction, when their role, under other circumstances, would have in fact been to guide them. Modern women think that communal education could help reverse the trend, especially if they succeed, as they hope, in reasserting their traditionally pre-eminent role in their children's education.

Women in traditional Burundian society were typically non-violent, compassionate and even-tempered, highly responsive to their children and knowledgeable about caring for them. Once those values are restored, present-day women may well feel more deeply involved in the peace process and better able to suggest innovative ways of resolving the crisis that do not involve the use of weapons or force. The reinstatement of such traditional virtues can be achieved only by means of a collective, concerted search for solutions, genuine political will and sustained work on education for peace.

Conclusion

The study we undertook enabled us to ascertain the leading role and status women enjoyed in traditional Burundian society, both specifically within the family and in the wider community. It is therefore legitimate for Burundian women today to want to revive certain values represented by that tradition that could help them in their peaceful quest for social harmony. How to go about reinstating those values, so as to give Burundian society the opportunity of again enjoying a lasting state of peace, remains to be seen.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, our study found that identification and reinstatement of those values could be achieved by:

◆ the community at large taking stock of the breakdown of the key values in the society and making a collective commitment to their reinstatement;

◆ there being a real political will to take action and to support efforts being made in this area; and by

◆ educating Burundian society as a whole, creating an awareness of positive traditional values.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are formulated in order to promote an appropriate follow-up of the present study:

1. Elicit a consensus about the traditional values to be reinstated
They would primarily be those relating to the family and the Ubushingantahe. Both institutions, having regained their former legitimacy, could effectively contribute to fostering and strengthening a culture of peace.

2. Introduce appropriate strategies for putting those values into practice once more
The main strategic thrust might be:

◆ to create awareness among the various communities of the values that have foundered and the solid grounds for reinstating them. This might be done through the media, seminars and meetings or other suitable communication channels;

◆ to introduce a basic understanding of the values that maintained and reinforced the balance of traditional society into the formal and non-formal education curricula.

3. Strengthen the education of young people in the values of peace and peaceful coexistence

It could be said that the current crisis has laid bare the vulnerability of this group in the population of Burundi. Various forms of incitement led young people to indulge in looting, killing and other forms of violence. Some feel that the education children receive today is artificial, and lacking in direction. Therefore, educating them in positive cultural values would help them get back on track. Besides, the younger generations have strengths that can be put to good use. And on this point, it would not be amiss to say that, ideally, the care of children needs reinforcing, and should be provided by both mother and father, although the mother's role in this context naturally predominates and will continue to do so.

4. Take on board the essential role women must play in conflict prevention and strengthening peace and social harmony

Taking the attributes of women in traditional society as its starting point, this study shows that in view of their innate qualities and thanks to the position they have occupied and the part they have played in Burundian society, women can and must be actively involved in conflict prevention and resolution. Society in general, for its part, must place a higher value on this 'peace potential' in women and use it advisedly.

5. Record women's history in the pursuit of peace

During this study, and through our investigations, we discovered that Burundian women have always distinguished themselves in fostering peace and consolidating social harmony. But the sad fact is that women's achievements in this sphere have never been recorded. So it is important for Burundian women's history to be written down and women presented in their true light, as indefatigable and undaunted facilitators of peace.

6. Examine ways in which modern women can be admitted to the Ubushingantahe

In traditional Burundian society, for the reasons mentioned, a woman was not appointed a *Mushingantahe*. At present a majority among the relatively young is tending to favour greater open-mindedness as regards allowing women of merit to be appointed to the *Bashingantahe* on the same basis as men.

The traditional mediation of conflicts by women in Cameroon

Valerie Ngongo-Mbede

This study concerns the place and role of women in the mediation of conflicts in the traditional society of Cameroon. Our analysis summarizes the main lessons learnt from the interviews we had with women and men from different social, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds and regions of the country. We left aside considerations of age and level of education in order to have the widest possible range of interviewees.

Before dealing with the subject proper, we thought it would be useful, first of all, to obtain an overview of the concept of peace in a number of Cameroon's cultural areas, in the light of the place and role of women in this context. A number of questions guided our survey, *inter alia*:

▷ What is the concrete significance of the term 'peace' to Cameroonian women and men?

▷ Did women play a role in the mediation of conflicts and building of peace in traditional society? In the affirmative, in what circumstances, on what occasions, and with what resources and strategies did women play the role of mediators?

A detailed survey of peace in the traditions of Cameroon

In almost all the cultures of Cameroon, peace was equated with 'freshness', health, well-being, harmony, calm and tranquillity. The absence of such qualities was seen as the sign of conflicts, which could be either latent or overt. It was that harmony and freshness which provided farmers with good crops, fishermen with

abundant catches and hunters with game. When there was enough food for everyone, peace would reign in homes and families, clans and tribes. As nobody had any reason to be envious of anybody else, neighbouring communities could live in peace, visit one another during the off-seasons and attend weddings and funerals.

Moreover, harmony, freshness and calm were seen as essentially female virtues, properties of nature which were marvellously embodied by women. It thus comes as no surprise that in the event of conflict between two clans, for example, or, quite simply, out of a desire to strengthen relations between two communities, a woman would be offered in marriage as a symbol of the alliance between two peoples. Such an alliance, sacred by definition, was a powerful crisis management tool which both set the seal on peace and prevented conflict. Blood was, indeed, sacred. It now became difficult to go to war with a clan in which one had nephews. Furthermore, in each of the two camps, the girls (who were now mothers) would play the role of mediators at the least sign of conflict. Thus, this form of preventive female diplomacy enabled societies to live free from violence, war and misfortune.

Peace seems to be so fundamental in many of Cameroon's cultural universes that when two Cameroonians greet each other, they often ask if there is peace at home:

▷ '*Ya me la?*' for the Bafang: 'What news from home?'
▷ '*Tchum ti hia?*' for the Baham: 'Do you enjoy peace at home?'
▷ '*Ye mine mvoe?*' or, '*Ye evovoe ene mine we?*' for the Beti: 'Do you enjoy peace at home?', 'Do you enjoy freshness at home?'

Because of the primacy of peace as a cardinal property of society, the education of girls was primarily based on peace. As was noted by a majority of the interviewees, girls were expected to become (as their mothers already were) the principal mediators at the various levels of conflict – couple, home, extended family, society in general – threatening to rend the social fabric.

Women as mediators

1. Mediation in the couple, the home and the family

Because women were the main actors with respect to peace in the community, the education of girls was primarily based on peace. Girls would thus ensure that their younger brothers and sisters were getting on well together, while their mothers were busy with other occupations. The older sisters had the

tasks of consoling, caressing and cradling; soothing and comforting. They taught the other children to share and to show solidarity. They showed them how to protect the weaker children and the handicapped. As a result, girls were considered to be nothing short of 'little mothers', preparing themselves, among their brothers and sisters for all the roles they would come to play in adult life in the realm of peace. Keeping this system of education enabled the girls to supplement the role played by their mothers by small conflicts which could hinder good domestic management. These little mediators were expected, for example, to settle the petty quarrels among their youngest brothers. In general, when there was a dispute between two boys, the girl was asked to go and 'see what is happening between (her) brothers' and to settle the problem.

In a polygamous marriage, the first wife (called *Dada Saré* among the Fulbe, *Kindag* among the Bassa, *Ekomba* among the Beti) was the chief mediator of conflicts in the family. She was responsible for restoring peace and tranquillity in situations of conflict between the husband and one of his wives, or among the latter. She also ensured that perfect harmony existed between the young brothers-in-law and their wives.

The first wife had great influence over her husband in at least two other ways:

◆ raised by her mother-in-law (having married very young), she was initiated by the latter and entrusted with all the family's secrets (this was the case among the Beti, in particular). Moreover, her position entitled her to be given official responsibility by her mother-in-law for relieving tension and ensuring a harmonious family relationship;

◆ moreover, her role as well as her personal qualities very often enabled the first wife to develop a strong personality, adding much charisma to her legitimate status. The husband, who owed almost as much respect to her as to his own mother, was conscious of all this.

In the Beti and Bassa communities, the first wife was sometimes invited to deliberate with the men in the Assemblies. As a woman in what were essentially masculine forums, one of her tasks was to 'soften' sentences considered to be too severe or which could lead to revolt or revenge.

2. Mediation in the village and community

Many communities afforded a special place in society to paternal aunts in matters of crisis management and conflict resolution. Among the Bakossi, for example, it was paternal aunts who were responsible for reconciling the individuals involved in a conflict.

Other categories of women played the same role in other societies. In the past, in the Lus-Mfumte society in the North-West Province (Nwa Subdivision), the Nkwuyi were women who took part in the discussions aimed at resolving conflicts. They played the role of mediators. It was also in this community that one found the very influential and feared secret society called the Djudju whose members initially were exclusively women. The role of the Djudju women was to maintain peace in the community. Unfortunately, the men seized the Djudju and appropriated it, claiming that the women were neglecting their farm-work and housework because of the Djudju.

One of the characteristics of the Djudju mask was that it could sometimes become very dangerous, and very aggressive. As a result, when its power was unleashed, only a pregnant or recently delivered woman could calm it. This was so because children represented another potent symbol of peace in society.

The pregnant woman symbolized peace among the Tikar (Kom, Menda, Bali, etc.) and Tchamba communities of the North-West Province. She was, therefore, a natural mediator. Even a criminal who found refuge in the house of a pregnant woman was not to be pursued, but left in peace as long as he or she remained in such a sacred place of refuge.

Among the Guidar, the *Mazaké* or old women played the role of keeping watch over the community. They were on the alert, and reacted immediately at the least sign of destructive conflict between the members of the community. If, for example, they noticed signs of conflict or an insidious quarrel, they promptly summoned the protagonists in order to question and calm them. After first listening to them, the *Mazaké* explained to them that, neither hatred nor quarrelling had ever solved a single problem and that it was better to find common ground. They also gave advice to those fighting, telling them that there was a risk that their behaviour would be copied by the children, which would amount to a failing on the part of the adults who had a responsibility to educate children in the art of peace. After helping to make them aware of the useless and dangerous character of their attitude, they let them resume their respective occupations, with the admonition never to do it again. After this discussion, the *mamas* kept a watchful eye on them for an appreciable length of time, until they were satisfied that the conflict had been well and truly settled and forgotten. When the mediators were satisfied that their advice had borne fruit, they again summoned the two protagonists and asked them to drink some *bil-bil* together, and then to seal their reconciliation with a kiss to celebrate peace.

Among the Guidar, peace was often disrupted by fighting among children of different families. These quarrels between children often degenerated into conflicts among parents. Adultery was also often a major cause of conflict and, here again, the women played a key role in the mediation of conflicts.

Not only did women mediate conflicts between human beings, but they could also serve as intermediaries in conflicts between human beings and nature.

In the land of the Mungo, for example, and more particularly among the Mbo, any misfortune occurring in the community brought the latter to seek the mediation of the *Kalbia*, who were married women. In these communities, in general, misfortune and calamities were taken to imply the existence of conflicts between the populations.

Not every married woman was a *Kalbia*. Only those women recognized by the clanswomen as having supernatural powers (the gift of clairvoyance, for example) became a *Kalbia*. Once discovered, the *Kalbia* was associated with all meetings and consultations. She had a very wide range of action: she could determine the causes of the evil undermining society and hindering peace, and she could ward off fate and restore peace, because she intervened between disruptive forces and society.

In the land of the Beti, the Mangissa and the Eton had what was known as the *Mbabi*. This was a purification rite aimed at restoring peace. The initiative could come from the women themselves when they realized that peace did not exist in the community, that nothing was going right: people were ill, the drought was continuing, the land no longer produced good crops, there were many deaths in the community, there were epidemics, a member of the community was suffering from or died of a serious disease, some members were experiencing difficulties linked to community life, a member of the community had been poisoned, another was unsuccessful in finding work, etc.

In the philosophy of these communities, such a succession of misfortunes was not fortuitous. It was the sign that love and peace were absent from the community, and prompted the women to decide to organize a *Mbabi*. The latter took place in a grove or on a crossroads, after consultation of the oracles. It was exclusively a meeting of women who had reached the age of the menopause. The ceremony was presided over by a woman of very advanced years whose moral integrity was usually universally acknowledged. Men could on occasion, be associated with the *Mbabi*. Even in such exceptional cases, however, it was the women who organized and presided over the ceremony of reconciling human beings with themselves, with relatives and with nature.

If, for example, the *Mbabi* was convened because of a long-lasting drought which was leading to famine in the community, the women invoked the help of the ancestors, intercessors between God and the living, and prayed for rain. The drought, in that case, was seen as a sign of conflict between humans and their Creator whom the former had disobeyed.

The *Mbabi* always ended with the drinking of mystic potions by each of the members present at the meeting.

Among the Tubur (Tupuri), mediation by women was primarily a matter of age. The *Wog Clu*, or 'old mamas', were responsible for mediation and consulted on all problems which disturbed the peace.

Once consulted, a *Wog Clu* convened both those directly involved in the conflict and witnesses. She listened attentively to them, and then addressed the protagonists, naming the person or persons at fault and asking the offended party to forgive the offender or offenders. It could happen that the mediation of the *Wog Clu* failed to resolve the conflict, in which case she referred the adversaries to the head of the community.

Other types of mediation were practised among the Tubur by the Nare Bunsonre (*Woing Busoo* in the singular). They involved three categories of mediators: the *Soon Baa*, the *Soon Manhuli* and the *Bunsonre*.

The *Woing Soo* was credited with a variety of gifts, including that of predicting the future. Well in advance, she predicted tornadoes, disasters and deaths, and was responsible for deflecting those evils which were the very opposite of peace and signified a conflict between nature and humanity. Her mediation consisted in indicating the sacrifices to be carried out so that the community could live in peace and the society could be reconciled with the elements.

This incomparable mediator could also predict the happy events that brought peace to society, such as the birth of twins, which constituted an even more potent symbol of peace.

The *Nare Bunsonre* were responsible for the day-to-day management of the conflicts between co-wives, adults, humans and nature. They communicated to humans not only the wishes for peace of the ancestors with whom they were in contact, but also the requirements for maintaining harmony with nature with which they were in communion.

The *Soon Baa* were supposed to speak 'on behalf of God'. They were characteristically calm and dispassionate. The community showed them great respect because of their status as divine messengers. They acted only in extreme circumstances, such as the occurrence of tornadoes, which destroyed cattle and humans and brought calamity to the community, and thus put obstacles in the way of harmony and peace. The role of the *Soon Baa* was, first and foremost, to calm the anger of humans and the furies of nature.

The *Soon Manhuli* were the spokespersons of the ancestors, and what they said was, accordingly, highly valued.

The *Soon Seona* were of less importance, and did not mediate, but contributed to mediation by exposing the evil spirits which could create conflict between the members of the community and disturb the peace.

Among the Bamileke, the *Magne*, or mothers of twins, were considered to be blessed by God. Their mission was, first of all, one of peace. The arrival of

a *Magne* in a place of conflict had the immediate effect of stopping the hostile acts. Once in the midst of the confrontation, she assumed responsibility for reconciling the belligerents. She divided the 'tree of peace' into two and offered a piece to each of the protagonists as a token of reconciliation. Twins themselves were seen as a tree of peace planted in the family.

In contrast to the *Magne*, whose role stemmed from the blessing of God (who had favoured her with the grace of being the mother of twins), the *Mafo*'s role stemmed from her status as the Mother of the Chief. Her role consisted, therefore, in bringing everybody together, and considering everyone as her own child. In every situation, she had to endeavour to restore the peace required for the smooth functioning of the chiefdom. The *Mafo* also played the role of intermediary, in other words of mediator, between the chief and his subjects. But to gain trust and respect, the *Mafo* had herself to be just and to show integrity.

In Massa society, women were responsible for resolving conflicts between men and women. The assistance of men was sought only when the women failed to restore peace. When the head of a Massa family died, he was succeeded by his eldest son. However, it was the first wife of the deceased who put his affairs in order and was also responsible for ensuring peace in the family during the transition phase. This practice could be compared to the customs of the Eton.

Among the Eton, in the absence of an heir worthy of succeeding a dead chief, it was the latter's sister who became regent until a worthy successor was found, meaning one who was capable of keeping the community together in peace and harmony.

The head of the Massa community was also master of the land. However, when receiving the complaints of his subjects under a tree, it was sometimes with the assistance, in the decision-making process, of women of advanced years who had the benefit of experience. Indeed, the Massa communities always had a *chada tchola vogoida*, a 'head-woman' traditionally chosen by the other women, who was responsible for women's affairs. It was she who submitted complaints to the chief when the women felt that peace was threatened by internal strife.

Before the Christianization of the Massa people, when plagues, famines and other disasters occurred, the women consulted seers so that peace – in other words, health, well-being and prosperity – would return. Each of them brought millet and red earth with which they smeared their faces. Together, the women carried out a pacification rite. Here, as in many other traditional societies, natural disasters (plagues, famines, etc.) were considered to be symptoms of hidden conflicts.

Conclusion: women and the mediation of conflicts in Cameroonian society in general

Apart from the above-mentioned customs and traditions, there were also women in Cameroonian society who competently played the role of mediators, primarily because of their social position but also, above all, their strong personality and personal charisma. These women drew their inspiration, first and foremost, from the customary courts, which were structures of conciliation, not sentencing.

Many women in Cameroon, as in the rest of Africa (and the world), see themselves, first and foremost, as givers and protectors of life. Moreover, because a decent quality of life cannot exist without peace, women who bring forth life are *ipso facto* the creators of peace.

For the Cameroonian women of the past and those of the present, peace is not an abstraction. It is a reality that is very rich, but also very fragile, which has to be constructed and consolidated on a day-to-day basis.

It is worrying to note that this conception of peace is now being lost. The often slow, but sometimes abrupt death of our peace traditions is one more reason for restoring the traditional peacemaking role once played by women, the mothers of the family and of life, in our traditional societies.

The role played by women of the Central African Republic in the prevention and resolution of conflicts

M.J. Mathey
Thérèse Dejean
Maurice Deballe
Romain Sopio
Abel Koulaninga
Joseph Moga

The main objective of this study is to seek in the people's collective memory certain traditional values which, once rehabilitated, could enable the Central African woman of today to carry out the mission of peace which was always hers in traditional society.

The violence which broke out in Bangui in 1996 and 1997 showed the Central Africans that peace was not a natural state of affairs, but a political and a cultural asset which needed to be secured and consolidated each and every day.

From the first signs of the violence the Central African women mobilized themselves spontaneously to seek a peaceful resolution of the troubles. This intervention by women in pursuit of peace was not new in the country. Central African women have always constituted the ultimate bulwark against the murderous folly of men, every time social harmony and life itself have been threatened.

After the tragic events which seriously disrupted social peace and national unity in 1996 and 1997, this study also provides an opportunity to record the opinions of some groups of the population whose voice has remained unheard. The analysis is based on some 60 respondents, living in the eight boroughs of Bangui and aged between 35 and 80, who expressed their opinions

and concerns about the evolution of society and peace. It should be pointed out that Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, is a crossroads-town. As a result, the persons interviewed make up a representative sample of the various ethnic groups and social classes to be found in the country.

In general, the results of the study demonstrate the fact that traditional values, in particular the importance of the role of women in society and in the process of restoring lasting peace, can constitute a strong defence against violent outbreaks of social conflict.

Traditional society

The Central African Republic lies in the heart of Africa. It is bounded by Sudan to the east, Cameroon in the west, Chad in the north, and Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the south. It covers an area of 623,000 km2, and has a population estimated at 2,688,000 inhabitants, giving a density of four people per square kilometer.

The main ethnic groups are the Banda, Banziri, Baya, Kaba, Kaka, Kare, Mandja, Mbati, Mbimu, Ngbaka, Nzakara, Sango, Sara, Yakoma and Zande.

The Banda, Baya and Mandja make up the majority of the population. The Baya and the Mandja are confined to certain regions of the Republic, whereas the Banda are to be found throughout the country.

The population figures show that women are in the majority, representing 50.8%.

1. The organization of society

In general, village society was held together by its identification with the *gbenge*. In Banda society, the *gbenge* was a talisman pouch made of the skin of a civet cat (*genetta genettoides*) or colobus monkey *(colobus polycomos)*. The pouch contained several divinatory objects: beads, pieces of loranthus, eagle droppings, etc. Among the Zande, the pouch was made of panther skin.

In the context of religious power, the authority of the religious leader was greater than that of the village chief. It was the former who sanctified certain types of work in the fields, and told the future with regard to war. He could prevent or unleash any development action.

The village chief exercised power with the assistance of a Council of Elders. Women were also associated with this Council, in which they played an important role in crisis management and conflict resolution. In general, the women associated with the Council intervened to question certain decisions

which they judged unjust, unfair or dangerous with regard to society's harmony and balance. When armed conflict broke out, it was the women who marched towards the enemy, waving branches to call for a ceasefire.

As a result, the political organization of the clan showed a clear balance between the power of the chief and the other powers, and between the pre-eminence of men and the integration of women.

The responsibilities of the Council of Elders included the granting of land for cultivation and areas for hunting and fishing, good relations among neighbours, the relations between heads of household, questions relating to women and witchcraft.

2. Clan and family units

The clan formed the basis of the community in traditional Central African society. The clans themselves were divided into lineages.

The clan was defined by common ancestry, and a high level of solidarity united its members. It was the largest group based on unilateral ancestry. The clan had a name, an ancestor whose name it bore, as well as taboos and prohibitions. Clans in the Central African Republic were usually exogamous. It was the custom that the wife did not become a full member of her husband's clan.

Solidarity was the guiding principle of the clan, and individuals had a binding duty to be useful and helpful to one another, and to provide mutual support. That solidarity was greater in times of armed conflict against an outside enemy. The members then banded together to defend the common cause.

But the clan's harmony and balance were affected by colonization. Only the family, the basic unit of society, was able to resist that negative influence. In traditional society, the family was usually defined in the broad sense of the term. It then comprised the man and his wife or wives, together with their children to whom were added the ascendants and extended family. With 'modernization', the family has increasingly come to be defined in the narrow or western sense of husband, wife and children.

Descent was through the male line, and special care was taken of male children. Boys, not girls, were considered to be the sole heirs of the family. Matrimonial settlement was subordinated to ancestral customs. A man could not marry into the clan of his father, nor into that of his mother.

Polygamy was the norm in traditional society, and the first wife played an important role in a polygamous household. She exercised considerable authority over her co-wives, giving orders to the other women and ensuring the smooth running of the house and compound in the absence of the husband.

Objects of value, such as weapons of war and for hunting, and fishing equipment, were kept in her room. At the time of the sanctification of certain types of work (including the clearing of brushwood, sowing and harvesting), the head of the household spent the night with his first wife.

3. The role played by women in the upbringing of children, and their influence on the behaviour of their husbands.

Traditional society assigned to women the role of educator. Young children remained with their mothers and took their meals with the group of women. As soon as they were old enough to start playing, they left their mothers and joined the group of the young people of the village.

The education of the young began when they were about six years old, by means of a variety of activities in which the children participated. The tasks allocated to boys included watching over the fields to drive away birds, rodents and monkeys. Accompanied by companions of the same age, they went in groups to their parents' farms, and spent the day chasing animals. Fathers took their sons to hunt and fish, teaching them how to recognize useful plants and certain animals. In the evening, around the family fire, the parents passed on knowledge about myths to their children.

Girls minded the younger children and helped their mothers with the housework. They accompanied them to the fields and participated in gathering and fishing. They had to be well prepared for their future role as wives. The mother served as role model and if a girl's marriage failed, it was the mother who was held responsible.

At home, the wife exercised a considerable influence over her husband. However, that authority was forced to remain discreet as it was a controversial issue in society, which could see it as weakness on the part of the husband. As a result, the wife was usually discreet in public, but became the most influential adviser of her husband in the intimacy of the bedroom. For instance, apart from the meals shared with the whole family, the wife reserved a small dish called the 'bed dish' which she gave to her husband at bedtime. It was during that intimate meal that confidential conversations took place between husband and wife. The wife called her husband by the name of her first son or first daughter, and gave him advice on the facts of life. That advice would greatly influence the decisions which the husband later took. Sometimes, the husband faced with a problem would postpone his decision until the following night so that he could first seek his wife's opinion.

In the final analysis, the head of the household was the only person to wield paternal authority. He was the priest who made sacrifices in the ceremonies

of ancestor worship. He was the mediator between the living and the dead of the clan, and the sacred shrine of the ancestors was to be found beside his hut.

4. The initiation rite as a factor in a culture of peace

Apart from the education given by the mother, children were also trained in the school of life through their initiation in secret societies.

Initiation was a form of traditional education through which children learned the traditional values. The initiates were taught by the elders, who were the depositories of traditional knowledge. That instruction, which was both theoretical and practical, concerned *inter alia* the totemic and historical traditions, and the duties and rights of each individual towards society.

It was through initiation that the child became a part of society, and the children represented their individual families within their age groups. The age group was a regulatory system, a school of fellowship and cordiality, that removed certain gaps and disparities in society. Each individual within the age group was equal to every other; indeed, this was the primary function of the traditional school.

Peace culture formed an important dimension of initiatory instruction. That instruction was aimed at inculcating the need in young people to preserve peace by respecting the pacts and alliances made by the clan, for example. The elders used storytelling and singing to teach the younger children the concepts of peace, tolerance and the art of living together. It was the duty of the heads of household to teach their descendants the importance of peace and alliances, in order to instil in them the moral values needed to preserve them.

Within the framework of society as a whole, the initiation societies played a decisive role in maintaining social cohesion. For the members of those societies, peace was far from being an innate quality. It was established, little by little, in young minds and moulded the behaviour and personality of the young. All the respondents in our surveys spoke with much nostalgia about their memories of the traditional society of former times in which storytelling, proverbs, parents, age groups and initiation groups all served to channel the essential values to young people, in order to preserve social harmony.

Access to the secret societies was not automatic, and was subject to rigorous selection. In addition to promoting and strengthening the ties of friendship and fraternity, the secret societies imposed a high degree of discipline on their members. The importance of the initiation societies stemmed from their role in the transmission of the knowledge and the moral and cultural values indispensable to the education of individuals with a view to their integration into society.

Traditions, women and the culture of peace

1. The education of girls

In traditional Central African societies, women were procreators, first and foremost. It was to women that the clan owed its continued existence. Women produced life and also educated the family. They carried out the process of socializing the children before their integration into the age groups and initiation groups.

The education of boys was designed to prepare them to exercise the role and activities attributed to men, especially those considered dangerous and requiring physical strength. An important aspect of the education of girls was the elimination of any form of aggressiveness that would be harmful to their role in society.

During the education of girls, their mothers (and sometimes their aunts and other older women) inculcated in them the essential values underlying a harmonious household and peace in the community.

When the girl became a wife and mother, she had a duty to hand down the same values to her own daughters. As a mother-in-law, she was responsible for helping her daughter-in-law to run an efficient household and relieve sources of tension.

During the period of training by her mother, the girl also acquired enough expertise to play the role of moderator in her own home and, later, in relation to her own daughter-in-law and the other members of the family. Her task was to preserve the harmony of the married couple, the family and the clan.

In traditional Central African society, women were seen as peaceful beings who personified gentleness and goodness, thus justifying the mission of peace which they were assigned. As bearers of life, they never carried weapons. This status of 'unarmed woman' facilitated the interposition and mediation of women during armed confrontation. Moreover, to raise one's weapon against a woman was considered as one of the most abominable of acts. Even in extreme cases of violence, such as punitive expeditions and pillaging, women's lives had always to be spared.

2. Women as regulators of conflict

The equation of women with peace (in contrast to that of men with brute force) meant that in many societies, likening a woman to a man carried the pejorative

connotation that the woman was violent and totally lacking in gentleness and tenderness.

Generally speaking, women produced and protected life and hence were also the vectors of the cultural values required to promote harmony in society and consolidate peace. In fact, in order to prevent male predominance in society leading the latter to its own destruction, custom assigned to women the function of principal regulator of social relationships. That privilege imbued the mother, wife and older woman with a moral authority which they had to impose on the men. The latter were considered to be generally quick-tempered and pugnacious. In extreme cases of conflict, the women would succeed in inducing the men to adopt peaceful means or symbolic procedures in order to restore peace. Society expected women to always react constructively whenever life was in danger.

This background gives us a better understanding of why, during a mutiny in Bangui, Central African women from all religions and ethnic groups braved the shells being fired in order to meet the fighters and negotiate peace.

Women working in conflict-resolution mechanisms

There was wide scope for conflict in traditional society, and equally numerous ways of restoring peace. Our interviews show that the causes of conflict in traditional societies were manifold. Adultery, power-sharing, disputes between children which often led to violent disputes between parents, if not between clans, the murder of a clan member calling for revenge, witchcraft, land boundaries and straying animals, all could lead to conflict and confrontation.

1. Women as mediators

A fundamental fact of traditional Central African societies was the sacred character of the respect given to the elderly in general, and to elderly women in particular. The elderly woman was respected by all, and played a key role in crisis management and conflict resolution. Thus, when a conflict degenerated into armed violence, an appeal would usually be made to a third party of mature years to calm the tension and reconcile the combatants. Such an appeal for mediation was usually made to a woman who enjoyed the consideration and respect of all who knew her.

If war broke out among the Zande, the oldest women of the clan would go to meet the opposing clan, and to interpose themselves between the fighters in order to make them see reason. When words proved fruitless, the women would

threaten to expose their nakedness or to go down on their knees. In either case, the gesture signified a curse for those who bore the responsibility for such grave acts. Because of the respect which the enemy soldiers had for the women, they would usually put down their weapons before the fateful acts were accomplished.

If there was no laying down of arms, the old women, naked and on their knees, would crawl towards the foolhardy combatants and say to them:

> *We are your mothers,*
> *We do not want war,*
> *We do not want bloodshed.*
> *Do not fight with your brothers.*
> *They have sent us to sue for peace.*

If the assailants still refused to see reason and marched on the village, they suffered the ultimate punishment for having disobeyed and obliged their 'grandmothers' to expose their nakedness.

2. Women as consolidators

In situations of armed conflict, women played both an active and a passive role in the restoration of peace. This was what happened within the framework of pacts, for example.

A pact usually operated in the resolution of a conflict caused by the murder of a clan member. When required, a female mediator was quickly sent to the family of the victim. If the mediation was effective, the two families met to 'break a string of beads'.

Within the framework of passive peacemaking by women, a girl could also be offered to the family of the victim as a form of reparation. This 'blood pact' not only put an end to the conflict in question but also precluded any future conflict between the descendants of the two clans, with the two being thenceforth intimately linked for life.

In certain situations of armed conflict between two clans, women used a stratagem to bring the hostilities to an end. They held a meeting and chose the prettiest girl of marriageable age to give to the opposing clan as a token of peace. That blood pact put an immediate and final end to the conflict, as the girl married to one of the heroes of the enemy village now became a link between her parents and the parents of her husband. The marriage itself constituted an inviolable alliance between the two villages involved in the conflict.

Generally speaking, the exogamous nature of marriages in traditional Central African society was a potent factor in the spread of peace. Over and

above the union of the physical persons that were the wife and husband, the marriage was regarded as an alliance between the clans represented by each partner. For the harmony of the marriage as well as to perpetuate that sacred alliance, the wife and husband were duty-bound to overcome together the difficulties and conflicts which could separate them, and thus to ensure that the couple and the alliance endured.

So, despite their apparent self-effacement, women played a major role in restoring peace in traditional society.

Because of the threat of sudden and violent death hanging over all those who violated an alliance or pact, the elders had the pressing obligation to raise awareness and create a moral sense in the younger generations about the dangers to which the clan was exposed if commitments made were not honoured.

In the land of the Runga, the imam, sultan or any other person with good knowledge of the Koran could settle conflicts between individuals. Here, women were not allowed to take part in public debates, but could make known their opinions and grievances. They could also forward 'explanations' to the dignitaries responsible for conflict management.

One of the final conclusions to be drawn from the various survey interviews is that the clans saw patience, humility and persuasiveness as essentially female attributes. They were the qualities which enabled women to handle situations of tension – qualities which they acquired with age. Accordingly, the older the woman, the more she was respected.

Aunts also had an important place in conflict management. They were usually appealed to in cases of insoluble conflicts which involved the children in the family. For instance, when a very recalcitrant child had to be made to behave, the parents would appeal to an aunt. According to custom, the authority exercised by aunts over their nieces and nephews was unquestionable, by definition.

Conclusion: the modern woman and social peace

Our survey was carried out in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. This large city and some provincial towns have become focal points of hatred and constant insecurity. The harmonious coexistence of the various ethnic groups in the neighbourhoods and boroughs has been replaced by distrust and fear of other people. The interviewees in the survey lamented the loss of traditional values, in particular the concept of the extended family, the central role played by women in society, communal labour, mutual respect, dialogue, the sense of generosity and the duty to remain dignified.

This loss of traditional moral and cultural values is a striking feature of all so-called modern African societies. The interviewees deplored the social decay caused by the weakening of the family structure. They noted that one of the reasons for the failure or, to be more accurate, ineffectiveness of the role of women as architects of peace in society was that 'the modern woman devotes less time to her family and children'. She is increasingly preoccupied with modern work, as is her husband. The education of her children and the harmony of the couple often suffer as a result. This leads to a great loosening of morals, which is observable, for example, in the behaviour of young people.

If in modern society women no longer play a fundamental role in the preservation of peace, it is normal that there is an upsurge in conflicts. As a result, we noted that more conflicts are generated in modern society than in traditional society.

The sources of conflict present in the Central African society of today which were named by the interviewees include: problems related to salaries (unpaid, or paid very late), unemployment, famine, disease, nepotism, corruption, tribalism, infidelity, contempt for others, intolerance, conflict between generations, and the lack of education of children. The factors which they named as worsening social instability were: abdication of their responsibilities by parents, the society and the Government, the influence of foreign cultures, notably the culture of violence and weapons widely disseminated through television and the cinema, the three-fold political, economic and moral crisis and the increase in tribalism, regionalism and racism.

The interviewees insisted on the need to rehabilitate the role of peace-makers played by women in the family in particular, and in society in general. They also mentioned the complementary role which schools and associations could play.

All the interviewees agreed that it was still possible for women to play their traditional role of peacemakers in the Central African society of today. The latest outbreaks of violence in the Central African Republic proved that it is usually men who take up arms to kill and destroy, and women and children who are the main victims of such armed violence. The women should, therefore, revive their natural function as neutral mediators in conflicts.

However, women can play such a role only if they enjoy the sort of credibility in their society that elderly women, for example, enjoyed in traditional society. The perception of the female mediator as a woman of perfect virtue is demonstrated by the fact that, for many of the interviewees, the ideal female mediator today would be a very pious or, at least, a religious woman.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made as a result of the survey:

1. *Recommendations concerning the preservation of positive moral and cultural values*
   - Identification of elderly resource persons who possess authentic Central African moral and cultural values with a view to establishing a Council of Sages of the Republic.
   - Drafting of a code of good conduct for young people and adults.
   - Re-establishment of a notation system for good behaviour in schools and universities.
   - Reintroduction of lessons in civic and moral instruction in schools.
   - Re-establishment of vice squads.
   - Labelling by television networks of violent, erotic or pornographic films reserved for adults.
   - Setting up of a parents' committee to be responsible for viewing films programmed by video cinemas.
   - Establishment of a national day for raising awareness about the preservation of the traditional moral and cultural values conducive to peace.
   - Making media professionals aware of their role as educators in society.

2. *Recommendations concerning the rehabilitation and strengthening of social cohesion and peace*
   - Information and awareness-raising about family unity through the promotion of positive traditional values and the rehabilitation of the role played by women.
   - Involvement of religious associations in strengthening social cohesion and peace.
   - Reintroduction of medals awarded to mothers and the family.
   - Sensitization of young people to the benefits of Central African moral and cultural values.
   - Adoption of welfare measures to benefit large families: housing, health care, means of transport and communication, loans and training.
   - Creation by local authorities of community and leisure centres for families.
   - Publicity campaigns to promote good behaviour in public places.
   - Elimination of the reactionary attitudes and harassment which undermine the dignity of women and the family.

- Girls' access to education and training by means of incentive measures, especially in science and technology.
- Upgrading and consolidation of texts concerning the conditions for the planning and establishment of churches and religious associations.
- Sensitization of the religious authorities to the need to harmonize levels of recruitment and training for their management personnel.
- Emphasis by the media on the provisions of the Constitution concerning the secular character of the State.

Women, politics and peace in northern Namibia

Heike Becker

The need for a gendered and culturally-specific perspective on conflict resolution and peace building

This study considers the role of women in decision-making and conflict resolution; it is an inquiry into the contribution of women in 'traditional' methods of peaceful conflict resolution in northern Namibia. The study aims at developing a gendered perspective on peace building policies and projects at the local level.

Recent studies of women and peace building have pointed out that there has been little documentation or analysis of women's peace building activities. Besides, traditional conflict and peace studies have focused on inter-state relations, and nation-states as actors in the making of war and peace. The experiences of ordinary women and men at the grassroots and community levels have been largely omitted in the analysis of peacemaking and peace building. This is partly owing to the prevailing concepts of peace building which have neglected the psychosocial and spiritual dimensions and processes in the reconciliation of human relationships (Mazurana/McKay 1999: 8-12). Related to this omission are narrow concepts of peace building, which focus on structural reconstruction in a post-conflict situation. Moreover, structural reconstruction often means simply the reconstruction of state structures, but neglects elements of much needed transformation in order to build lasting peace.

The meanings and practices of peace building are culturally specific, and any investigation of best practices, therefore, requires a careful analysis of local approaches. This includes, among others, the study of traditional African conflict

management practices. Apart from conflict resolution practices based on mediation, as in the customary judicial processes, traditional approaches to conflict resolution also involve dimensions of spiritual practices that help to reconcile and end persistent violence.

The new approaches to gender and culture as stepping stones of sustainable peace have lately been taken up in several efforts to promote the role of women in peace building processes. The UNESCO programme on *Women and a Culture of Peace* (1996) and its special project on women and a culture of peace in Africa (1998-1999) focused on research in several regions throughout Africa on women's contributions to, and best practices of, peace building, as well as their use of mediation techniques and survival skills. The *Women's Agenda for a Culture of Peace in Africa*, adopted in May 1999 in Zanzibar, emphasizes the role of women as actors. It draws attention to the fact that in the past, women have primarily been considered as the victims of conflict. Yet their experiences and skills have been neglected in peace building processes. The *Women's Agenda* has identified the 'need to encourage and support African women to enter into decision-making roles in all areas of policy including conflict prevention, management and resolution'.

The methodology of the study

This study investigates the gender aspects of (political) power sharing, conflict resolution and peace building in traditional authorities and customary courts in northern Namibia. It presents a gendered analysis of peace building in the region. The area formerly known as Owamboland, and today consisting of four of the thirteen Namibian administrative districts—the Oshana, Omusati, and Ohangwena regions and the northern parts of Oshikoto, was selected as the main focus of the study for three main reasons:

  ▷ Owambo, which was the main arena of the Namibian war of liberation (1966-1989), is a post-conflict zone with many characteristic problems of the aftermath.
  ▷ The Owambo are the largest language group in Namibia. About half of Namibia's total population of an estimated 1.8 million people live in Owambo. Although the area covers only about 6 per cent of the Namibian territory, in Namibian usage it is commonly referred to as the North.
  ▷ Unlike other cultural clusters in northern Namibia, that is in the Kavango and Caprivi regions to the east of Owambo, and in the northern Kunene region bordering on Owambo's west, the culture and his-

tory of Owambo are relatively well-documented. Despite the necessary caution toward ethnographic sources from the early and middle colonial era, the abundance of writing by missionaries and colonial officials presents a sufficient basis for a critical analysis of the traditional features of Owambo culture. In addition, over the past decade Owambo culture and history have been the subject of several excellent studies based on archival and oral research, which have critically re-evaluated older sources.[1]

To a lesser extent, some information on the Kavango region has also been included in the study. Like all northern Namibian regions, Kavango was affected by the liberation war, though far less than Owambo. In addition, there are certain similarities between Owambo and Kavango cultures, in particular their allegiance to matrilineal succession.

The empirical data cited have been collected by the author during field research in Owambo and Kavango. In addition to empirical data, and ethnographic and historical sources, literary sources have been consulted. These include collections of orature, such as proverbs, sayings, songs and stories, as well as recent autobiographic and fictional literary writing.

Setting the scene:
social structure in northern Namibia with special emphasis on gender

This section describes the area under study. It then analyses the social structure of the Owambo of Namibia, focusing on gender related elements that are relevant for an assessment of gendered war, peace and conflict resolution in northern Namibia. The section also includes a few observations on the Kavango communities to the east of Owambo. Although Kavango has been far less affected by the Namibian war of liberation, some social characteristics of the area give valuable clues for the understanding of gender, war and peace.

---

1. See the unpublished dissertations by Patricia Hayes (1992), Meredith McKittrick (1995), Emmanuel Kreike (1996), and Märta Salokoski (1992), and the published theses by Martti Eirola (1992), Harri Siiskonen (1990) and Frieda-Nela Williams (1991). There has also been a proliferation of articles and papers providing a gender lens on Owambo culture and history. See Hayes (1996 and 1998), McKittrick (1998), Becker (1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1999a), Orford/Becker (1999).

1. Description of the area

Owambo and Kavango belong to the central African matrilineal belt, that is their kinship systems and inheritance and succession norms are organized in such a way that they follow the maternal line. In the heyday of structural-functional anthropology, authors like Audrey Richards (1950: 246) made much of the apparent contradiction of matrilineal descent and male authority in these societies. This has been labelled the 'matrilineal puzzle'. For several decades the view that matriliny did not entail greater authority for women but merely meant that authority flowed through the mother's brother rather than the father, remained stock of the mainstream western anthropology.

The seven Namibian Owambo polities are located in the north-central part of Namibia. Their economy has been based on the cultivation of the staple *omahangu* (millet), supplemented by vegetables, such as spinach and ground-nuts, and the husbandry of cattle and goats. The Namibian Owambo communities have been the source of substantial male labour migration to the mines, farms and factories of southern and central Namibia from the late nineteenth century.

Another basic characteristic of Owambo is that it is a highly Christianized region. The proportion of churchgoing Christians in Owambo is usually estimated at about 90 per cent. The Christian churches are major social institutions in Owambo that is ostensibly thoroughly permeated by a Christian discourse. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) is the biggest Christian denomination in Owambo, while substantial minorities belong to the Roman Catholic and the Anglican Churches. The Roman Catholic Church is the dominant Christian denomination in Kavango. Only in Ukwangali, the westernmost Kavango area, does ELCIN have considerable influence. However, the impact of Christianity appears to be far less intensive in Kavango than in Owambo.

The results of the three national and two regional elections held in Namibia since independence show that Owambo has been completely dominated politically by the former liberation movement and now ruling party. Everywhere in Owambo SWAPO has scored an average of more than 90 per cent of the vote.

The five Kavango polities are located east of Oukwanyama, the easternmost Owambo area. They stretch along the Kavango River, as well as cover the adjacent inland areas. The river is the area's heart and its main economic and political centre.

The economy is based on subsistence agriculture, that is the cultivation of *omahangu* (millet) and a range of vegetables, while fishing and, to a smaller

extent animal husbandry, play a complementary role. Male labour migration has played a limited role, with recruitment mainly to the farms in north-central Namibia and to the mines of South Africa.

2. Social structure and gender

Recent historical-anthropological research in Namibia indicates that in the pre-colonial past certain women may have held much more political and social power and influence in some communities than one is commonly led to believe today. Contrary to contemporary suppositions, women in many communities had access to property and were highly valued as agricultural producers. In the example of Owambo culture, where the economy was based on a mixed agricultural-pastoral system, the value socially attached to men's products, that is cattle, was high because of its ritual significance. Women, however, contributed the bulk of subsistence through agriculture. On the basis of her re-evaluation of oral material collected around 1930 the Finish anthropologist Märta Salokoski has concluded that in congruence with the strength of women in Owambo society, manifested in the matrilineal descent system, women were strong also in the right over their produce.

Women were thus visible in the sphere of production, which was integrated with the relations of reproduction. Elements of the matrilineal system mitigated the control a husband could evoke over his wife, or wives and children. Divorce was frequent and easy to obtain in the absence of any substantial material transfer at marriage.

Oral history and oral traditions indicate that women played significant roles as healers, as well as in ritual and cultural performances, such as the ritual *ovapitif* (leaders) of the *efundula* (traditional wedding) in Oukwanyama. Women were a minority among traditional rulers, but at least in a number of communities in Kavango and Owambo queens and other female leaders were nothing exceptional. In many rites women performed rituals that dealt with male endeavours and vice versa. Thus in the ritual realm the divide of male and female spheres was transcended (Salokoski 1992: 154).

Salokoski has further pointed out that several of the important office bearers at the king's court were female. Some posts were filled in line with a parallel sex system, that is, with a male and female officer (Salokoski 1992: 162). She further cautioned that the ruling kings in most of the remembered history of Owambo kingship have been men, only a few have been women. However, in the matrilineal royal clans the women played a very important role, and seem to have executed a considerable amount of influence behind the scenes. The king's mother was particularly powerful, but other female members of the royal clan

were also revered. Salokoski quotes the Finnish missionary Savola who had observed in Ondonga, the south-eastern Owambo polity first penetrated by the Lutheran missionaries that, 'the female members of the kingly clan are inviolable and holy persons for the Ondonga. This is particularly true about the queen mother and the eldest sister of the king. An Ondonga person kneels down also in front of them'. (Savola, Albin 1916, *Hamin majoissa* (*In the Huts of Ham*), Helsinki, The Finnish Missionary Society: 87; in: Salokoski 1992: 165). Salokoski finally states that, 'in the court, the *headwife* of the king is very powerful' (Salokoski 1992: 164-5).

Women of the royal lineage, that is the king's mother, her sisters and the king's own sisters have frequently been described as wielding considerable political powers. A royal woman normally ruled over an *oshikandjo* (district) and royal women held positions as *omalenga* (district headmen or counsellors). The king's mother held the most politically influential position a woman could obtain in most of the Owambo polities. She was consulted on important matters and frequently engineered succession to the kingship. (Tönjes 1911: 117-118, Hayes 1992: 49-50, 97, 243-, Loeb 1962: 42).

In some of the communities under study women were also rulers. The historical presence of women rulers is most evident in the Kavango region in north-eastern Namibia. A look at the literature shows that four of the five Kavango communities have known *vahompa* (female ruling chiefs) in the past. In Kwangali, the westernmost of the Kavango communities, for example, about one third of the chiefs between 1500 and 1960 were women (Gibson/Larson/McGurk 1981: 41-3). The royal genealogy of Gciriku includes three women among the thirteen rulers (Gibson/Larson/McGurk 1981: 197). While the history of Mbunza mentions at least one female *hompa* who lived in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Gibson/Larson/McGurk 1981: 83), the central Kavango area of Sambyu was ruled during a long part of the last century by two successive female chiefs, mother and daughter, who according to oral history seemed to have been extremely popular. Since 1940, again Sambyu has been under the reign of female *vahompa*, Maria Mwengere, who ruled for 47 years and was succeeded in 1989 by her granddaughter Angelina Ribebe, known as Matumbo, the *hompa* of Sambyu.

It has often been overlooked that the Ongandjera polity in the western part of Owambo was ruled by several female chiefs before the coming of the colonial forces (Williams 1991: 1334, 157). The last female Ngandjera *omukwaniilwa* (king or queen) reigned in the 1860s and 1870s. (Louw 1967: 30).

While there are no definite reports of female chiefs in the other Owambo communities, this does not mean that certain women could not hold influential positions. As has been indicated, female members of the royal lineage, female

maternal relatives of the chief, his mother, his sisters and his mother's sisters wielded considerable political power. In particular, the high degree of influence exerted by the chief's mother in several Owambo communities is most remarkable. A missionary living among the Ovakwanyama at the turn of this century, for example, reported that the chief asked the advice of his mother in all important affairs and usually acted according to her suggestions.

While the German missionaries reported that only royal males qualified for the supreme rule, rule over the whole of the polity, they emphasized the prominent and powerful position of certain royal women. The high-profile visibility given to the female *ohamba*, Nekoto, in their reports and published sources is most remarkable. Nekoto, an aunt of kings Weyulu and Nande and a great-aunt of the last Kwanyama king Mandume, ruled over a large section of Oukwanyama where she took all relevant political decisions and sentenced in court. Nekoto was obviously highly redoubtable. She not only exerted great influence over other royals, including the supreme rulers, but also commanded much respect with the missionaries. When the German mission inspector J. Spiecker visited Oukwailyama in 1906, she was one of the very few eminent Ovakwanyama to whom he paid courtesy visits.[2]

A historical perspective on conflict resolution in northern Namibia

1. Spiritual healing: purification and cleansing of blood-guilt

As far as conflict resolution and peace building are concerned in traditional societies in northern Namibia, ethnographic sources mention good magic that was used for purifying and conciliating purposes. Maija Hiltunen, a Finnish anthropologist who spent several years in the 1950s and 1960s as a missionary in Ondonga, has presented an analysis of these rituals, based on the Emil Liljeblad collection dating back to 1932.

Hiltunen deals mostly with situations in which an individual was concerned. However, in some cases a whole family was in need of purification. If an individual had become contaminated with the blood of a person he had put to death, he needed purification (Hiltunen 1993: 218).

---

2. Apart from numerous references in the files of the Rhenish Mission Society, Nekoto also features prominently in the book written by the Rhenish missionary Herrmann Tönjes (Tönjes 1996).

The following depiction of how blood-guilt (OshiNdonga: *uutoni*; OshiKwanyama: *outoni*) was dealt with is based on accounts that focus on cases of individual killing, that is not necessarily in the context of armed conflict. The idea behind the ritual was that the blood of the person killed had to be conciliated. The killer had to be purified with magic rites, otherwise his desire to kill would spread to other people. The killer was considered intoxicated with blood (A *kolwa ombinzi*). It was believed that the blood he had spilled made him unable to control himself, losing part of his body, heart and speech. This made him speak in a confused manner (Hiltunen 1993: 218-9).

A person who had acquired blood-guilt was regarded as taboo because a dangerous power was in him, which he received from the blood of the person he had killed.

In Loeb's study (1962: 90-91) an extensive account of returning soldiers in Oukwanyama is included. Loeb wrote that it was believed that any man who had killed another person had to undergo a purification rite, for if he were not properly purified the dead man's ghost would drive him insane. The Kwanyama believed that a killer was dangerous both to himself and to others until he had been purified. Loeb elaborates that every soldier who returned from war had to undergo some purification ritual. However, those who had killed no one simply went to an *ondudu* (diviner/healer) who washed them clean from bad luck and gave them herbs to drink. Then the head wife of the owner of the homestead sprayed his back with ashes, and he was free from all taboos. But for the returning soldier who had killed, more complicated observances were necessary. Until the final purification at the end of the ritual he was considered impure and spent his days in isolation.

2. Judicial processes as conflict resolution

It is difficult to assess the significance and nature of mediation and judicial processes as forms of conflict resolution in pre-colonial northern Namibian societies. It appears that such processes were very different from the more recent adjudication of laws in customary courts presided over by office bearers of the traditional authorities. Although this form of community justice is labelled traditional in present discourses, its roots seem to stem largely from the early colonial period.

The different sources on pre-colonial judicial processes are contradictory. However, it seems that the judicious function of the kings, and possibly also of heads of districts and wards, was not at all separate from spiritual forms of conflict resolution, including those involving magic executed by diviners. Salokoski holds that religious functionaries were also part of the distribution of justice. She elaborates:

> *'Misfortune, illness and death were according to traditional Owambo belief caused through the evil influence of human beings (often unwittingly) or spirits, or the case was defined as a misfortune sent by Kalunga. Transgressions of one person towards another, or of a person towards the society, like keeping the rain from falling, often were seen to be caused by spiritual actors outside this person. Justice in such a case called for communication with the spiritual world. This explains why the task of 'judges' merged with the task of diviner.'* (Salokoski 1992: 183)

It also remains unclear whether these judicial processes were of a conciliatory nature. It emerges from at least some of the sources that they were rather of a punitory nature. At least in the later 1800s and early 1900s crimes were often punished harshly, as indicated by the descriptions of internal punishment raids by authors like Loeb and Salokoski. It appears, however, that rituals aimed at conciliating former enemies were of a rather spiritual nature. A diviner, rather than a royal or *elenga*, played the role of reconciliator (Hiltunen 1993: 221).

Conflict in northern Namibia: a gendered perspective

1. Women and war in a historical perspective

From the older sources it seems that in Owambo, raids and war were male pre-occupations. From an early age boys began their training as future soldiers. Loeb has presented an account of several plays that served to instil the corresponding attitudes and skills in young Kwanyama boys. He wrote that a favourite game, called *onhandeka*, consisted of fights between pairs of boys. Each pair fought another pair with knobkerrie sticks for an even number of rounds until the vanquished pair admitted defeat. Then each victor performed a jumping dance, called himself by the name of a great warrior and challenged the other boys to fight him. Interestingly, *onhandeka* was also the name for the war dance, in which the men about to go to war jumped up and down, sang war songs and shook their spears. There were other games and sports, which prepared boys for their future soldiering tasks, such as *okapumba* (to throw at one another), wrestling and target shooting. The latter was also called *okapumba* and provided the training for skilled archers (Loeb 1962: 81-2).

It would be erroneous, however, to assume that women and girls played no role in the encouragement of belligerent attitudes. Nor are there any

indications that mothers would have raised their children in a way that would have discouraged their inclination to battle. Loeb (1962: 81) emphasized that boys who played *onhandeka* often engaged in play fighting because they wanted to show off before the girls. His account of the boys' target shooting also alludes to interesting gender connotations. The boys used a limited number of arrows and took turns in shooting at a melon. Each boy took his turn until he failed to hit the target. The winner was the boy who continued until his last arrow hit the target. He was given the prize, imaginary horses or cattle or wives. If the prize was a wife, and a boy won on his first turn, each hit thereafter counted as a child (Loeb 1962: 82).

Furthermore, according to Salokoski (1992: 144), women's ritual behaviour during war and raids was seen to be crucial for the endeavour. Loeb (1962: 86) has elaborated that the ritual final meal for a war band party before they set out from home was considered a significant occasion for observing the omens that augured success or failure. The pot in which the meal had been cooked was considered sacred, and the meal had to be prepared by a prepubescent girl. After the soldiers had left, the girl had to approach the pot, crawling on her hands and knees, and make the cry of the jackal. The purpose of this action was to increase the cunning of the war leader, and thus ensure the success of the raid.

Whereas the older ethnographies such as Loeb's presented pre-colonial culture and society, including aspects of violence and gendered identities, as largely static, recent historical research has refuted this image. Historian Meredith McKittrick in her analysis of shifting Owambo masculinities has pointed out that along with the arrival of mercantile capitalism, the introduction of firearms and the new social institutions, described above by Salokoski, masculine ideals changed before the advent of colonialism:

> '*A gun culture linked to male power emerged in late 19th-century Owambo kingdoms. Bravery in battle had long been an element of ideal masculinity, but the desire for costly commodities militarised masculinity. The resulting elite male culture incorporated goods such as horses, guns and clothing into the textures of both mundane daily life and momentous ritual events...*' (McKittrick 1999: 7)

It also appears that, contrary to contemporary common belief, women were not absent from the fighting altogether. According to an eminent oral historian from the Ongandjera polity, Petrus Amutenya, at least one former *omukwaniilwa* (ruling queen) of Ongandjera, who ruled in the early 1800s,

waged battles bravely and went to war together with her soldiers. Queen Niita herself was an adept archer.[3] This is very interesting information that challenges the common presumption held by contemporary Namibians and historians alike that in the past women could not rule because they would not carry weapons and would not fight.

There is little information on if, and how, women might have been involved in peacemaking in northern Namibia. Peace treaties are not covered well by the oral traditions on which the ethnographic sources based their accounts. Loeb, however, cites a manuscript by the German missionary Karl Sckär which mentioned a peace treaty the Kwanyama king Mweshipandeka, who ruled from 1862 to 1882, contracted with the neighbouring kingdoms of Uukwambi and Ondonga. This peace treaty, probably the only formal agreement of its kind in pre-colonial Owambo has become known as *okakulikadi* (to do by women). Loeb wrote that according to oral traditions the agreement became known by this name because the king was advised by either his wives or his female relatives to make the treaty (Loeb 1962: 92).

Very little is known about the historical role of women in war among the Kavango communities. Maria Fisch's article on the history of the female chiefs of the Sambyu does not give any details. She describes several war-related movements of the community during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when the community was headed by female *vahompa*. However, her depiction suggests that the Sambyu people may have engaged less in active warfare than taken flight in the face of powerful adversaries, such as the Kololo who approached from the area of present-day Lesotho in 1858 (Fisch 1999: 110). At least, today's Sambyu represent their history as that of a community little inclined towards bellicose ambitions.

2. Women and spiritual healing in historical perspective

It appears that women played a major role in the processes of physical and spiritual healing in northern Namibia. The different sources largely agree that in Owambo there were four grades of diviners. The three lower grades of herbalists, spiritualists, and those performing blood offerings to ancestral spirits, included both men and women. It is not clear, however, how many of these diviners were women, or whether women performed their tasks in ways different from males. Their involvement was apparently quite extensive, however.

---

3. Interview with Petrus Amutenya, Okahao, 21 July 1997.

Only the diviners of the fourth grade (the makers of amulets) were apparently always male (Hiltunen 1993: 49).

It also appears from some sources that women played a significant role in purification rituals to cleanse returning soldiers from *uutoni/outoni* (blood-guilt). Loeb's account mentions that the same young girl who had prepared the ritual last meal in which the soldier participated before the war party left for a raid had to prepare, and rub him with, a lotion of millet, water and butter at a specific stage of the purification ritual on his return. She also performed the final step of the purification by rubbing him with herbs (Loeb 1962: 90-1).

3. Women and judicial processes in historical perspective

As has already been mentioned, the extent to which the kings, other royals and the kings' officials played a role in conciliatory judicial processes cannot be sufficiently clarified from available sources. There is also insufficient information on the gender aspects of these processes. It is impossible, for instance, to say without additional research into oral traditions whether women judges handled conciliation processes differently from men.

There is also no conclusive information on how changes in gender and the judicial process were related to historical changes. However, a case study carried out in Ongandjera, the Owambo polity repeatedly ruled by women from the royal clan, gives some indication that changes in gender aspects of traditional politics and the related judicial processes were possibly linked to the increasing centralization and militarization the Owambo polities experienced after contact with white traders and the introduction of firearms in the area (Becker 1998a). The rulers' need for firearms, ammunition and commodities such as alcohol, Western-style clothes and horses was probably the driving force behind the prevailing politics of raiding during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Linked to the emergence of a new class of armed non-hereditary officials, the *omalenga*, was the demise of remnants of an earlier kinship-based organization in the administration of the Owambo polities.

Up until the 1860s the Western Owambo polity of Ongandjera was frequently ruled by queens, but never after that date. It was not possible to collect any conclusive information on why the tradition of female ruling *aakwaniilwa* came to an end in Ongandjera at that time. The timing suggests, however, that this might have been part of the social and political changes that occurred with the onset of mercantile capitalism and the economy and politics of raiding. How exactly these changes were suffused with gender assumptions, is still open to speculation. It might be the case, however, that the process of centralization of authority and power was detrimental to the participation of women in these

structures. It may also have entailed pervasive redefinition of gender representations and practices (Becker 1998a: 34).

The processes of masculinizing the positions of *traditional authority* and of judicial processes, were reinforced with the onset of colonial rule. Ongandjera rulers had been assisted and controlled by both male and female *omalenga* and *aanamadhina*. This contradicts the more recent gender composition of the traditional authority positions in the Owambo communities. Until most recently all *omalenga* had been male since the time of Shaanika na Shilongo, the king during whose rule Ongandjera became subject to colonial rule. There were still female *oomwene gwomikunda* (ward headmen or headwomen, the basic level of pre-colonial political organization and traditional authority) during the early years of colonial rule, but this practice gradually died out during the early years of colonial rule.[4] Again, conclusive insight is still lacking as to why this happened. It appears to be intrinsic to the broader changes Ngandjera society underwent at the time that women disappeared from positions of authority they had held formerly. The emerging new structures of tribal authority evolved into all-male domains.

In the Kavango polities royal women in positions of authority were nothing exceptional. In four of the five Kavango communities there were no explicit barriers against the appointment of female political and judicial officers in the past, and there are none today. With the exception of the easternmost Kavango community, Mbukushu, all Kavango communities have accepted women as headwomen, senior headwomen or *vahompa* (chiefs or kings/queens) ever since these communities were settled in the Kavango, probably in the 1600s (Gibson/Larson/McGurk 1981: 22).

Women can still be found in traditional authority positions in Kavango despite attempts by the colonial administration and the local male elite to masculinize these positions. In 1941, for example, Kanuni, the female *hompa* of the Kwangali was deposed by the then Native Commissioner for Kavango and replaced by her brother Sivute. Her brother had launched false reports to the colonial administration with the aim of suggesting that the people would prefer a male chief (Kampungu 1965: 371-373). The Native Commissioner for the Kavango, Harold Eedes, was only too ready to follow these suggestions since a woman ruling over men did not fit into his white-male early-to-mid twentieth century perceptions of male and female. According to the Western gender ideology of Eedes' time, women were presumably weak, and hence unable to exert the amount of control expected of a chief by the colonial administration in order to maintain law and order.

---

4. Interviews with Aune Amos, Uukwalumbe, 22 July 1997; Festus Iitula, Okalondo, 19 July 1997; and Petrus Amutenya, Okahao, 21 July 1997.

Despite the fact that among the Kavango communities there is no gender discrimination with regard to traditional authority positions, currently very few women hold positions as headwomen or advisers to customary courts. The female *hompa* (chief) of Sambyu is a notable exception. Definite information about the exact earlier gender composition of political authority and judicial officers is lacking, but there are indications that also in the Kavango female leadership was contested, and that the colonial administration in conjunction with local men played a major role in these attempts. The case of Kanuni is just one example.[5]

Conflict resolution and gender in contemporary northern Namibia

1. Women and conflict resolution during the war

In their comparative study of women and peace building, Mazuarana and McKay (1999: 20) have found that throughout Africa, women have drawn upon the moral authority granted to them by virtue of their being mothers, that is, creators of life, to call for peace. They concluded this from abundant writings by grassroots organizations, but also some academic and United Nations documents, which portray women's natural peacefulness.

This image has played a certain role during the Namibian war of liberation. Women have argued as mothers to fight the compulsory conscription of young black men into the South West Africa Territorial Force (SWATF) during the 1980s (Becker 1995a: 211 and Cleaver/Wallace 1990: 83). However, only young men from southern and central Namibia were called up. The young men from the northern territories were never subject to conscription, and this form of political motherhood discourse was, therefore, not applicable in the northern war zone.

There are however a few documents, including literary texts, which indicate Owambo women's ambiguity towards armed struggle, and particularly the fact that so many of their children left to join the SWAPO guerrilla PLAN (People's Liberation Army of Namibia). Tanga, the protagonist of the first Namibian women's novel, *Marrying Apartheid* by Ndeutala Hishongwa, for instance, agonizes over the fate of her children who have left Namibia to join the liberation movement (Hishongwa 1986: 65).

_____

5. See Becker 1998b: 263; Fisch 1999: 116-7.

Yet the picture that emerges from the few available written sources on women who lived during the period in the northern war zone does indicate, rather, a general acceptance of armed struggle as a necessity. While there are numerous reports of women's suffering because of the conflict, women in the war zone also actively supported the armed struggle waged by the then liberation movement and its guerrilla force. In Owambo at least, numerous civilian women took considerable risks to cook for the fighters. Women provided cash for the guerrillas, attended to their medical needs, harboured them and provided intelligence (Soiri 1996: 59, 68, 70). The PLAN guerillas were fondly referred to as *ovamati*, that is, (our) boys. A different concept of political motherhood emerges from these reports, which draws upon the image of women as the nurturers of the young, armed, fighters for freedom and a better future, but does not presuppose a natural female peacefulness. This perspective of armed struggle as painful but necessary for the liberation of the country has been beautifully expressed by the distinguished oral poet Meekulu (Grandmother) Mukwahongo Ester Kaimti in her celebration of the return of Namibian exiles in 1989.[6]

Peaceful conflict resolution was apparently not considered an option by many in the northern Namibian war zone, men and women alike. This stance was based on experience. As early as 1974, Magdalena Nehambo Shamena, a teacher from Owambo who had sent a letter to the United Nations the year before, entitled 'Emergency call from the women of Namibia',[7] had to flee the country because of her call for an end to the war and torture.

A rare exception was the February 1988 prediction and call for peace by a prophetess from Owambo. Justina Haihambo delivered a message 'to Botha, from God' to the then South African colonial governor in Namibia:

> *'The war has been fought since then the blood of black and white people has been shed …. The war must end. Give one another peace. If there is no repentance, the seas will rise and many homes will be destroyed.'* (*The Namibian*, 18 February 1988, p. 12)

Months later, the peace settlement and Namibian independence were on the way.

---

6. See 'Children of Namibia', recorded by Namibian filmmaker Bridget Pickering for a series of documentaries on Namibian women, *Stories of Tenderness and Power*. Translation from OshiKwanyama by Ndeshi Immanuel and Kaleni Hiyalwa.

7. An English version of this document was published in *Kalahari Times*, Vol.7, Nos. 6 and 7, June/July 1974.

2. Judicial processes and gender in the conflict situation

At least in some of the Owambo communities during the colonial period, women were excluded from attending and speaking in court unless they were implicated as a party or witness to the case. As late as 1993, women in both Ombalantu and Uukwambi mentioned not being allowed to speak in the customary courts as one of women's legal problems (NDT/CASS 1994: 78 and 79). Before 1989 women were not represented in the structures of the tribal authorities and customary courts in Owambo.

However, in the Kavango, the Sambyu community was headed by the female *hompa* Maria Mwengere until her death in 1987. Ten years after her death, Mwengere was generally remembered by the Sambyu community as a good *hompa* and a very strong personality, being both caring and strict. However, she was also remembered for her particularly close cooperation with the South African administration in the 1970s and 1980s:

> '*Most laws that were put up during her time were made collabo-ratively with the South Africans. ... The South Africans also punished offenders, and then brought them to the chief for further punishment in kind or cash ... When SWAPOs, PLAN combatants were caught, they were brought to the chief and showed to her, dead or alive. The chief used to say only, take these people to your camp, and deal with them as you wish because I have got nothing to do with SWAPOs ... The tribal police beat those SWAPO members who called meetings. The tribal police always came with a message, saying, the chief had sent them.*'[8]

3. Judicial processes and gender-related changes in the post-conflict situation

Customary Courts and Gender in Owambo
While it appears that gender aspects were absent from the possible conciliatory role of customary courts before Namibian independence in 1990, this has begun

---

8. Interview with Veronica Haushiku, Sharukwe, 7 October 1997. Confirmed by interviews with Fr. Bernardus 'Mudama' Roosmalen, Utokota, 5.10.1997; Paulus Sindano and Felicitas Sitoka, Sharukwe, 8 October 1997; focus groups with male and female Grade 12 students respectively, Kayengona, Maria Mwengere Secondary School, 7 October 1997. The students also recalled Mwengere's speeches, broadcast by the then South West Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SWABC), in which she expressed her hatred for SWAPO and called on the population to beat 'SWAPOs' if they saw them.

to change over the past ten years. The examples are drawn from Owambo, and particularly from the two communities of Uukwambi and Ongandjera.

Before 1989, women in both Uukwambi and Ongandjera were excluded from traditional authority positions and indeed from active participation in decision-making within the traditional political and judicial structures. From the late 1980s, however, the traditional authorities of Uukwambi and Ongandjera started removing the barriers which had formerly excluded women, initially without much success as proved by the vivid complaints of Aakwambi women interviewed in 1999 (see above).

In Uukwambi, the process gained momentum when in May 1993 a consultative meeting of the different Owambo 'traditional authorities' was held in Ongwediva. This meeting resolved, *inter alia*, that 'women should be allowed to participate fully in the work of community courts' (Minutes of Customary Law Workshop of Owambo Traditional Leaders, Ongwediva, 25-26 May 1993). Once these recommendations had been accepted, the council of Uukwambi senior headmen started an initiative to institutionalize women's participation in customary court and 'traditional authority' structures. The council called a meeting of all Uukwambi headmen where they were told that an *omukunda* (female representative) had to be selected in each ward. These female representatives were assigned to participate actively in hearings of customary courts, and generally act as deputy to the headman. They were further tasked to encourage other women to attend and speak during court hearings and other community meetings. It took more than two years to get the process properly off the ground because many headmen initially ignored this directive. Although as late as November 1995 there were still *omukunda* without a female representative, this system of indigenous affirmative action seemed to be well in place by then.

The Uukwambi council also cooperated with the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS) at the University of Namibia's Law Faculty in a programme to improve the administration of justice in customary courts. The programme to train community legal activators[9] emphasized the need for gender equality in all spheres of life in independent Namibia, and particularly in both the State's and the community-based customary law system. Training in mediation skills was part of the course, and gender-based major problems of women were dealt with extensively. Women participants had identified matters

---

9. This programme was carried out by CASS from July 1994 to May 1995. About 30 women and men from Uukwambi trained in concepts of general and customary law, marriage and family-related legal issues and conflict resolution skills (for details, see Becker 1995b).

such as maintenance, inheritance, divorce, and violence against women such as battery and rape, as urgent concerns.

Women in Uukwambi were very outspoken about their dissatisfaction with the conflict resolution provided by many male headmen. They accused the headmen of corruption and added that they often did not take women's problems seriously. Women felt that men usually got a better deal because chiefs and headmen 'are mostly men themselves'. Women thus expressed the hope that their presence in traditional authority and customary courts would improve the chances of women to have their concerns treated in a fair manner in the local conflict resolution processes.

In Ongandjera the reform process took a slightly different shape. Among the Owambo communities Ongandjera stands out as the polity which had a strong tradition of female rulers, known as *aakwaniilwa* (kings or queens; singular *omukwaniilwa*), in pre-colonial times until the 1860s. In contrast to the pre-colonial time, the structures of colonial *tribal* authority and customary courts were all-male domains. Throughout the colonial era and until the eve of independence there were no women in positions of tribal authority, and hearings of customary courts and other community gatherings in Ongandjera were fora for men only.

Like in neighbouring Uukwambi, the year 1989 and the country's imminent independence spurred efforts to make the traditional authority structures more inclusive and responsive to the needs of women. In late 1995 and again in the following year, two women were appointed as senior *omalenga* when two of these leading positions became vacant after the death of the previous incumbents.

However, as positive as these reforms may appear, to arrive at an analysis of changing gender relations in post-independence rural politics, more needs to be taken into consideration than simply the appointment of a few women as headwomen. The overarching question is how women and men participate in the public fora of the community. Like in Uukwambi, until quite recently hearings of customary courts and other community meetings in Ongandjera were an all-male affair. Women were present in specific situations only, for instance, when they themselves were a party or witness to a court case. This remained the case until in 1989 the traditional authority decreed that women and men were invited on equal terms to attend court hearings and community meetings.[10]

Women in Ongandjera have taken this call seriously. In 1997 most of those who attended community meetings and hearings of customary courts were women.[11] However, it also appears that while women were often the majority

---

10. Interview with King Jafet Munkundi and Secretary Andreas Shaanika Ndakokamo, Uukwandongo, 26 July 1997.
11. Female community members; Okahao, 21 July 1997; Interview with Jason Tshehama; Uukwalumbe, 23 July 1997.

of those attending public events, they were only marginally involved in the actual decision-making. This was said to be due to women's fear of exposing themselves, 'because the accused might harm her later'.[12]

In both Uukwambi and Ongandjera we were told that everyone, female and male, welcomed the recent local *gender equality* moves. However, there are indications of male opposition to women's participation in leadership roles and public decision-making, due to fears that 'the women are colonising us'.[13] This male opposition to outspoken women may silence many women.

Without any doubt the recent changes concerning the participation of women in traditional authority structures are inextricably intertwined with the recent political history of Namibia. Changes in broader society have been reflected in the discourses of the traditional structures.

Independence and the Constitution appear to have indeed had a strong impact on the changes of gender representations and practices in Owambo. While the wording of Namibia's supreme law still remains unknown to the majority of Namibians,[14] its spirit of gender equality has reached an amazingly broad spectrum of people. This is particularly true for the Owambo communities, where virtually everyone supports the SWAPO government.

Customary courts and gender in Kavango

Previous analysis shows that Sambyu has a long-standing tradition of women yielding political-judicial power as *vahompa*, and has been under female chiefs for most of the twentieth century.

At the time of writing, the traditional authority of Sambyu is headed by *Hompa* Matumbo Angelina Ribebe who was installed in 1989. Apart from the chief, the 'traditional authority' is officially composed of seven senior *nkuru vaforomani* (headmen/headwomen) and eight *vaforoman* (headmen/headwomen). One *nkuru foromani* is a woman, while two of the *vaforomani* are women.

The Sambyu community is, thus, headed by one of only two women chiefs in Namibia. In addition, there are a handful of women in positions as senior headwomen, and counsellors. The overwhelming majority of traditional leaders in Sambyu, as elsewhere, are male, however.

There appears to be no opposition to women's participation in the community's political and judicial authority positions among either women or men.[15] Only one of the recently appointed headwomen said she had experienced

---

12. Interview with Jason Tshehama; Uukwalumbe, 23 July 1997.
13. Cited by female community members, Okahao, 21 July 1997.
14. The text of the Namibian Constitution is available in English only.
15. Interview with Veronica Haushiku, Sharukwe, 7 October 1997.

some opposition, predominantly from older men. It was usually argued that it was a Sambyu *tradition* anyway, to have women chiefs, so non-royal women could also become leaders. Women expressed happiness and excitement that they as women 'are also given the opportunity to lead other people'. But women felt more than simple joy about equal opportunities; they forwarded several quali-fications, too. Most prominently perceived was the need for more women in leadership roles, in order to encourage other women to overcome their shyness and speak in community fora, particularly during customary court hearings.

The *hompa* added that it was important to have women resolve conflicts in the community because women and men used different styles, particularly

A Woman in Power:
Portrait of Hompa Matumbo Angelina Ribebe

Matumbo, as she is generally known in Sambyu, was born on 22 August 1960 as the youngest child of the late Hompa Mwengere's daughter Nankali. She was brought up by her grandmother after her mother died when she was only eight years old.

Matumbo says she virtually grew up in the hompa's court because she loved to be with her grandmother all the time. She not only learned the skills of peaceful conflict resolution from an early age but also enjoyed the privileges that were due to her status as a princess. She recalls that older children would often carry her on their backs, to school or to the bathing-place at the river, and back home. However, she cannot remember that it was ever discussed with her or her siblings that one day one of them might become the chief.

Hompa Mwengere survived all of her four children. When she died in February 1987 she left the wish that her favourite granddaughter Matumbo should become the next chief. But Matumbo declined. At 26 she simply felt far too young for the position. Instead, her much older brother Gotthardt Hainanga was installed, but died after just one year in office in a car accident. Again, the matimbi (counsellors) came to Matumbo, would she please accept the chieftainship. She refused again, feeling too young and incompetent. However, she finally agreed to stand for election by the community as one of ten candidates from the royal family. Seven of the candidates were male, while three were women, namely Matumbo herself, her elder sister Ingrid Katiku and her aunt Rebekka Kambundu. Matumbo received the highest number of votes. This is how Matumbo Angelina Ribebe became the chief of Sambyu while still in her twenties.

Having grown up with her grandmother, the chief, it never came to Matumbo's mind that as a woman she might not be suitable for the highest position of political authority and judicial conflict resolution in her community. Hompa Ribebe feels very strongly that more women must take positions as traditional leaders.

when making investigations in court. The involvement of more women in the leadership may give the authority a kinder, more peaceful face. She argued: 'we as women like talking friendly to people during court sessions, but men can become angry very quickly. It's like they are short-tempered'.[16] She described her own experience (see box page 66).

In line with the *hompa*'s efforts, since independence more women have started to participate actively in the community's conflict resolution processes.[17] However, not too much has changed apparently because most community women feel inferior to men and prefer to keep quiet in their presence. In the words of one of the few headwomen:

> *'Everybody is free to speak, no matter whether the person is male or female. Women who are courageous and open-minded come up and speak out their concerns. But the majority of women are afraid, perhaps because of the inferiority complex, that men might embarrass them, [Courageous women may be] old or young, literate or illiterate. But they have got the reasoning capacity and know-how to analyse an argument, so that an agreeable solution can be found.'*[18]

4. Healing the wounds of war: spiritual healing processes

Several recent studies from other Southern African countries which have gone through experiences of armed conflict similar to Namibia's emphasize the relevance of spiritual healing processes in a post-conflict situation. Such historical and anthropological studies have come mostly from Zimbabwe and Mozambique.[19] They underline the significance of spiritual healing for lasting peace and reconciliation. There are indications that despite the dominant role of mainstream (Western) Christianity in the contemporary northern Namibian societies, non-Christian, traditional, spiritual elements are still highly significant in the area, and have had a certain bearing on the war as well.[20]

---

16. Interview with Matumbo Angelina Ribebe, Kayengona, 8 October 1997.
17. Focus group women, Gove, 9 October 1997; interviews with Veronica Haushiku, Sharukwe, 7 October 1997; Felicitas Sitoka, Sharukwe, 8 October 1997.
18. Interview with Justina Kapande Kakongo, Kaisosi, 6 October 1997.
19. See for instance, Schmidt (1997) on war, violence and healing in Mutasa district, Manicaland province, Zimbabwe; Ranger (1992), also on Zimbabwe and Green/Honwana (1999) on Mozambique.
20. Personal communication with Ellen Namhila on Owambo and Inge Brinkman on Kavango.

Unfortunately, in-depth research into these matters has yet to be conducted in Namibia. This is most likely due to several factors. Local social and historical researchers have so far often felt reluctant to dig into the painful matters of Namibia's recent past beyond the canon of officially sanctioned heroism or martyrdom. This has happened also in neighbouring countries, such as Zimbabwe where the first critical presentation of local people's suffering during the liberation war was published only ten years after the country had become independent in 1980. Irene Staunton's (1990) collection of rural women's life histories has shed light on their hardships caused by both the then Rhodesian security forces and the guerrilla forces. It has also demonstrated rural women's remarkable resilience. No comparable investigation of how women and rural communities lived through the liberation war has been presented on the Namibian experience as yet.

The Zimbabwean studies on spiritual healing of the wounds of war have found that these practices, which include cleansing to appease ancestors and the reburial of war victims, have only become widespread from the early 1990s (Schmidt 1997). This would indicate that a certain period might have to lapse after the experience of war and violence before these ritual forms of reconciliation can take place.

Traditional healers may play a significant role in rituals to provide spiritual healing and reconciliation. A recent documentary film from Mozambique displayed the healing process, involving a former rebel RENAMO soldier, his family and an elderly female healer in all detail.[21] As in northern Namibia many traditional healers and ritual leaders are female, a thorough investigation of such practices may highlight another aspect of the role of women in the post-conflict situation.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study of women and peaceful conflict resolution in northern Namibia has corroborated the need for careful gender analyses of conflict and peaceful conflict resolution. Such an analysis needs to be historically and culturally specific. It would indeed be fallacious to assume ahistorical traditional situations and mechanisms in any one culture. It would be an equally erroneous essentialist presumption that women were intrinsically more peaceful than men. This is obviously not the case considering the active combat and supportive roles

---

21. 'From the Ashes', one of four half-hour videos of the *Landscape of Memory Series* on Truth and Reconciliation in Southern Africa.

women played during the war of liberation in northern Namibia. Besides, gender and femininities are fluid concepts. For instance, there are indications that at least for certain younger women from northern Namibia, carrying a gun as a freedom fighter symbolized empowerment (Soiri 1996: 76).

As has already been pointed out, spiritual healing has played a prominent role in post-conflict situations in some of Namibia's neighbouring countries. Indications are that they may become relevant, or on the ground have already become relevant, in Namibia as well. It is also beyond doubt that the Christian churches will play a significant role in any peaceful conflict resolution in a highly-Christianized country like Namibia.[22]

Recommendations from the study include the following:

1. *Empirical research should be carried out to:*
   ◆ Assess the needs and community best practices in northern Namibia.
   ◆ Assess the needs and opportunities for practices which go beyond the restitution of 'negative' peace, that is, the mere absence of war, to promote 'positive' peace, i.e., conditions of political and social non-violence.
   ◆ Investigate the gender-awareness and women-empowering potential of best practices.
   ◆ Assess the ability of women, men, girls and boys to promote best practices within their own cultural contexts.

2. *Training material and programmes should be designed to foster all of the above.*

3. *Research and material/programme design should be carried out in cooperation with Namibian institutions and organizations which already play a significant role in promoting peaceful conflict resolution and women's empowerment.*

---

22. The important role of the Namibian churches has become very obvious during the situation of violent conflict along the border with Angola. The Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) represents all major Christian denominations in the country, and was headed starting in 1999 by a clergy-woman, the Reverend Nangula Kathindi of the Anglican Church. On 9 February 1999, the representatives of eight churches urged President Sam Nujoma to encourage the Angolan government and UNITA to talk peace rather than engage in a war. The church leaders told the Namibian President that they are disturbed that Namibia is supporting a military option as a means of ending the Angolan war instead of dialogue (*The Namibian*, 10 February 2000).

References

Allison, Caroline (1986). *'It's like holding the Key to your Own Jail'. Women in Namibia.* Geneva: World Council of Churches.

Becker, Heike (1995a). *Namibian Women's Movement 1980 to 1992. From Anticolonial Resistance to Reconstruction.* Frankfurt: IKO – Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunilation.

Becker, Heike (1995b). Community Legal Activator Programme. Evaluation report. Windhoek: CASS. (CASS paper No.35)

Becker, Heike (1998a). *Gender, Power and traditional Authority: Four Namibian Case Studies.* Windhoek: Centre for Applied Social Sciences.

Becker, Heike (1998b). Gender aspects of traditional authorities and customary courts in northern Namibia. 'This new thing that came with independence'. In: *Traditional Authority and Democracy in Southern Africa.* Ed. By Marina d'Engelbronner-Kolff, Manfred O. Hinz and John Sindano. pp.257-88. Windhoek: New Namibia Books.

Becker, Heike (1998c). *Efundula past and present. Female initiation, gender and customary law in northern Namibia.* Paper presented at 'Gender, Sexuality and Law' Conference. Keele University (U.K.). 19-21 June 1998.

Becker, Heike (1999a). *'We want that women are given an equal chance'. Postindependence rural politics in northern Namibia.* Paper presented at 'The Aftermath. Women in Post-war Reconstruction' Conference, Johannesburg College of Education, 20-22 July 1999.

Becker, Heike (1999b). A Kwanyama Queen. In: *The Namibian*, 9.4. 1999

Cleaver, Tessa; Marion Wallace (1990). *Namibia. Women in War.* London and New Jersey: Zed Books.

Cock, Jacklyn (1991). *Colonels & Cadres. War & Gender in South Africa.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Dammann, Ernst; Toivo E. Tirronen (1975). *Ndonga-Anthologie.* Berlin: Verlag von Dietrich Reimer. (Beiheft 29, Folge der Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Eingeborenen-Sprachen)

Eirola, Martti (1992). *The Ovambogefahr. The Ovamboland Reservation in the Making. Political Responses of the Kingdom of Ondonga to the German Colonial Power 1884-1910.* Jyväskylä: Societas Historica Finlandiae Septentronalis. (Studia Historica Septentrionalia 22)

Fisch, Maria (1999). History of the female chiefs of the Shambyu tribe (Kavangoland). In: *Journal Namibia Scientific Society 47*: 109-120.

Gibson, Gordon D.; Thomas J. Larson; Cecilia R. McGurk (1981). *The Karango Peoples.* Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner. (Studien zur Kulturkunde Bd.56)

Green, Edward C.: Alcinda Honwana (1999). Den Zron der Geister besänftigen. Vom Wert traditioneller Heilung kriegstraumatisierter Kinder in Africa. In: *Africa Süd* 5, 99:30-2.

Hayes, Patricia (1992). *A History of the Ovambo of Namibia, c. 1880-1935.* Cambridge. (Unpubl. PhD thesis)

Hayens, Patricia (1996). 'Cocky' Hahn and the 'Black Venus': The Making of a Native Commissioner in South West Africa, 1915-46. In: *Gender & History*, Vol.8 No.3: 364-92.

Hayens, Patricia (1998). The 'Famine of the Dams'. Gender, Labour and Politics in Colonial Ovamboland. In: *Namibia under South African Rule. Mobility & Containment, 1915-46.* Ed. By Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Silvester. Marion Wallace and Wolfram Hartmann, with Ben Fuller. pp.117-48. Oxford: James Currey.

Herbstein, Denis; John Evenson (1989). *The Devils Are Among Us. The War for Namibia.* London: Zed Books.

Hiltunen, Maija (1986). *Witchcraft and Sorcery in Ovambo.* Helsinki: The Finnish Anthropological Society. (Transactions of the Finnish Anthropological Society 17).

Hiltunen, Maija (1993). *Good Magic in Ovambo.* Helsinki. The Finnish Anthropological Society. (Transactions of the Finnish Anthropological Society 33).

Hishongwa, Ndeutala (1986). *Marrying Apartheid.* Abbotsford, Vic.: Imprenta.

Hinz, Mansfred; Nadia Gevers (1989). *Koevoet Versus the People of Namibia.* Utrecht: Working Group Kairos.

Kampungu, Romanus (1965). *Okavango Marriage Custom investigated in the Light of Ecclesiastical Legislation.* A Dissertation. Submitted to the Faculty of Canon Law of the Pontifical University of the Propaganda Fide in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor Canon Law. Roma.

König, Barbara (1983). *Namibia. The Revenge of War.* London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa.

Kreike, Emmanuel (1996). *Recreating Eden: Agro-Ecological Change, Food Security and Environmental Diversity in Southern Angola and Northern Namibia*, 1890-1960. Yale University. (Unpubl. PhD thesis)

LeBeau, Deborah Leah (1999). *Seeking Health: the Hierarchy of Resort and Utilization Patterns of Traditional and Western Medicine in Multi-cultural Katutura, Namibia.* A Dissertation submitted in fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Rhodes University. Submitted December 1999.

Loeb, Edwin (1962). *In Feudal Africa.* Bloomington: Mouton & co.

Louw, Walter (1967). Die Socio-politieke Stelsel van die Ngandjera van Ovamboland. Port Elisabeth. (MA thesis)

Lush, David (1993). *Last Steps to Uhuru. An eye-witness account of Namibia's transition to independence.* Windhoek: new Namibia Books.

Mazurana, Dyan E.; Susan R. McKay (1999). *Women & Peacebuilding.* Montreal: International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development.

McKittrick, Meredith (1995). *Conflict and Social Change in Northern Namibia*, 1850-1954. Stanford University. (Unpubl. PhD thesis)

McKittrick, Meredith (1998). Generational Struggles & Social Mobility in Western Ovambo Communities, 1915-1954. The 'Famine of the Dams'. Gender, Labour and Politics in Colonial Ovamboland. In: *Namibia under South African Rule. Mobility & Containment, 1915-46.* Ed. By Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Silvester, Marion Wallace and Wolfram Hartmann, with Ben Fuller. pp. 241-63. Oxford: James Currey.

McKittrick, Meredith (1999). *Forsaking their Fathers? Colonialism, Christianity and Coming of Age in Ovamboland, Northern Namibia.* Paper presented at African Studies Association Conference, Philadelphia, 11-14 November 1999.

Namhila, Ellen Ndeshi (1997). *The Price of Freedom.* Windhoek: New Namibia Books.

NDT/CASS (1994). *Improving the Legal and Socio-Economic Situation of Women in Namibia. Uukwambi, Ombalantu and Uukwanyama Integrated Report.* Part 1: The Socio-Economic Aspects. Part 2: the Legal Aspects. Windhoek: NDT and CASS.

Olivier, M. J. (1961). *Inboorlingsbeleid en –administrasie in die mandaatgebied van Suidwes-Afrika. Stellenbosch.* (unpubl. PhD thesis)

Orford, Margie; Heike Becker (1999). *Home and Exile: Owambo Women's Literature.* Paper presented at Zimbabwe Book Fair/Women Writers' Conference. Harare, 29-30 July 1999.

Pankhurst, Donna (n.d.). *From the Village Council to the Negotiating Table: Women in Peacebuilding. A Framework for Action by the International Community.* Department of Peace Studies, Bradford University, UK.

Pendleton, Wade; Debie LeBeau; Chris Tapscott (1993). *A Socio-Economic Assessment of the Oshakati/Ondangwa Nexus.* Windhoek: Namibian Institute for Social and Economic research. (Research Report 10)

Preston, Rosemary (1997). Integrating Fighters After War. Reflection on the Experience, 1989-1993. In: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 23(3): 453-72.

Ranger, Terence (1992). 'Afterworld: War, Violence and healing in Zimbabwe'. In: *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18,3

Rautanen, Martti (n.d.). *Beantwortung des Fragebogens über die Rechte der Eingeborenen in den deutschen Kolonien.* Ovambogebiet (Deutsch-Südwestafrika).

Salokoski, Märta (1992). Symbolic Power of Kings in Pre-colonial Ovambo Societies. University of Helsinki. (Licensiate Thesis in Sociology/Social Anthropology).

Schmidt, Heike (1997). *Healing the Wounds of War: Memories of Violence and the Making History in Zimbabwe's Most Recent Past.* In Journal of Southern African Studies 23,2: 301-10.

Shikola, Teckla (1998). *We Left our Shoes Behind.* In *What Women Do in Wartime. Gender and Conflict in Africa*. Ed. By Meredeth Turshen and Clothilde Twagiramariya. Pp.138-49. London: Zed Books.

Siiskonen, Harri (1990). *Trade and Socioeconomic Change in Ovamboland*, 1850-1906. Helsinki: Societas Historica Fennica. (Studia Historica 35)

Soiri, Lins (1996). *The Radical Motherhood. Namibian Women's Independence Struggle.* Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet. (Research Report No.99)

Staunton, Irene (1990). *Mothers of the Revolution.* Harare: Baobab Books.

Steans, Jill (1998). *Gender and International Relations. An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Tönjes, Herrmann (1996; German original 1911). *Ovamboland. Country. People. Mission. With Particular reference to the Largest Tribe, The Kwanyama.* Windhoek: Namibia Scientific Society.

Tötemeyerm Gerhard (1978). *Namibia Old and New. Traditional and Modern Leaders in Ovamboland.* London: C. Hurst & Co.

Thomas, Caroline; Peter Wilkin (eds.) (1999). *Globalization, Human Security, and the African Experience.* Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publ.

UNESCO (1999). *The Women's Agenda for a Culture of Peace in Africa*, Zanzibar, the United Republic of Tanzania, 20 May 1999.

Waylen, Georgiana (1996). *Gender in Third World Politics.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Williams, Frieda-Nela (1991). *Precolonial Communities of Southwestern Africa. A History of Owambo Kingdoms 1600-1920.* Windhoek: National Archives of Namibia. (Archeia 16)

The role of Somali women in the search for peace

Mohamed Abdi Mohamed

Somalia is a country of 673,660 square kilometres and about 10 million inhabitants. It is located in the Horn of Africa and shares its borders with three States: Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya. The country has the longest coastline in Africa: 3,330 kilometres.

The Somali State came into being in 1960, following the unification of the British Protectorate in the north and the Italian Somaliland in the south. Not all Somali people live within the borders of Somalia. Somalis are also found in Djibouti, the Ogaden province in Ethiopia and north-eastern Kenya. Before the colonial powers divided them into five parts, the Somali people inhabited their own traditional territory. The introduction of colonial borders has been costly to the Somalis. In fact, the imposition of colonial borders is a key explanatory factor of the protracted conflicts that have been tormenting the people of the Horn of Africa for decades.

In terms of religious faith, Somalis are Sunni Muslims of the Shafi' sect. A small number of Shi'a Muslims live in such coastal towns as Mogadishu, Merka and Kismayo. The national language is Somali. The capital city is Mogadishu. Prior to the civil war, an estimated 2 million people resided in Mogadishu. Today, about 400,000 people live there.

Since 1991, Somalia has been experiencing a harsh civil war, which has killed hundreds of thousands, has sent millions in refugee camps and has left the entire country profoundly devastated.

Many attempts have been made to bring Somalia back to sustainable peace and stability. As Somalia continues to be a war-torn society, these efforts are ongoing. This chapter focuses on the role of Somali women in the search for peace.

For a better understanding of the role of Somali women in the peace process, it is important to shed light on some important aspects of the Somali social, cultural and political life.

The Somali society is divided culturally into several categories. The following table presents the main divisions and their respective functions.

Table 1: Main Somali societal divisions

Categories	Functions
Spear men	This category largely encompasses shepherds and farmers. This is the group that dominates political power.
Religious men	These are the people who are in charge of matters relating to religion.
Artisans	These are people who are skilled in textile, leatherwork and ironwork. Most Somalis look down upon them. They include people locally known as *miclgaan, Tumaal, Yibir, Riibi, Maclaraal, Boon, Waata, Aweer, Jaaji, Yaxar, Gacan sibir*, etc. This group does not have access to marriage with the spear men and men of religion. They suffer a great deal of discrimination.

It is important to mention that the structure of these groups obscures women. The situation of women among artisan communities is even worse.

Besides these main categories, there are other groups that do not belong to the above-mentioned main divisions. The following table gives an illustration of these other categories, as well as their functions.

Table 2: Other social categories

Groups	Functions
City dwellers	They include Hamari people, Baravanese people, the inhabitants of Marka, etc.
Islanders	Like the Baajuuni people, who live in and around the small islands in southern Somalia. The Islands themselves are known by the name of Baajuun.
Some farming communities	These are communities which hail from the Bantu, and which live along the Jubba and Shabelle rivers.

Beyond these categories, perhaps one of the best known features of the Somali socio-political system is that it is a society based on a traditional, rigid system, which is built and functions under the influence of clanism and segregation:

◆ *Clanism* means that the society is separated into myriad divisions and subdivisions. These divisions are based on a genealogical formula, which traces people's identity through the father line. Mothers are sometimes used as supplementary markers. This happens only when a man marries several women, in which case the mothers' names are used to separate the children.

◆ *Segregation* reflects the division of the society. People are divided into nobles and people of lesser rank; not all enjoy equal rights, particularly in matters relating to marriage.

The Somali society is founded on six pillars: kinship, customary law, religion, language, traditional territory and the State.

Table 3: The six pillars of the Somali society

Kinship	Kinship bonds people together, in two different ways: based on genealogy and rooted in marriage. The Somali culture pays a great deal of attention to both. Marriage bonds are particularly emphasized. Somalis say: 'The day your son needs you most is the day you marry his mother.'
Customary law	This refers to custom-based laws and traditions that govern society. Customary law deals with matters relating to custom, injury and death, war and peace, protection, etc. This can be referred to as general customary law. There are also specialized custom-based laws and by-laws that are specific to groups like hunting and fishing communities.
	When highlighting the importance of customary law, Somalis say: 'A community based on customary law does not become poor'. They also say that: 'customary law is peace', meaning that when adhered to, customary law brings about peace.
	Traditional legislators are all male. Women play no role in the decision-making; they are not present during deliberations. However, they wield a great deal of power from behind the scenes, which sometimes is more effective than male power. When dealing with difficult cases, male legislators often consulted with their wives and sought their advice.
	Although both the colonial powers and independent Somali government have weakened it, customary law still holds sway across the country. Therefore it is important to understand customary law and to take it into consideration in matters relating to peace in Somalia.
Religion	The Somalis are Muslim, and their religion unites them and is of the strongest pillars of Somali society. Religion also underpinned Somali customary law and in the process strengthened the unity and cohesion of the Somali people.
Language	The Somali people share a common language. The Somali language thus unites the Somali people and facilitates communication and understanding among all Somalis.

| Traditional territory | The Somali people inhabit a unique territory, which they consider to be theirs and which the outside world associates with them. This territory is different from the notion of territory associated with the modern nation-state that emerged in Africa in the 1960s. As noted earlier, the traditional Somali territory encompasses four States: Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya. |
| State | The State system underpinned the pillars mentioned earlier. The State gave birth to urbanization and generations of towns-people. Those who have grown up with the State believe and try to practice secular law. |

This section emphasizes that the Somali people function under three authority systems upon which the administration and management of the country rest. The three systems of authority are: customary law; religion; and the State. The three are interrelated, and if one is eliminated the country would collapse.

Beyond (or beneath) the above-mentioned categorization, the Somali society is fundamentally premised on two other main divisions: (1) divisions based on descent (this comprises units that are arranged like a ladder, with the family being the smallest unit, and the nation the biggest one) and (2) divisions based on gender and age group.

Table 4: Descent, gender and age in Somali society

I
Divisions based on descent

Group	Contain/Substance
Family	Husband, wife and their children. The husband is the family leader.
Extended family	A group of families presided over by an ad hoc committee
Clan	A group of extended families. The clan refers to those who pay and receive 'blood money,' and who do not marry one another. The clan is led by a committee.
Clan family	A group of several clans. The clan family has a leader and a management committee.
Tribe	The tribe combines several clan families. It refers to the biggest group that pays and receives compensations when a member kills or is killed. It has one king. Somalis say: 'A tribe shares the payment of blood money and a king.' The tribe is presided over by a traditional legislature.

Confederation	Combines many tribes. Somalis say: 'A confederation is a tightly knit entity.' A confederation is united by kinship, custom, language, territory and religion. During general consultations, the most senior king presides over the meeting. There is also a traditional consultative body in charge of overall governance.
Nation	Several confederations make up a nation. All the Somali people form a nation. The nation is led by a president. It has a government and parliament. It is a modern nation-state.

II
Gender and Age

Gender and Age Group	This is an ancient tradition, which traditional Somali society strongly adhered to. It appears that following the arrival of colonialism and urbanization, the rigid cultural traditions have weakened. In some parts of the country (the areas between Jubba and Tana rivers), people adhered to gender and age-based traditions and practices. And each generation gave itself a name based on gender or age-based qualities or exploits.

Understanding conflict in the Somali society: early wars and their causes

The people of Somalia have been engaged in a constant struggle for survival for many decades. The total breakdown of law and order in 1991 is just one episode of the long and seemingly endless battle. This continual unrest in Somali society has many causes, most of which are economic, cultural, political or geopolitical.

Somali territory can be described as arid, with desert conditions characterizing the bulk of the landscape. Water is scarce. Rainy seasons are erratic and unreliable; and even when it rains normally, the amount of water produced is insufficient. The maximum amount of rainfall received annually is around 500 millimetres. Most of the Somalis lead a nomadic life. Many practice agropastoralism, and some depend on subsistence farming for their livelihood. Droughts are ordinary occurrences. Shepherds move perpetually in search of water and pasture. The constant movement causes many people to leave their traditional land and settle elsewhere. This engenders friction, confrontation, or even conflict. Conflicts emanating from land and water issues also erupted in agricultural areas. Thus, for most Somali, with or without armed fighting, life is a constant struggle.

But water, pasture and land were not the only factors that lead to confrontation in Somalia. Early wars resulted from a wide spectrum of causes. The main ones are discussed below.

1. Pasture

Pasture-related conflicts are caused by the following conditions:
  ▷ A limited grazing area saved by one community is overtaken by another group or groups with large numbers of livestock.
  ▷ A group which did not belong to the territory enters and uses a grazing area without permission.
  ▷ A group flagrantly violates the basic principles governing land use and environmental protection.
  ▷ Expansionist ambitions designed to capture a new territory, particularly land with rich pasture, by encroaching upon or driving out the rightful owners.

2. Water

During harsh winters people converge on places with water: wells, lakes and rivers. This leads to arguments and disputes concerning how to share water and who should drink first. Lakes require additional work because they are easily accessible and could be muddied by both people and animals.

Areas with a good supply of water always engender a great deal of competition, and this causes many communities to clash.

Clashes occur when a group that did not belong to the area descends upon the wells and other water source points without permission.

Finally, conflicts erupt when one group imposes strict controls or a ban on the use of rivers.

3. Livestock

Camels are the most valued livestock in Somali culture. They have always been the yardstick with which wealth and prestige are measured. They were used for paying blood money, dowry, etc. The famous poet Abdi Gahayr summed up the love most Somalis have for camels:

> *Even in the afterlife, a person without a camel is a loser.*

Somalis believed that camels were a publicly owned resource, which circulated in the community and which often ended up in the hands of

those who were the strongest. It was believed that people should own camels regardless of the means and methods used to obtain them. The following song underlines this attitude:

> *Whether through right and/or might*
> *If camels end up in one's kraal*
> *One ought to congratulate oneself.*

Camels provide a variety of goods and services, including meat, leather, milk and transportation. In many areas camels are used for ploughing fields and for treading sesame seeds to make oil. Furthermore, camels are ideal in the arid and drought conditions prevailing in the bulk of the Somali peninsula.

Cows were also a principal source of conflict, mainly because cows, like camels, were constantly looted or stolen. They also provide a wealth of resources: milk, meat, butter/ghee, and in many areas transportation and ploughing.

Horses also triggered conflicts, because they were highly valued, were useful and bestowed on their owners a great deal of pride and prestige. Horses were used for transportation as well as for herding cows and camels; they were particularly useful in warfare. In the following stanza, Raage Ugaas captures the critical role horses played in warfare:

> *In a place ablaze with war-cries,*
> *Where spears fly in all directions,*
> *I keep him (favourite horse) close to my heart*
> *Like a son given to me by God*
> *And is he my true brother?*

Horses were also used for surveillance, communication and pageantry. And when a famous man was murdered, horses were included in the payment of the blood money. Horses also featured in dowries.

4. Farms

Agricultural communities experienced conflicts emanating from matters related to farms. The main ones are listed below:

> ▷ Conflicts relating to the distribution and use of water, particularly when the basic rules governing water distribution were violated.
> ▷ Disputes concerning farm boundaries which occurred when a farmer encroached on a farm adjacent to his.

▷ Theft, particularly in relation to produce and other valuable resources.
▷ When a person or a group seized publicly owned land and turned it into a private farm without consultation or consensus.
▷ Conflicts that erupted between farmers and shepherds when shepherds let their animals graze on a private farm or land and refused to pay compensation.
▷ Breaking into barns and stealing grain or hay.

5. Women

Among the most protracted and bloody conflicts were those relating to women. These occurred particularly in the following circumstances:

▷ When forcing/coercing an engaged or married woman into a new marriage. The most famous conflict was the one involving Ali Dulane and Af-Hakame that came to be known as bloody feet. The conflict erupted when a woman who was engaged to Ali Dulane and was on her way to his village was waylaid and seized by Af-Hakame. A large number of young men perished in that conflict, including Ali Dulane and Af-Hakame. This saga has inspired many stories and poems.
▷ When performing traditional dances men devoted a great deal of time and energy to finding a good dance partner. This often led to confrontation, even conflict with serious consequences.
▷ Rape and other forms of sexual abuse/violence. Those found guilty of such crimes were required to pay blood compensation, because in traditional customary law rape was seen as being synonymous with murder. If the perpetrators failed to comply with the verdict, war or wars broke out.
▷ Lethal verbal abuse/assault directed against women. Men who abused women were ostracized and banned from participation in public affairs. The following line underlines this stance: 'A man who heaps insult on women cannot hold his head high in public'.

6. Customs of violence

The Somali culture embodies many conflicting and contradictory norms, which can encourage conflict and war making. The ways in which some dimensions of the Somali culture encourage violence include the glorification of warriors and men of war. Warriors are perceived and idolized as heroes. This perception encourages conflict and rewards violent men. The following proverb indicates

that the Somali society tends to encourage violence: 'You can be safe with your hands, you cannot rely on the law'.

On the other hand, men of peace were considered to be cowards.

When we look at the Somali culture today, we see that Somalis act in ways that are remarkably similar to ancient Arabs prior to the arrival of Islam. For example, when a particular community or clan decides to mobilize its members for aggression people tend to follow without question, without concern. If a member of a clan cries wolf, his kinsmen take up arms without hesitation.

7. Arrogance

Arrogance and conceit led to confrontation and conflict. Arrogance could take a variety of forms:

> *Insult, vicious verbal abuses or slander. Somali oral literature is replete with poems, maxims and proverbs warning against such offences. The following line from a famous poem by Ismail Mire sums up this point: 'Oh men! Arrogance ruins, bear this in mind.'*

Arrogance also revealed itself when disputes occurred and one party or both parties deliberately and disdainfully ignored the fundamental principles of fairness and decency. Somalis say: 'A person who rejects justice is a person who rejects God'.

8. Cultural flaws

If we examine closely the Somali culture we see that it embodies some negative characteristics that can easily generate conflict or fuel violence. For instance, the Somali culture tends to promote, even condone conflict as this maxim illustrates: 'He who does not taste your spear, does heed your words'. This saying indicates that the Somali society is a violent society in which non-violence and dialogue mean very little. This culture of violence seems to be rooted in the clan system, which coerces people to defend an indefensible cause, to commit crimes in the name of the clan. It is important to notice that the enlightened aspects of Somali customary law are against this custom. So is the Islamic faith.

In Somali culture, peace and war are inseparably linked. Somalis say: 'Seek peace and ask clan elders and religions leaders to intervene, but if you fail, sharpen your spear and prepare for war'. It is important to notice however that another option, the one in which peace and dialogue emerge as the dominant force is most often considered. Somalis say: 'What you could get through dialogue, you would not get with a spear'.

Finally, certain characteristics of the Somali society make women appear as tools of war used by the fighters. It is in this context that some Somali women played a crucial role in perpetuating the war. Their role revealed itself in a variety of manifestations:

▷ Songs and poems encouraging war. Women composed a series of war songs and poems in which they ridiculed and vilified men who were reluctant to join the war, and praised and idolized those who went without hesitation.

▷ They confronted the men who refused to fight and promoted peace, saying to them: 'Take our dresses and give us the guns'. The men who refused to take part in the bloodshed were described as women to be replaced by real women.

▷ They raised and collected money and other resources for the war effort, strengthening the hands of the warlords and warmongers.

▷ They provided food, water and medicine.

▷ They directly participated in the war as fighters or as spies and informers.

These contradictions make the task of traditional legislators even more difficult. Each has to be thoroughly investigated, and both warring parties must be involved continuously. This takes a great deal of time and energy.

1991: Conflict and breakdown

Following the 1977 Ethiopia-Somalia war, the country was saddled with myriad economic and political difficulties: high unemployment, inflation, drought and a comatose government that held sway in one city, the capital, Mogadishu. Oppression and injustice increased and one political party dominated power. These problems triggered many revolts across the country. Those popular revolts were hijacked by clan-based armed groups, which wanted to seize power for political gain. When Mohamed Siad Barre's regime was toppled in January 1991, the clan-based groups that took power did not have a coherent political agenda. As a result, they turned on each other, triggering a countrywide civil war.

Let us make a few remarks concerning this division of regional authority based on clan affiliation. We have seen that the Somali people function under three systems of authority: customary, Islamic and State. When we examine each of these separately, we can understand a number of points more clearly.

The custodians of customary law are all male. Women, who constitute 50 per cent of the population, do not directly participate in the decision-making process. In many parts of the country, girls are not allowed to inherit livestock.

If a husband dies and leaves behind a wife with no sons, she and her daughters lose their inheritance rights. Also disenfranchised are the minorities like the artisans. What this means is that if the country is governed solely on the basis of customary law, the majority of the people will be excluded from power.

With regard to religious law, we see that women cannot hold leadership positions, although Islam does not condone discrimination and exclusion.

Finally, if the State is to be just, it must guarantee the rights and dignity of every citizen.

Efforts aimed at building or re-building a state in Somalia must take all these into consideration. The emerging state must be one that can reconcile the best of traditional Somali customary law with modernity, taking into consideration the fact that the Somali people are overwhelmingly Muslim.

There are also other points to keep in mind. For example, although every clan is associated with a specific territory, the towns or cities populated by only one clan rarely mature and prosper. Thus it is clear that only those areas with diverse populations, diverse economy and diverse talents have the capacity to make economic and political progress. The emerging regional blocks that are founded on clan identity are unlikely to endure in the long term. It is important to explore other formulas, which take into consideration diversity and balance.

Culture and peace in Somali society

The fact that Somalia has been at war for decades does not mean that Somali people are inherently warmongers. The contrary is even true despite some misleading evidence. Somali culture contains norms and principles that make it clear that the Somali are people with a deeply rooted culture of peace.

As explained above, the Somali society consists of units and divisions that are organized similar to the steps of a ladder. The smallest unit is the family while the uppermost level corresponds to the nation. Every unit in the structure has its own leader, and in the Somali culture that person must be male. Since there are many sections, there are many layers of leaders. They comprise traditional legislature locally known as *xeer-beegti* and clan leaders. They rule on the basis of customary law. The kings and clan leaders preside over the deliberations, but they do not pass judgement. This is the main thrust of the Somali proverb that reads: 'The king chairs, he does not judge'. This shows that culturally the Somali society does not lean towards authoritarianism, that it is a society founded on consensus. Members of the traditional legislature are selected with a great deal of care and conviction. They must possess such qualities as tolerance, generosity, fairness, oratory, courage, decency, etc.

The enlightened principles characterizing the Somalis can be found in customary law. Every article of customary law has its roots in a saying that expresses wisdom, truth, or rule of conduct. Somalis say: 'Everything has a foundation'. The enlightened norms underlying the Somali culture have been strengthened by Islam.

The supremacy of peace
In Somali society, whenever two persons or two groups meet, the first words they say to each other are: 'Are you in peace?' And whenever they part company, they say: 'May peace be upon you'. Thus the integrative girdle that connects people together is peace which is itself rooted in the Somali customary law. There are many proverbs that highlight and underline the importance and value of peace, including the following one: 'Peace breeds development'. Somali customary law has its roots in the Somali culture and economy. It has been the foundation on which the security, welfare, dignity and honour of the Somali were built. It has furnished society with a sense of governance and law and order at a time when there were no State police in the country.

In order to strengthen peace, Somali customary law encourages people to uphold the principles listed below, which constitute the basic pillars underpinning the culture of peace. In many areas Somali customary law and Islam supplement each other. The Islamic religion values peace and in the process reinforces the notion of peace underlying Somali customary law. The Qur'an says: 'If you are greeted with peace, reciprocate with a better greeting or return an identical one (Suurat an-Nisaa', verse 87). God forbade violation of peoples, rights, for example, entering a house without permission' (Suurat an-Nuur, 27 and 61).

Tolerance
Tolerance can be defined as the ability to understand and live with someone with a different world-view, colour, race, clan and religion. The Somalis are a people who share a common language, religion, territory and culture. The divisions that characterize them can be attributed to the clan system, political cleavages, and cultural and dialectal differences. Tolerance enables people to prevent violence. The Somalis have underlined this in many maxims, proverbs and poems. They include: 'Intolerance fosters war', or 'Tolerance brings about prosperity'. Particularly relevant is the proverb: 'It's wise to swallow the fruits of the fig tree in one go', meaning that sometimes we must have the courage to tolerate the intolerable. The Somali culture also encourages freedom of expression as underlined in this proverb: 'What is right for one person can be wrong for another'.

Somali customary law fosters patience and forgiveness. Somalis say: 'He who shows patience wins'. The Islamic faith reinforces this principle. Islam encourages every Muslim to respect those from different religious, racial, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Islam particularly underlines patience.

Non-violence

The Somalis, although currently tormented by strife, are a people who dislike fanning the flames of war. They have developed traditions designed to prevent conflicts, both verbal and physical. Somalis say: 'Insults portend conflict'. This means that verbal assaults aimed at degrading or humiliating others can easily lead to violent conflicts. The following proverb also conveys a similar message: 'Both peace and war emanate from tongues (what people say)'. Thus Somali customary law warns people to watch and carefully weigh what they say, and how they say it. For example, uttering words during discussions aimed at degrading other peoples, race, ethnic background, or occupation is frowned upon. Somali customary law also discourages people from looking down upon or vilifying those with local/marginal cultural and dialectal traditions simply because they live and speak differently.

Somali customary law encourages cooperation and justice. It encourages the majority to respect the rights of minorities. The Islamic religion also forbids violence and murder. Both the Qur'an and the Hadith contain many statements illustrating this point.

Respect for human rights

Although the Somali society is primarily founded on clanism and segregation, Somali customary law encourages the individual to respect human dignity, both at the individual and group level. Somali customary law also forbids inequality and discrimination, although in reality these afflictions are rampant. Furthermore, Somali customary law recognizes the critical role played by both men and women, and underlines the principle of equality for all human beings. At the same time, Somali customary law does not explicitly mention gender equality.

Equality

The Somali society displays myriad divisions. At the same time, Somali customary law fosters equality. Somalis say: 'Every man has a father' or, 'All camels are alike'. These two proverbs are metaphors underlining the fundamental principle that all human beings are equal. The following wise sayings further support this point: 'There is no one who simply rose from the earth', and 'Human beings are fundamentally the same'. Somali customary law underlines the view that each

individual human being is fundamentally decent and should be seen and treated as such.

Respect

Somali customary law encourages individuals to respect each other, and to treat one another with respect. Somalis say: 'Animals thrive on grass, humans on respect'. Somali customary law takes the view that if people treat each other with respect, the prospect for strife, conflict or war would be slim. The following maxim highlights this point: 'Respect does not ignite conflict within a family'.

Consideration for neighbours

Somali customary law says a great deal about this topic, particularly with regard to matters relating to both immediate and distant neighbours. Somalis say: 'Neighbours share more than what those of the same father share'. This maxim indicates that your neighbour is closer than your brother/sister or anyone with whom you have genealogical affiliation.

Nevertheless, Somali customary law makes it clear that conflict can and does erupt between neighbours. Somalis say: 'Teeth and tongue are close neighbours yet they clash'. At the same time, it preaches patience, and furnishes people with ideas and traditions aimed at tackling disputes.

Inviolability

Somali customary law identifies a specific group of people that cannot and should not be harmed, even during an ongoing war. Locally known as *birima-geydo* or 'those who are shielded from steel', this group comprises refugees, guests, peace envoys, women and children, the elderly and the sick, travellers, non-combatants/civilians and priests. These are the people whose lives and properties cannot be violated even when wars reach their ugly summit.

Somali customary law dictates that these people are inviolable no matter what the situation, and if they are violated there will be dire consequences, with the violators paying a heavy price.

As noted earlier, the Somali society possesses a structure founded on clans. Traditionally every clan had a system in which it enthroned and blessed its own leader. Somalis believe that once crowned, traditional rulers were blessed with special powers. They were also believed to be men of peace. When conflicts or wars erupted, all the warring parties were expected to guarantee their safety and dignity. In fact, traditional leaders, kings and clan leaders and their assistants, belonged to another inviolable group comprising leaders, prominent religious figures and women. This group is referred to as the *three with crowned heads* and

Somali customary law shielded it from persecution and humiliation. Somalis say: 'The three with crowned heads cannot be killed'.

Somali customary law particularly warns against the persecution of women and children. Whoever commits this sin is considered to be a coward and is ostracized. The community whose women and children are deliberately harmed neither forgets nor forgives. Somalis say: 'Killing women and children breeds perpetual conflict'. Somalis also believe that in times of strife and war there are boundaries that should not be crossed. For example, actions and incidents that violate Somali customary law and Islamic principles are strictly forbidden. People are constantly reminded that conflict is not permanent, and are encouraged to always adhere to basic human decency. Crimes perpetrated against women and children are known as *hiiro*, which roughly translates as 'deep wound'. Somalis say: 'Material wealth can be forgotten, but *hiiro* (crimes committed against women and children) cannot be forgotten'.

With regard to refugees and guests, Somali customary law emphasizes a number of points. Their persecution is forbidden in war and peace. In fact, Somali customary law makes it incumbent upon people to defend refugees and guests by any means necessary. The following Somali maxim aptly illustrates this point: 'One must go hungry in order to feed guests, one must sacrifice his/her life in order to protect refugees'. Somali literature is replete with similar messages.

The protection of the elderly and the sick also occupies a central position in Somali customary law, as does that of travellers. Travelling was and still is a critical element of the social and economic stability of the Somali people. Thus, Somali customary law gives utmost priority to the security of travellers and their property. Somalis say: 'Travellers deserve a wholehearted welcome and a decent farewell'. This means that upon arrival, travellers should be given a warm welcome including accommodation and food, and upon departure they should be given all possible help including information, guidance and even escort.

The culture of peace underlying Somali customary law also covers non-combatants and civilians. Somali customary law strictly forbids the persecution or harassment of non-combatants. Warring parties are expected to recognize and uphold the rights of the civilian population.

Finally, Somali customary law upholds the rights and dignity of priests and other prominent religious figures. In Somali culture, priests, more than any other group, command a great deal of respect. The reason has a lot to do with their role and experience in mediating and resolving conflicts and disputes. Moreover, prominent religious figures were, and still are, believed to possess enormous powers.

In matters relating to this topic, Islam and Somali customary laws reinforce each other. Islam underpins the enlightened principles underlying Somali customary law. It recognizes basic human rights. The Islamic religion stipulates that human life is inviolable. The basic human rights recognized by Islam include freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

Islam particularly underlines equality and justice. Islam stipulates that all human beings evolved from Adam and all are equal. The Prophet emphasized this in a Hadith delivered during His last pilgrimage: 'All of you came from Adam and Adam was created from clay' (AlGazali, 1993:246). The Islamic faith obliges Muslims to observe basic human rights, particularly in relation to women, children, the elderly, the sick and leaders.

Consensus

The way of life of Somalis was based on consensus and cooperation. The foundation of that tradition was justice and equality.

The Somali people loathe tyranny and totalitarian rule. Somalis say: 'A man with dictatorial tendencies drags his kin down'. They also say: 'Never saddle your kin with a rule based on might'. The latter maxim indicates that there is a huge difference between a ruler who rules by consensus and one who rules by might.

The Somalis have had a culture of consensus. They say: 'Be a person who generates ideas, or one who follows'. This means that ideas that are good for the community should be presented in public and discussed.

Peace Envoy(s)

In traditional Somali society there was an entity locally known as *ergo* or messengers of peace. Its principal task was to promote and bring about peace and reconciliation between warring clans. This entity was a symbol of peace. Somalis say: 'A peace committee is dialogue and dialogue is peace'. According to Somali customary law, peace envoys must not be harassed or harmed. If this principle was violated, protracted conflicts engulfed the communities concerned. In addition, the clan or community whose members committed the crime was saddled with a badge of shame and was stigmatized for generations.

Religion

Although Islam came to Somalia peacefully, some conflicts erupted between various sects and these developed into bloody wars, notably in 1840-43 in the vicinity of Afgoye and in the early 1900s in Biyoley.

We should point out that the number of people killed in early wars was small, because the deadly arsenal used in today's wars was not available at

that time. The only weapons used in those days were spears, daggers, arrows, clubs and stones.

When we look at the principles listed above, we see that ceratain are economic in nature, others relate to social matters, and one pertains to religion. Somali oral tradition is replete with proverbs, poems and stories indicating that these three factors were the main causes that triggered wars in traditional Somali society. Somalis say: 'A conflict that arose from a woman and one that arose from a camel do not end quickly'. Another maxim reads: 'A war involving women, camels or wells is destined to be long'.

The structure of the Somali society does not allow the individual to exist or act independently. His or her destiny is inseparably tied to the group to which he or she belongs. Every clan associates itself with a specific territory, and it is the collective responsibility of that clan to manage the pasture, water and environment of its territory. To prevent conflict, a multiplicity of laws and by-laws were enacted and every group was expected to comply with it. As a rule, it was incumbent upon the guest community or clan to forward a request to owners of the land into which they intend to move and reside temporarily. Somalis say: 'Conflict prevention is better than conflict resolution'.

One underlying question which begs to be answered is why this cultural background did not prevent the outbreak and the subsequent endless escalation of violence in Somalia.

The difference between present and past violence

An answer to the question above is that the current upheaval in Somalia is qualitatively different from past traditional conflicts in Somali society.

As noted above, conflicts in the past often erupted between clans, and they were caused by communal tensions, particularly those pertaining to survival issues. And when conflicts erupted, they were resolved fairly quickly. The clan elders and the traditional legislature immediately tackled them. When matters were brought to the tree of justice, they were dealt with fairly.

Today's wars however are vastly different in terms of circumstances and actors, goals, leaders, weaponry and number of casualties.

1. Civil war: people and circumstances

Two forces have caused the civil war that engulfed the country and people of Somalia:

▷ The first is the dictatorial regime that ruled from Mogadishu, a regime known for its capacity to wage war against its people.

▷ The second relates to a few groups/factions whose primary objective was to seize power. These groups were clan-based. They were backed, economically, politically and militarily by foreign powers. Those who ignited the civil war included both men and women. The organization and execution of the war was the domain of men. Women, however, also played a critical role, particularly in matters relating to cooking, medical care and encouragement. Women were particularly effective in the realm of propaganda and psychological warfare. They vilified and lambasted men who refused to embrace the war and glorified those who did. In many areas this has exacerbated and prolonged the civil war.

The tragedy that befell Somalia is one that the Somali people had never experienced before. This civil war was vastly different from past conflicts in the sense that it engulfed the whole country whereas earlier conflicts erupted between two neighbouring clans or communities and hardly reached beyond the two parties and the territory they inhabited.

Looking at the contemporary problems that torment the Somali people, we observe that they can be attributed to a variety of factors including:

▷ A power struggle aimed at obtaining economic and political control. The principal objective is to establish clan hegemony by capturing and clanising the State system.

▷ A fierce struggle aimed at seizing land: rich, agricultural land, land ideal for settlement and livestock raising, and land endowed with strategic infrastructure: ports, airports and roads.

▷ Disputes involving religion:

   i.   At one level there is a conflict between puritanical Islamists and traditional Islamic sects like Qadiriya, Ahmadiya, Salihiya, Dandarawiya, Marqaniya, Shadeliya, etc.;

   ii.   At another level, there is a growing tension between puritanical Islamists and Somali customary law which they describe as un-Islamic;

   iii. Finally there is a dispute between the puritanical Islamists and secular politicians. This struggle is over who defines and controls the country's reconstruction particularly in relation to the State and the role of religion. Islamists want a State system defined and underpinned by Islamic law.

In general, when we compare past and present conflicts in Somalia, we see that the struggle for resources is still the dominant factor, but a lot has

changed and the focus is now on agricultural land and strategic infrastructure. This civil war also brought about a religious conflict not seen in recent times. Moreover, there is evidence that conflicting views are emerging in matters relating to:

▷ Land owned by clans: traditionally every clan has its own territory.
▷ Land owned by the State: the land is owned by the State and all citizens are equal in matters relating to land ownership. Every person can own land in his/her place of birth or place of residence.
▷ Captured land: the civil war has introduced new methods in the sense that many communities have been invaded, displaced and plundered. A new discourse has emerged including 'I touched it first', meaning 'I seized this property and therefore it's mine'. This has become a pervasive practice that many people embraced without restraint or shame.

In addition, there are deep structural changes that make the conflict not only unique in Somali history, but also highly difficult to resolve.

2. Changes brought about by the civil war

Destructive changes
The civil war has created an environment in which the cultural norms that promoted peace were routinely and flagrantly violated. The aberrations spawned by the civil war include the following:

▷ Gross human rights violations have been committed including murder, plunder, humiliation and collective punishment.
▷ Discrimination and persecution based on ethnic origin and clan affiliation.
▷ A new hierarchy of power based on might has been created.
▷ The tradition of consensus has been jettisoned, causing many groups to be marginalized or even disenfranchised.
▷ The rights and dignity of the individual have been violated.
▷ Large-scale massacres have been committed.
▷ Many groups have been subjected to a brutal campaign of degradation, dispossession and humiliation.
▷ The inviolable have been routinely and ashamedly violated.
▷ Groups previously known for their piety and peace have turned into aggressive, militarized and militant militias.
▷ An entire generation may have been lost to the culture of violence spawned by the civil war.
▷ Many parts of the country have become awash with drugs, with the country's youth paying a heavy price.

Constructive attitudes

Despite this depressing environment, for the last ten years, the Somali people have been relentlessly striving to bring sustainable peace back to their country. Traditional as well as modern conflict resolution methods are being used by those engaged in the process—for instance, *ergo*, the traditional method of conflict resolution, is being widely used. Its basic mission is to promote and underpin societal stability and cohesion.

During periods of tension and in serious situations a peace delegation was sent. The *ergo* can be dispatched by one of the warring parties or by a neutral community or clan.

The Somalis are careful as to whom they would choose as a peace envoy. Would-be *ergo* members are required to possess a wide spectrum of qualities and competencies, including a sense of responsibility, patience, good personality, oratory abilities, decency, etc. They are expected to be well versed in customary law, and are required to know exactly what the problem is and what is at stake. They are a select group, individuals of rare qualities. This is one reason why Somali customary law urges people not to harass or harm peace emissaries. According to Somali customary law: 'Two deserve utmost decency. *Ergo* and a young woman seeking marriage'.

In one of the regions of Somalia, there is a tradition in which artisans in ironwork locally known as *tumaallo* used to stand between the warring parties. The mediators demanded that the two parties cease all hostilities immediately. They often succeeded. The reason was that the mediators were the only group that manufactured traditional weapons, and any group that turned down their proposition would incur their wrath in the shape of an arms embargo. It was this latent threat that did the trick.

In many areas efforts aimed at resolving conflicts were not confined to the *ergo* tradition. There were also enlightened and visionary individuals in both camps. Those individuals shuttled between the two sides, carrying messages of peace and reconciliation. They included the leaders, religious leaders, poets and women.

Responsibility for the selection and deployment of the *ergo* rested with crowned heads, prominent leaders, religious figures and women. Religious leaders threw themselves into the thick of the battle and demanded that the spears be turned upside down. If one or both parties refused to heed their word, they unfolded the holy Qur'an before the warring parties and challenged them to cross the word of God. This threat often worked with great success.

Poets and poetry also played a critical role. Known as a nation of poets, the Somalis have always paid a great deal of attention to their poets. Poets composed anti-war poems. Some poets even threw themselves into the thick of the battle praying for peace and reconciliation in verse and with great success.

Married women, capitalizing on their neutrality and the privileges bestowed on them by the Somali culture, shuttled between the warring clans, theirs and that of their husbands. They carried messages of peace and reconciliation, and they mobilized and encouraged the forces of peace from both sides. When the real cause or causes of the war were figured out, the aggressors acknowledged their mistake, submitted themselves to mediation and accepted the verdict. Lying and arrogance were rare in traditional Somali society. People used to say: 'He who sinned and refused to submit himself to justice is not free'.

In the past, Somali women and men played a critical role in preventing and resolving conflicts. They did so in a variety of ways:

▷ The custodians of customary law and clan elders made every effort to bring about peace and reconciliation between warring clans. They used Somali customary law. They promoted a culture of peace i.e. tolerance, non-violence, human rights and consensus.

▷ Religious leaders actively promoted peace across the country. Using the Islamic faith, they took steps aimed at fostering a culture of peace. In places where Muslims gather, pilgrimage sites and mosques for example, they encouraged people to invest and have faith in peace. They also informed people about the horrors and cost of war. Religious leaders also visited conflict areas and invited the warring parties to stop the fighting and submit themselves to mediation.

▷ Qur'anic schoolteachers inculcated in their pupils norms relating to values of peace and the futility of war. As we know, following the civil war, the modern education system completely collapsed. But the Qur'anic schools remained intact. In fact Qur'anic schools increased dramatically, mainly because Qur'anic schools have always been community-based institutions. They have also been self-sufficient. It can be argued that Qur'anic schools are the only schools that are available across the country. Thus it is important to take note of the fact that Qur'anic schools are one of the few foundations upon which an enduring culture of peace can be built.

▷ Women also played a critical role. As mothers they inculcated in their children the values of peace and cooperation. As wives they attempted to encourage their husbands to refrain from violence and war. When determined, the wife could and did have a positive influence on her husband. Women wield a great deal of power that enables them to bring their husbands round to their cause. There is a Somali maxim that says: 'A man can face a spear zooming in on him, but he cannot face a woman's challenge'. As sisters, women tried their best to see to it that their brothers did not wither away in violent conflicts. Finally,

women were a powerful force in the peace movement in Somalia. They organized meetings and conferences aimed at preventing or resolving conflicts. Female poets and artists constantly called upon their people to invest in peace.

▷ Somali intellectuals, both male and female, agitated for peace. They organized or took part in conferences aimed at promoting peace and national reconciliation. They educated their people about other nations' problems and experiences, particularly those that were pertinent to their situation.

▷ Somali artists, both female and male, made significant contributions to the peace process in Somalia. Through plays, poems, songs, they promoted peace and warned against violence. Artists also played a critical role in non-formal education, which itself constituted a significant contribution to efforts aimed at building a culture of peace in Somali society.

Proverbs And Maxims
Relating To Peace And Non-Violence

1. Reciprocity in peace brings about dialogue.
2. Peace brings about progress, war only destruction.
3. Peace enriches people war impoverishes them.
4. People prosper in peace and wither away in violence.
5. A man of peace lives in peace.
6. Do not rush to a conflict with your kinsfolk.
7. Men's mattress is peace.
8. He who embraces violence rarely sleeps in peace.
9. Do not hasten to wage war, particularly against your own.
10. Both parties lose in a civil war.

Mursal Saddexle

Today, these constructive attitudes and behaviours are being revamped for the sake of peace. Women are among the most active groups in this collective search for peace.

Women and peace

A better understanding of the role of women in the search for peace in Somalia begins with a clear understanding of their place and role in Somali society.

1. Women in Somali Society

Somali women have shown a high degree of resourcefulness and selflessness. They have participated in the development of Somali society. Women play a critical role in Somali nomadic communities. They are central to the management and guidance of the family. They shoulder the bulk of the workload. They take part in the loading of the camel freight, in the daily search for water, in herding livestock, in constructing the traditional family house, etc. When the husband is away, the wife assumes both her duties and those of her absent partner. When we look at the world of nomads, work by and large is divided along gender lines. But in reality women end up doing more than their share. They first do their bit themselves then move on to help men finish their part.

The tasks that women perform include milking goats and cows and churning milk to make butter. Women also make most of the articles and implements used in the household including the wooden structures and fibre mattresses used for building traditional huts.

With regard to agricultural communities, women, when they are done with household chores, are frequently seen toiling on the farm: tilling, sowing, watering, weeding, harvesting, storing, etc.

In hunting communities, women perform a wide variety of tasks pertaining to the very survival of the community. Women prepare and train the young boys who are one day going to be hunters. They teach young boys the rules of the game, particularly norms relating to the wild animals that can be hunted and those that cannot and should not be touched. Among the animals that cannot be hunted are the ones that are pregnant and those with calves. When men go to hunt, women accompany them. Women often sit and wait at the camp, where, among other things, they manage and distribute the meat. They also prepare and dye the skin as part of transforming it into readily usable leather material such as shoes, belts and sleeping mattresses. In the past, animal skins were used to make leather clothes known as *dhuu* to be worn locally. In some of the hunting communities, when the chief is absent, his wife fills in and assumes the reins of leadership. And in some hunting communities, we see that men and women are equal and that there is justice.

In fishing communities, women both accomplish tasks expected of them and help their husbands. Women particularly take part in preparing, salt-

ing, drying and selling the catch. These communities, particularly those in the Lower Jubba region in southern Somalia, have a tradition in which men and women work side by side, and in many cases the women preside over the family. Affairs in which women are excluded often end up in failure.

In Somali folk tales, there is a story recounting a time when women occupied powerful positions in Somali society. The tales speak of a queen called Arraweelo who hated and oppressed men. There are many stories chronicling the reign and legacy of queen Arraweelo. Some people believe that at that time the Somalis were a matriarchal society, with a genealogy tracing origin through the mother line. This theory has its roots in the belief that Arraweelo's mother was known and had the name of Haramaanyo, but it was not known who her father was.

Somali women resisted the injustices perpetrated against them. Women suffered a multiplicity of inequities. They were and still are evicted from their homes. They are denied custody of their children. And they suffered massive economic exploitation.

In some areas of Somalia, girls of marriageable age rebelled against the dowry institution. They left behind a large collection of poetry highlighting their lives and struggle. They travelled in groups across the country, telling those they encountered, men in particular, that they were on a mission. The girls argued that the dowry violated their right to marry whoever they wanted, particularly if the men they chose happened to be poor.

In late 19th century and early 20th century, there were Somali women who were considered to be more talented than men in the art of poetry. Among them were Geelo and Yaraabuun. On one occasion, Geelo challenged a group of men in a poetic contest and won decisively. Geelo's victory prompted the man who ruled the country at the time to declare: 'I will reward whoever beats Geelo in poetry with a hundred she-camels'. This was not to be, because no one could match Geelo in verse.

Somali women were the backbone of the struggle against injustice and colonialism. They stood side by side with Somali men in battle. They played a critical role in the anti-colonial struggles that swept the Somali territory in the modern historical period that began with the era of Mohamed Abdille Hassan. Women were active members of the leading political parties, and they struggled with integrity, discipline, royalty and selflessness. Although the women who endured untold hardships, went to jail, or sacrificed their lives for freedom are too many to be counted, we can nevertheless mention Jamad Abdille Hassan, Xawo Cisman 'Taako' and Timiro Cukash. There were also the hundreds, even thousands, of women who sold their belongings to finance the struggle for independence.

We will conclude this piece with the story of those women who took part in the struggle both as fighters and as brilliant poetesses whose verse caused the people to join the struggle in droves. Among them were Hawa Jibril, Halimo Godane, Barni Warsame, Halimo Shiil all of whom were talented and committed poetesses.

We remember Halimo Godane's words when she said:

Every day women are in mourning
Because their husbands are devoured by vultures
O Somalis! Wake up before we vanish.
Our men fight day and night and refuse to come home
They are determined to bring us victory
And I have decided to stand by their side.

The struggle undertaken by these women has given Somali women a vote and a voice as well as an opportunity to participate in the first local government election held in the southern part of the country in March 1954. Unfortunately, when the country achieved independence in 1960, Somali women found themselves disenfranchised. But the struggle to build a society based on justice and equality continued to inch forward.

The struggle made significant strides in 1972, when for the first time Somalia recognized International Women's day, 8 March, and sanctioned its celebration every year as a mark of respect for Somali women. This was followed by another landmark decision: 11 January was designated as the Somali Women's Day. And on 11 January 1975 the famous Family and Equality Law was enacted. This was revolutionary in the sense that it stipulated that men and women were equal in a society rooted in and dominated by patriarchy and masculinity. It led the country to recognize the rights of the working mother such as maternal leave with pay, for example.

Following the civil war, Somali women, collaborating with enlightened Somali men, have been at the forefront of efforts aimed at bringing about peace and reconciliation. Women artists have composed songs and poems highlighting the myriad conflicts raging in the country. Among those were Faduma Qasim Hilowle and Zainab Hagi Ali (Baxsan).

Oh my country!
When one group descended upon another
When peace deserted the land
When close relatives stabbed each other
When even old people were murdered

When we conceived and delivered poison
It was then that I fled to save my skin.

On other occasions, Faduma Qasim Hilowle and Zeinab Hagi Ali, speaking on behalf of Somali women, sang about peace.

We the women
Have a complaint against men
In the name of marriage, love and friendship,
We the women
Demand peace in the country
We demand security and prosperity
The boys that we bring up
We want them to grow up in peace

Faduma Qasim Hilowle

Women always played a central role in the country's productivity, but since the civil war their effort has increased twofold. Following the collapse of the central government, the economic activities of women have expanded both within the country and abroad. Within the country the bulk of the economic activities is in their hands.

There are many reasons for this. First, although women suffered a great deal, most people observed the traditional Somali norms that prohibited violence against women. This has enabled many women to move relatively free and trade in areas engulfed by inter- and intra-clan strife.

Second, Somali women have shown a great deal of determination and resourcefulness. Today people everywhere are struggling to make a living amidst uncertainty and austerity. This causes many men especially to give up, leaving women as the dominant economic actors. Because of their patience and perseverance, the latter manage to survive and to earn bread and dignity for themselves and their families. Some men see this development as an aberration. They argue that the new status has made women arrogant and has caused them to behave in a manner that was impossible for men to even contemplate when they had power.

One area in which women have been active is handicraft. They have established local non-governmental organizations designed to furnish women with knowledge and skills. In some cities there are newspapers such as *Daryeel and Hooyo* with women writers and women editors that represent women's voices. The journalist working for *Daryeel and Hooyo* also write for other newspapers in the country in matters relating to women and children.

With regard to the situation of Somalis in neighbouring countries, it is evident that they face a multitude of problems emanating from the climate and cultures of the host countries. There is evidence however that Somali women have done better than Somali men in adapting to and coping with the constraints of refugee life. In addition, when it comes to helping family members and relatives back home, Somali men do not compare with Somali women. In Somali communities with patriarchal traditions, people believed that a man who had not fathered a son was an accursed man, a man without a name. These days there are signs that the appreciation of daughters has risen dramatically. The Somali landscape reverberates with the maxim: 'He who fathers a daughter is not an accursed man'.

2. Women's role as peacemakers and ambassadors

The Somali women have always been the integrative girdles that through marriage brought together and cemented two different and distant clans. A Somali proverb highlights their unique role: 'Only a woman can bring two separate clans together'.

When two clans connect through marriage, it is the married woman who forms the backbone of the newly established community. She becomes an ambassador to her clan. Somalis say: 'A married woman is an ambassador'. They also say: 'A married woman is a leader'. The bridge she builds between the two communities is one that brings about unity and cooperation.

At the same time, there is the saying: 'A married woman is a person catapulted into an awkward situation'. This means that hers is a formidable task, because whatever transpires between the two clans impacts on her personally and directly. This is why the married woman is sometimes called *godob-reeb* or wound-healer. She assumes this role in conflict situations, particularly when someone is killed.

Mothering, peace and cooperation
The mother is the first and most valuable school in life. Somalis say: 'Mother is a school'. Mothers always strive to bring up their children with positive norms and ethos, with a view to building a family equipped to contribute to the foundation of a decent society. They make every effort to lay the foundation for a healthy, confident society that can take charge of its destiny. The famous poet, Arays Isse Karshe, underscores this point:

> *The language with which we speak*
> *The fundamentals of our behaviour and conduct*

She taught us with great skill.
Mother is indispensable for being and learning.

In another example, Mohamed Ibrahim 'Hadrawi' mused:

Mother! Without you
It would have been impossible to utter the alphabet
Mother! Without you
It would have been impossible to learn how to speak
A child deprived of your care
Sweet lullaby
And soft touches
Would not grow up.
Mother! You are the source of love
The epitome of kindness.

The following song captures the thoughts of a Somali mother describing the tyranny of the civil war:

I am the foundation of the world
And I am a woman
I am the womb that gave birth to human beings
I am the pillar of life.

Women are the foundation of the world as well as the energy that moves it. 'Men are family and family is wife and wife is children and children are wealth and wealth is nation and nation is wisdom and wisdom is teachers and teachers are knowledge and knowledge is decency.'

When a family is built, women are the foundation and the fundamentals of learning and values ultimately lead to decency. Somalis say: 'The values with which children are brought up precede their actual birth'. Indeed, before becoming adults, we attend a basic school, and that school is mother.

Women as a symbol of peace
When two clans fight and there is death, steps are taken to organize the collection and payment of blood money. A marriage or marriages involving the two parties immediately follow this. This kind of marriage occurs between a man who lost a brother or close relative and a girl from the opposing side. The main objective of the marriage is to heal the wounds and to cement the agreement/settlement reached by the two parties. Somalis say: 'Where

blood is shed, it must be soaked with birth fluids'. The point is the married woman will give birth to sons who will fill the void created by the men who perished in the battle. In addition, the marriage is designed to bond the two groups, and thus to minimize the possibility of another conflict erupting between them.

In periods of conflict, there were times when a group of young, unmarried women from one of the warring clans paid visits to the opposing clan without the knowledge or consent of their families. They were locally known as *Heerin*. They told the people that they were unmarried women, and that they wanted to be married. Because this was a well known tradition, the young women were welcomed, and preparations were made to ensure that they were married. This immediately stabilized the situation, set in motion a peace process that eventually resolved the conflict.

In some parts of the country, women at times employed desperate measures to stop inter- and intra-clan wars. They formed a human chain, lined themselves up between the warring parties, and refused to leave until the two groups backed down. Their immediate objective was to see to it that the two armies did not shoot at each other. A related objective was to bring in alternative conflict resolution methods based on dialogue and peace.

If, in the thick of a battle, a woman stepped in front of a man about to be killed, that man's life was spared. Women played a key role in saving the lives of those considered to be of high standing in the community. This act often created an environment that enabled the warring parties to settle their differences peacefully and to establish good relations.

The Somali culture teems with folk tales. Embedded in these folk tales are a culture of peace, an anti-war tradition and tolerance. It is the role of the mother or grandmother to teach the young the values embodied by these folk tales.

In some regions, older women who could no longer conceive were used as peace envoys. Because women belong to both those considered to be inviolate and to the three whose heads are protected, they are shielded from war-related violations.

In times of war women were the only ones who could move across the zones of conflict freely and without much danger. It was women who studied the situation, assessed the prospects for peace, and facilitated contact and communication between the two warring parties.

Women building bridges between communities
Women are bridge builders within and among communities at two levels: the family and the clan.

a. The family level

Women occupy a powerful position in the community. At the family level, without the support of the wife, the husband alone would not accomplish much. Somalis say: 'Your wife either supports you or sabotages you'. Another saying reads: 'Only a woman can make two brothers of equal ability unequal'. The following two maxims further illustrate this point:

> *All men are equal in manhood; it's their wives that separate them.*
> *A camel led by a camel and a man led by a woman will not let you*
> *off easily.*

These sayings highlight the central position women occupy at the family level, and underline the fact that they are the central pillar that holds the family together.

Although there are in the Somali culture proverbs that look down upon and degrade women, there is at the same time ample evidence that the Somali society recognizes and respects the role played by women. The following sayings illustrate this role:

> *An army accompanied by women cannot be defeated.*
> *A world without women is a world without life.*
> *A man is what his wife wishes him to be.*

b. The clan level

As we noted, the traditional Somali society was a society that did not encourage marriage within the clan. It was common to hear 'we cannot marry or we are brother and sister'. As a result, marriage used to occur between people who were far from each other in terms of both genealogy and territory. This type of marriage brought together and bonded two previously unrelated clans. If the territory inhabited by one of the clans was hit by drought, the marriage enabled that clan to move into the territory of the other clan for water and pasture. Speaking of the value and role of women, Osman Yusuf Kenadid observed: 'If a girl is prudent, and takes her responsibility seriously, there is no way a boy could compete with her, this is the fact'.

Thus it is women that bring the clans together, and promote peace, understanding and cooperation between them.

Women strengthening social cohesion and preserving communal ties

As we already mentioned, kinship is one of the pillars that hold the society. It encompasses and unifies the two constituent parts of society, blood relations

and marriage relations. Somalis say: 'People are a product of blood relationship and marriage'. Thus marriage is a fundamental factor, and when contemplated, many things are taken into account. These include the integrity and decency of the two families and clans involved, and the quality of the would-be bride and bridegroom. It is important to think out these factors before the wedding. The two families and the two clans involved will be joined by a pact based on respect and cooperation. This in turn leads to the emergence of a strong, coherent and confident community.

Women and conflict resolution
When talking about marriage relations, it is clear that the symbol of the marriage bond is the wife. She is at once a wound-healer *goclob-reeb*, a peace envoy *heerin*, a bridge-builder emanating from an ordinary marriage. In these three roles, women constitute a symbol of peace and cooperation. First, the woman promotes understanding between herself and her husband. Second, she bonds her family and her husband's family. And third, she builds a bridge between her clan/community and that of her husband. When building a healthy society, the first unit and building block is the family. The family also forms the backbone of the nation. Women also assume other roles including mediation and conflict resolution in communities tormented by strife and war.

Women and peacemaking in the current conflict

Since the outbreak of the war in 1991, women have participated in the search for peace in a variety of ways.

They have participated in organizations promoting peace and have taken part in efforts aimed at bringing about reconciliation such as awareness campaigns designed to show women how they could participate in the search for peace. Somalis say: 'A woman's identity is rooted in matrimony, not clan-ship'. This means that she does not belong to her clan, and this enables her to take a neutral stance enjoying the confidence and trust of both her own family and that of her husband. In some areas of the country the women who declared themselves candidates in regional elections were not allowed to exercise their right. They were told that they did not have much clout with their clans and that no clan in its right mind would back a woman. At times they were told to seek the approval of clan elders, but unfortunately the elders turned them down, arguing that as women they were inherently incapable of representing clans.

In some areas when war broke out between two clans, women sent

envoys to both parties, in order to identify and establish contact with peace promoters and activists in both camps. And in some regions women organized and financed the bulk of the peace conferences. What is more, they confronted those men who were reluctant to join the peace process and at times even dragged them into the conference hall. Furthermore, prior to the peace conference, women made all the initial preparations including such delicate tasks as establishing contacts between the two parties and planning and executing confidence-building measures.

Some of the Somali women living abroad collect funds to be sent to women's organizations which are active in the search for peace inside Somalia. The money has been used to organize seminars and training workshops in matters relating to the prevention and resolution of conflicts. Part of the money has also been used to build schools that furnish women with skills in handicraft.

As mothers, women bring up their children, inculcate in them basic decency and tolerance and explain to them the futility of war. They make every effort to shield their sons from the lure of violence.

As wives, some women try to remove their husbands from the war zone. They even threaten to leave them if they do not sever their links with conflict and war. Even those who are only engaged embrace this tactic with conviction, threatening their would-be husbands to disassociate themselves from the conflict or else.

As sisters, there are signs that many women take issue with their brothers and eventually convince them that wars produce only death and destruction.

As artists, women actively contribute to the search for peace by composing poems and songs that discourage violence and promote peace. Sometimes they organize poetic contests with emphasis on themes relating to peace and reconciliation.

Evaluation of the efficacy of the traditional method for peace building and its application to the current situation in Somalia

As noted earlier, Somali customary law taught people that peace is bound up with tolerance, non-violence, consensus and human rights. The wars raging in Somalia have violated the traditional norms that have underpinned the ways of the Somali people for centuries. The traditional norms suffered significant erosion under colonialism and in the hands of successive Somali governments that ruled the country after independence. In order to tackle the problems that confront us today, it is important to resuscitate and reinvigorate the noble

Somali traditions that were based on tolerance and non-violence. Tolerance and non-violence are pathways to a culture of peace.

A culture of peace could lay the foundation for sustainable development. The traditions of tolerance and non-violence can be reactivated and redeployed with the help of sections of the Somali society. They include the following:

Clan leaders. To discharge their duties, the elders could rely on Somali customary law, particularly the section pertaining to tolerance and non-violence. They could initiate debates in places where there is water and where people gather. They organize meetings and conferences. They could summon people under the tree of justice, and promote reconciliation between warring clans. The clan elders could play a critical role in rehabilitating the young boys who embraced the gun. They could also rescue those boys from the tyranny of the warlords.

Religious leaders. The religious leaders could provide guidance and leadership, using the Islamic religion particularly the part relating to tolerance and non-violence. They could use the mosques as their platform, particularly on Fridays. They could also preach in such places as Islamic centres, places of pilgrimage and religious communes. Religious leaders could play a critical role in efforts aimed at bringing about peace and reconciliation. The Islamic religion discourages conflict. It promotes tolerance and non-violence.

The religious leaders could also intervene in Qur'anic schools, with a view to inculcating in the children the principles of non-violence, and teaching them that Islam obliges Muslims to embrace peace and avoid war.

Women. It is important to empower women and those who suffer discrimination based on race, belief, religion, occupation and clan. This would enable them to actively participate in the search for peace and in national politics. Women can play a crucial role in promoting tolerance and non-violence, for they are the first school of life. They can make their presence felt as wives, crowning their homes with integrity and decency. Women can also involve their brothers/sisters in the peace movement. They can accomplish these tasks by organizing training courses, awareness-raising campaigns and seminars.

Intellectuals. Intellectuals could contribute to the search for peace by informing their people about the experiences of others in promoting tolerance and non-violence. They could equip people with the tools required for building a healthy society based on the enlightened traditions underlying the Somali culture, the Islamic religion and the international community's experiences in promoting a culture of peace. Intellectuals could employ a variety of methods to achieve their goal, including conferences, debates, workshops, etc.

Education and upbringing. In formal education, schools could be

used to teach the children the values of peace and decency. This could be achieved by incorporating the culture of peace into the school curriculum. This subject would familiarize young children with the principles of tolerance, non-violence, human rights and decency, which would in turn facilitate the creation of a healthy community.

Informal education could be the role of artists and poets, who could utilize songs, poems and theatre to mobilize the people for peace. Poets could play a crucial role in promoting a culture of peace. Poets and informal education are intrinsically linked. They could guide the people and help them take the right path. Highlighting the role of poets, Hassan Sheikh Mumin mused:

> *Night and day, we juggle with words*
> *Our determination is to develop our mother tongue*
> *We entertain the people, we inform them and lead them*
> *We don't let them down, we serve them.*

Artists. Every effort should be made to identify talented artists and to urge them to devote their energy and skills to the cultivation of a culture of peace. Making simple drawings and cartoons pertaining to peace and tolerance can be seen as a good beginning.

Professionals. It is important to establish associations for professionals. Such associations could encompass doctors, farmers, engineers, teachers, environmentalists, etc. These associations could be staunch advocates of public interests and societal concerns. They could provide leadership in matters relating to projects and issues concerning the public.

Conclusion

The main points of this study can be summarized as follows.

The Somali society is a society based on discrimination and segregation. Its structure consists of hierarchical units, which, when counted upwards, grow in size until, at the uppermost level, they reach the nation. The Somali society shares kinship, customary law, religion, language, territory and government. It possessed an old, rigid system to which it subscribed in the past. The Somali people did not have a tradition of a central government before the colonial era, but they had a traditional system of governance. They were led by traditional clan elders. We can also observe from this study that the existence of the clan system is based on shared interests and cooperation. In this society, the value of the individual is determined by his/her being a member of a particular group.

Although there are injustices perpetrated against women and minorities, the Somali custom is at the same time rooted in tolerance and peace. It encourages tolerance and warns against conflict. It promotes cooperation and consensus in decision-making in matters relating to public interest. The Somali custom upheld the human rights of minorities. This enlightened tradition has been strengthened by the Islamic faith.

Sometimes the Somali culture appears to be saddled with contradictions. It is a culture that encourages war, which conveys the message that those who throw themselves into the thick of the battle are heroes. Yet, it encourages people to struggle for their rights peacefully and not to resort to war unless they are compelled to. In yet another stance, the Somali custom completely prohibits people from using violence even if they are wronged.

This study also reveals that the tragedy that has befallen Somalia is complex and has its roots in the colonial era. It should nevertheless be remembered that it is the Somalis themselves that are largely responsible for the destruction of the country. The tragedy had been brewing for decades before reaching its ugly apex in 1991.

The division of the traditional Somali territory set in motion the process of disintegration, in the sense that it introduced into the area a great deal of instability and insecurity. The fact that the Somali territory was located in a strategic region further exacerbated the problem and poisoned relationships between Somalia and its neighbours. The clash between Somalis and colonialists and the subjugation of Somali customary law, the mistakes and excesses of post-independence Somali governments, and the injustices suffered by the people paved the way for the current explosion.

The civil war has passed through several phases. Currently the Somalis have become fed up with the seemingly endless conflict. In many areas steps have been taken to establish local administrations based on clan identity. Recent studies have shown that places and towns inhabited by only one clan have not made much progress. It is thus important to think about an alternative before it is too late. Such an alternative should be based on diversity in terms of both people and economic activity.

What is evident today is that the people are saddled with three competing structures of power. The first is traditional authority. The main problem with this system is that power is in the hands of men, and women who account for more than 50 per cent of the population are disenfranchised. The system also discriminates against minorities and other marginalized communities.

The second is the Islamic religion, which strengthened its position and influence following the collapse of the government and eruption of the civil war, and which managed to establish local authorities and Islamic courts in some

regions. Once more we see that women cannot aspire to positions of leadership in the realm of religion. But it is important to note that Islam does not condone such discrimination.

The third structure of power concerns the State. Obviously, the state system in Somalia is not completely functional. At the same time it is not completely dysfunctional. Some aspects of the state system still linger and attempts have been made by some groups to resuscitate and exploit them. But a well-functioning State in which the rights of citizens are recognized and defended has yet to emerge.

Although there is tension between these three sources of power, conditions seem to favour the State. The State however must first be rebuilt, and it must be a State that can integrate and reconcile enlightened aspects of the Somali traditional culture and modernity, taking into consideration that the Somali people are 100 per cent Muslim.

This study also highlights the role of women in Somali society. Besides their contribution to the constant struggle for survival, Somali women have played a variety of roles in the struggle for peace. We have noted that women have played a critical role in the lives of traditional Somali nomads, farmers, hunters and fishing communities. They had shown a great deal of courage in the struggle for independence, and today they are at the forefront of the search for peace and national reconciliation. They have made their presence felt as mothers, wives and sisters. They established and utilized peace associations, and organized conferences and workshops promoting peace and tolerance. They train women in order to empower them and to furnish them with marketable skills.

Somali women act as peace envoys shuttling between warring groups. They organize poetic contests and use theatre designed to promote a culture of peace in the country. They invest in and run newspapers in which issues relating to women and children are highlighted. They actively participate in efforts aimed at educating the public in matters relating to peace.

Moreover, women shoulder the bulk of the responsibility when it comes to feeding their families and relatives both within Somalia and abroad. Most families in Somalia depend primarily on their female members, relatives and even friends living abroad. It is evident that currently women are the backbone of the Somali society. We can only hope that the Somali people will recognize this, and will see to it that women play a leading role in the creation of a better, healthier and more coherent Somali society.

Women's peace building and conflict resolution skills, Morogoro region, Tanzania

A. Lihamba

The contribution that women have made to engender a culture of peace has hardly been fully taken into account. Conventional wisdom teaches us that since it is men who fight wars, it is men who (should) sit together and make peace. This perception does not accurately reflect the realities of war, peace, conflict and conflict resolution. In fact, while men may make up the majority of combatants, they could hardly do so if they did not have their women folk supporting them. Besides, in numerous war situations in Africa and elsewhere in the world, many women have been active on the front lines.

In the African liberation struggles for instance, women were quite often at the front lines as active fighting forces, or were engaged in other war efforts. In Tanzania, women participated in the war of liberation that led to independence.

Thus while women have always participated in issues of war and peace, their specific role has not received the same attention as that of men. In particular, women's contribution towards the sustenance of a peaceful world has largely been neglected, and the accolades of peace have been attributed to the men who, it is said, bring peace when they stop fighting.

Peace, however, cannot be maintained only because men have stopped fighting each other. Rather, conditions for peace come from a system of societal equilibrium where both men and women are convinced that peace is the preferred state of being. Peace thus inevitably involves a confrontation between belligerent attitudes and those that seek to minimize conflict. Conflict is more than a contest of guns; individuals, family, the clan, the village can be

a source of tension acting to undermine peace. It is here that women undoubtedly play a significant role. They are the ones responsible for bringing up children whose development they influence greatly. As the 1992 UNFPA report puts it: 'women chiefly determine the quality of children, both male and female .... Women's education and awareness and their degree of control over family resources determine children's nutritional, mental and physical development. Through these it affects their success ... and productivity in later life'. It equally influences their morals and ethics both as human beings and as citizens.

In areas free of violent upheavals women's responsibilities are common ones. In case of violence, women may still supply labour, look after families and so on, while the men go on to fight. This study looks at how women from the Morogoro region in Central Tanzania have coped with violent conflict and more specifically at how they have contributed to building peace. The women under study are from the Kaguru ethnic group, which has been in conflict with the Maasai, its neighbours. The study seeks to document the efforts of the Kaguru women in trying to establish a culture of peace.

Rationale and Objective of the study

History and current events show that although overshadowed by the attention given to men, women have hardly been absent from the building of peace. Women's involvement however, has suffered from what might be called under-reporting. This has been particularly the case with regard to grassroots initiatives where women at the community level act to create an environment conducive to peace and conviviality. This study aims to shed light on such initiatives.

More specifically, this case study examines women's peace building and conflict resolution skills and the traditional and contemporary roles of women in the Morogoro region in the maintenance and cultivation of peace. The lessons learned shape recommendations on how threats to security might be minimized and how peace might be better maintained. They could also contribute to a broader understanding of the subject of women and the culture of peace.

Pre-colonial Tanzanian societies were organized along two major lines. The majority practised a communal or non-centralized type of social organization, while some had relatively centralized systems of kingdoms and chiefdoms. Social and political power was also stratified along clan, gender, age and occupational categories. In the case of the centralized political systems, for example,

one's exercise of power depended not only on the political system but also on the clan, age group, gender and the type of profession practised.

Whichever system of governance was practised however, it was informed by a belief system which defined the place of groups and individuals in society in relation to material and non-material factors. Tension and conflict could rise not only from the workings of the political system but also from relations between the living on one hand and the gods, the spirits, the dead and the unborn on the other. Pre-colonial societies equated peace with social equilibrium. Peace meant that the fabric of society was healthy. The absence of peace or presence of conflicts and tensions were signs of social sickness and lack of equilibrium in the material and/or non-material realms. Rituals and other social manifestations were therefore practised to guard the peace and keep away threats. Within certain societies, some of these systems continue to operate today and in part inform the women's role in peace processes.

Colonialism brought with it new sources of conflicts and threats to peace. The newly introduced mode of production and its attendant system of social relations as well as the political system of governance created inevitable tensions and disturbances.

The 1905-07 Maji Maji wars of eastern and southern Tanzania and the wars of the Wahehe against the Germans led by Chief Nkwawa were symptomatic of the conflicts sparked by colonialism. While traditional forms of conflict resolution continued to be employed, colonialism introduced laws that encouraged negotiations and judicial processes, and discouraged ethnic strife that could endanger economic activities. Because the conception of peace of those ruling and those ruled differed, however, the various methods of conflict resolution were mostly at loggerheads.

The accession to independence in 1961 did not necessarily bring peace either. In addition to inheriting conflicts engendered by colonialism, independent Tanzania came to be surrounded by countries which have suffered continuous political strife and war: Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, etc.

Despite this unstable environment, Tanzania is one of the fortunate countries on the African Continent that has enjoyed relative stability and peace since independence. Apart from one army mutiny and unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the Government in 1964, Tanzania has escaped the internal strife that has characterized many other African countries. This can be attributed to Tanzania's first President, Julius Kambarage Nyerere who early on recognized that without peace there could be no development (Mwapachu 1997).

An important element in the creation and sustenance of a culture of peace in Tanzania was the promulgation of Kiswahili as a national language

and its use in education and official fora. Tanzanians could more or less move freely about the country and settle wherever they chose without fear of being unable to communicate. A Tanzanian who chose to leave his own community could move to a new area and settle there in peace. He could marry in his new home, start a family and become part of the others. Tanzanians therefore enjoyed peace, that was not only the absence of war, but was also the result of an effort to create a nation whose people recognized each other as one and had similar aspirations (Mwapachu 1997, Mbilinyi 1977).

The amalgamation of the over 120 ethnic groups into one people, the Tanzanian people, played a key role in Tanzania. As long as the people avoided defining their differences in terms of ethnicity, one of the essential causes of conflict throughout Africa was minimized. The Arusha Declaration, an effort to socialize the economic life in the country, was in itself an effort to reduce further differences among the people. Though it may have had limited economic successes, it prompted a rhetoric about equality and forced the rich to be afraid of demonstrating their riches. Thus Tanzanians came to see themselves more or less as members of one nation with similar aspirations.

Forming a nation out of the more than 120 ethic groups has not been an easy matter. One of the galvanizing methods employed has been the promotion of cultural activities. President Nyerere had used these during the struggle for independence, when songs, dances, storytelling and other folk media were used to bring people together to struggle for a common cause (Nchimbi 1995). Strategies of rallying support through the use of culture had proved successful in aiding the struggle against colonialism. After independence, Nyerere sought to use these again, this time as a tool of nation building. The introduction of a Ministry of National Culture in 1962, a year after independence, was part of this attempt to harness cultural activities to build national unity.

Women played a particularly significant role in this mobilization. During the independence struggle, they did most of the singing and dancing, in addition to actively engaging in several practical aspects of the struggle such as ferrying messages, spying, acting as bodyguards and so on. Nowadays women have assumed even stronger roles by organizing themselves into powerful activist and lobbying groups that have made great inroads in the abolishment of certain forms and systems of oppression. A recent example is the enactment of a law in Parliament curbing sexual harassment, which was strongly promoted by the Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA). Other organizations such as the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) have also taken up campaigns against various conditions that are detrimental to peace efforts, such as poverty, inequality in education and so on. These campaigns have been carried out through caucusing, workshops, seminars and theatrical activities.

Women as peace builders in Tanzanian society

Women's role in the establishment of a society that minimizes conflict can be traced to well before the struggle for independence. Tanzanian women have always played a critical part in maintaining equilibrium in their society by bringing up their children as responsible members of the community. Women taught their daughters and sons proper behaviour and the ethos of society, and impressed on them the importance of such values as honesty, uprightness and the necessity to compromise. As such, women have always been active promoters of harmony in the community, which can be referred to as a culture of peace (Katunzi 1997). This natural role of women is not unique to any particular ethnic group in Tanzania, but rather is generalized throughout the country.

Morogoro women working for a culture of peace

1. The Morogoro region

The Morogoro Region covers 73,039 square kilometres, or 8.2 per cent of Tanzania's territory. The 1988 census registered 1,222,737 inhabitants in the region of which 616,965 were women. The main economic activities are agriculture and logging. Morogoro has five districts and a total of 457 registered villages. The study concentrated on one district: Kilosa.

The Kilosa district covers an area of 14,918 square kilometres and has a population of 400,000, of whom half are women (347,233 according to 1988 census).

Kilosa is inhabited by three main ethnic groups: the Kaguru (who comprise more than half of the population of the districts of Sagara and Vidunda), the Maasai and the Beni. There are also other small ethnic groups who have migrated to the area for a variety of reasons.

The major economic activity of the district is agriculture, which accounts for 75 per cent of household income. Livestock tendering is also practised, especially by the Maasai. The district has as well two main industries, the sugar and carpet manufacturing industry, both at Kilombero. The district also includes the Mikumi National Park.

2. Kaguru women of the Morogoro region

Although the study concentrates on the Kaguru of the northern part of the Kilosa district, a large number of these also live in the Mpwapwa district of the Dodoma region. The area they occupy in the Kilosa district is a central plateau

featuring wooded hills, mountains, savannah and river valleys. Like so many other groups though, many Kaguru are also scattered throughout the country.

Similar to many Tanzanian societies, the Kaguru were once organized around matrilineal clans. Even though they had an overall main chief called a *mndewa*, political power and its exercise was in the hands of the clans. The land was communally owned and one's claim to it depended upon utilization.

Being a matrilineal society, Kaguru women exercised great power over social activities that were related to inheritance, children, property, rituals, etc. Even though they were not necessarily the ultimate bearers of political power, they could not be ignored and in many cases, they were the brokers of power.

The Kaguru women of the Kilosa district exemplify many women of the 120 ethnic groups in Tanzania. Even though Tanzania has a few large ethnic groups, no one group has been able to dominate the others. Most of Tanzania's ethnic groups thus are of medium size with a political structure similar to that of the Kaguru, even when they are patrilineal.

Despite the social and political changes that have occurred in the country generally and among the Kaguru specifically (e.g., currently the role of the *mndewa* has been disbanded), the group has managed to preserve its cultural and social practices, making adjustments whenever necessary. Some of these practices have relevance to peace issues and women are major actors in these.

Methodology of the study

The study sought to ascertain:
 ◆ the views of the women in Kilosa district;
 ◆ the strategies they have used in order to maintain peace in their communities;
 ◆ how they view their current participation in the maintenance of that peace, especially in a changing world.

In terms of conflict resolution and peace building, Kilosa is an interesting region to study because of the disputes over land between the Kaguru and the Maasai in the recent past. Throughout Africa, the issue of land has been a major cause of conflict and wars.

Coexistence between the Kaguru who depend on agriculture and the traditionally nomadic Maasai, has resulted in occasional conflicts and tensions over land use. The Kaguru of Gairo in the Kilosa district, live in an area that borders the Maasai. Because the Maasai are shepherds, they wander looking for pasture. Sometimes they wander onto Kaguru land. There have been skirmishes

over land which one group uses to harvest crops while the other uses for grazing. The July/August 1998 case of the Dongo massacres is a case in point.

Although skirmishes do not usually lead to full-scale war, they nevertheless cause material and social damage. Peaceful coexistence is constantly threatened by conflict. Because each group tries to protect what it sees as its rights, common grounds for exercising those rights should be part of the solution of peaceful coexistence.

Historically, the Kaguru and the Maasai have alternated long periods of peaceful coexistence with occasional periods of tensions. This has greatly affected women who have had to deal with the situation and its consequences. To see how women have coped, we have asked women about how they deal with conflict.

The interviews

1. Selection of the sample

The participants for our study were selected mostly from among older women who have lived through times of conflict. We felt that such targeted sampling would be more effective at giving a better picture of how women have lived with conflict. These women would have had the most pertinent experiences for our purposes. As mothers and even grandmothers they would also be able to recount the changes they would have witnessed among their offspring.

In addition to the older women, younger women were questioned about their current participation in community life.

In order to obtain a perspective different from that expressed by women, the views of a few men were solicited as well. Altogether 35 individuals were interviewed, of whom seven were male. The table below gives a breakdown of the sample in terms of age and sex.

Table: Gender and age distribution of the persons interviewed

Age	Female	Male	Total
60+	8	4	12
50+	3	1	4
40+	4	–	4
30+	10	2	12
20+	3	–	3
Total	28	7	35

2. The process

The interviews were carried out with both individuals and groups. Individual interviews were aimed at obtaining detailed information about the views of the interviewees with regard to conflict and conflict resolution as well as peace building practices. Group discussions were held to ascertain collective views. The individual and group interviews served as mutual validation instruments as well as to provide a more complete whole. The interviews were carried out in an informal manner with minimal note-taking in order to encourage free exchanges. After each session an account of the interview was recorded while the memory was still fresh.

The questions varied, from individual roles and strategies to group practices and peace education both in traditional and contemporary settings.

Study findings and analysis

1. General responses to the questions

▷ The respondents, both women and men, lament the general deterioration of harmony in their community.

▷ The older respondents are more alarmed at what they see as a near breakdown of societal morals and the apparent powerlessness of community members to counter this.

▷ They see the central government as 'distant' and impersonal and slow in responding to the visible changes affecting their society. One old man argued that the problem may be because the local administrators come from other areas of Tanzania; as such they are not conscious of the culture and sensibilities of the local population. He cited the case of their Ward Executive Officer whom he accused of not understanding or even caring about their customs.

▷ The respondents identified schooling as one of the reasons for the breakdown of community ethos, because children now spend more time at school than with their parents. Schoolchildren no longer respected the elders, did not listen and generally did not care. The schools are not rigorous enough and permit all sorts of wrong behaviour, or did not take time to correct improper behaviour. Naturally, the outcome is that children act irresponsibly, lack

forbearance, are quarrelsome, rude and are always 'looking for fights'. The youth degenerate to drugs, and the girls succumb easily to prostitution.

▷ Regarding the challenges resulting from modernization, women feel that they were not being given sufficient aid. In response to who/what would give them this aid, the answer was 'the government'. Women felt that their condition is quite harsh, with many of them or their husbands unable to make ends meet. Weak women succumb to temptations and destabilize families. Finding activities that yield income is very difficult for all. Consequently, in a state of generalized economic hardship, women confessed that friction in social relationships had become more common and there was a growing sense of helplessness and hopelessness on how to address these issues.

▷ Women are generally nostalgic about the old ways where everyone's role was well defined and understood in the community. Harmony was enhanced and conflict was minimized. In those times it did not matter whether a husband had five or even ten wives. Everyone knew what to do and everybody knew what to expect. When someone failed to fulfil his or her obligations, the whole community was involved, and quite often succeeded in 'bringing the stray sheep back into the fold'.

▷ Regarding the crisis with the Maasai, the interviewees felt that the state of mutual suspicion continued because the Maasai still saw the Kaguru as inferior, and in particular not good enough to own cattle.

▷ The interviewees said, however, that the presence of a central government including the police had cooled down tensions between the two groups. Moreover, where mutual respect had been cultivated, conflict had been reduced.

Younger women did not generally express themselves with the same fervour as older women or even as men. They were much blander and spoke of leaving the area although they were unable to specify where they would go.

2. Responses to the specific questions

Question 1:
> *What did women do in direct response to conflicts?*

This question raised two main types of responses.

The first set of responses was about the reaction to armed conflicts with

the Maasai. Women did not actually go to war, but stayed home where they kept the doors open as a sign of welcoming back their husbands. They were expected not to engage in any disreputable behaviour. Women saw the cause of their husbands' wars as justified and generally felt that the Maasai had provoked the conflict. After the fighting, the women would sing and dance to welcome back the men and a great party would be held in the village.

The elder women from each clan were often consulted before the outbreak of hostilities. Their role was mostly advisory as the decisions were taken by men. Women however, played an important background role and influenced policy through their husbands. They were generally never opposed to going to war which they saw as justified since the Maasai were threatening their interests. Women nevertheless disliked times of hostility and recounted stories so as to discourage these.

The second set of responses to the question was with regard to other areas of conflict, particularly domestic conflict. If a man mistreated his wife, for example, the elder women would go to visit the couple with the objective of facilitating reconciliation. As the cause of conflicts could be either the woman or the man, the elders did not want to judge but rather bring back harmony in the family, as, according to them, the whole community would be perturbed by such an event.

There were also instances when children misbehaved, insulted others or even stole or damaged property of fellow community members. In such instances, the culprit was brought before a council of elders composed of both men and women. If the culprit pleaded guilty to the offence, the mother would spit in her hand, which the culprit would lick, as a promise never to commit such an offence again. An immediate fine of either a goat or chickens would also be levied and the problem would be solved.

Conflict was perceived as having both tangible and intangible sources. Lack of individual and community equilibrium was seen as the major cause of conflicts. This could result in either disease or unacceptable behaviour. To remedy matters healing processes were enacted which included the expurgation of bad sprits and evil, the isolation of factors which brought illness, and the appeasement and recognition of factors which sustain good health.

Question 2:
What specific strategies did women use to minimize conflicts?

All the respondents spoke of education and community pressure for conformity as pre-emptive strategies especially for avoiding community conflicts.

Education was conducted both formally and informally. Life was seen

as a process of education and learning. Beginning with childhood, individuals underwent an endless process of socialization where the community's morality, ethics, aesthetics and codes of conduct as well as production and consumption patterns were absorbed and practised. At various stages in life, formal education and training were received. The community conducted initiation ceremonies known as Digubi for girls and Dikumbi for boys.

Girls were specifically trained in their duties and responsibilities as women for as long as three months. Elderly women were responsible for this training. Young men were taken to the bush where they learned how to behave as responsible men.

Poor performance in the training sessions was punished with stiff penalties, while success was a great source of pride for both child and parents. After the training sessions, the education process continued with aunts, grandmothers, uncles and the whole community keeping up the pressure for conformity to community norms. It was an obligation, responsibility and right of every adult to participate in the training of the youth.

A successful community member was considered to have all the positive qualities such as honesty, patience, etc., so that, even when conflicts broke out, duties were clear and community judgement was simple. After judgement, a fine of a goat, chickens or even a cow (depending on the gravity of the crime) was imposed. Everyone shared in the fine and villagers drank together, danced and forgot about the conflict.

Question 3:
What roles did women play to minimize conflicts?

As mentioned above, the major role of women was to train the young to become responsible members of the community. Women also reported that another role was to demonstrate maturity, patience and responsibility. 'One could have an unruly husband who was unmanageable. A woman who tried to show that she too was "fire" courted disaster. A woman had a lot of responsibilities, including feeding the children, looking after the husband, working on the farm, etc.' If a woman performed her responsibilities, then there was no conflict. If, however, she went around drinking alcohol and neglected her duties, family and community conflict would follow.

Another way that women played a major role in minimizing conflict was to ensure that institutions of conflict resolution were working properly and that they themselves became participants and trainers in these institutions. One such institution is Diwiku, an event held at the end of a mourning period for a dead person.

Diwiku is held at the time chosen by the close relatives of the deceased. It usually takes place at night. Members of the families and clans related to the deceased as well as friends and other members of the community are expected to attend. The presiding elder carries a staff and once the proceedings begin, only those holding the staff are allowed to speak. Any grievances, disagreement or unresolved issue concerning the deceased or her/his family and clan were brought into the open at the Diwiku. Conflicts were thus resolved and erased both socially and psychologically.

Question 4:

> *What do you do to educate your children about conflict and conflict resolution?*

Here the women expressed some frustration because they felt they were no longer in control of the upbringing of their children. Children are away from their mothers for most of the time, and even when they are talked to, they never seem to listen. The traditional training of young girls and boys is not as rigorous as previously. One old woman even commented that she had given up on her children; each time she has tried to talk to them, they merely laughed at her. Another old woman who tried to intervene while her son was beating his wife was threatened with a similar beating herself.

Old men expressed the same frustration. Their sons are now circumcised in hospitals and there is no time to spend with them 'to hammer sense into their heads'. Modern school is considered to be one of the strongest causes of the collapse of the traditional education system. Children spend most of their time in school, but 'concentrate on things other than proper and responsible conduct'.

In spite of these frustrations, women and men said that they still try to ensure that the young and the community know and practise methods of peaceful conflict resolution.

In addition to Diwiku, other systems of education such as Digub and Dikumbi, are also practised although to a lesser extent.

Since informal education is for the most part instilled through theatrical performances, women play a major role in training children in dance, music, narrative skills and other performing arts.

Question 5:

> *Are there any songs, dances or stories that were aimed at minimizing conflict?*

This question was answered unanimously in the affirmative. From early child-

hood, one is exposed to a variety of songs, dances, stories, proverbs and sayings that aim at reducing conflict. The boys' training in the bush contains a lot of storytelling particularly about responsibilities and hard work. Girls are also told stories that exalt these qualities.

The dance songs, stories, proverbs and sayings contain simple but clear messages and moral teachings. There are many stories for example that talk of greed and individual interests as major sources of conflict and the young men are warned against them. Many stories told to children for instance aim at raising their consciousness about fairness, responsibility and punish-ment for those who break community norms due to greed or self-interest.

Certain myths are also perpetuated to underscore the fact that to avoid war can sometimes be an act of good leadership. There are stories told, for example, of a powerful local magician who was able to veil the eyes of the enemy so that his people could not be seen. Avoiding military engagement thus precluded war. Stories that carry this myth emphasize the power and wisdom of the magician. Some stories also underscore the negative aspects of conflict and hostilities such that these become a deterrent.

Question 6:

In today's world, how do women see their role in peace building and conflict resolution?

Women were in general somewhat nostalgic about the past. They felt that the traditional education systems needed to be revamped and strengthened to be able to cope with current peace and security challenges.

Women felt that the economic hardships faced on a daily basis create an environment in which conflict and confrontation become natural. Most women believed that peace is first and foremost about having enough food and living in security. Women have always been 'responsible for putting food on the table', but they think men should be more responsible. As one woman put it: 'some men think their only responsibility is to produce children, but they don't care whether the children eat or not'.

Thus while women must continue looking after the household, the men must 'come home from the bars' and take up the challenge of providing for their family. Women saw bars as providing an 'escape' for men who often failed to provide family needs. After the men returned from drinking, quarrels and sometimes even violence broke out. This sad behaviour was seen as stemming from poverty, as well as from the breakdown of family ethics and responsibility.

Question 7:

> *Have you ever participated in a peace outreach programme?*

The conflict with the Maasai has died down and as such external conflicts were no longer a threat to peace. Older women (two over 80 years old) recalled that in past wars with the Maasai, the Kaguru women used to hide some Maasai women as a gesture of goodwill, so that the Kaguru men could not kill them. They did this in realization that the women were all victims of 'men's wars'. While there were no peace outreach programmes, there were old women that were clan leaders and were still called upon to settle conflicts. Most of them participated also in such conflict resolution events as Diwiku.

Question 8:

> *How do you define the major causes of conflict?*
> *Who and what do you think are the major causes?*

Poverty is perceived as the main cause of conflict. Kaguru women see the lack of economic means as the central cause of strife. Issues such as democracy and good governance were not mentioned at all.

The decline in community ethics was seen as the second major cause of conflict, followed by the failure of the modern school system to teach appropriate skills needed by individuals and the community. Children are neither well educated nor disciplined.

Local administrators representing the central government were also criticized because they are unable to respond appropriately even to minor crises. In 'the old days' one would talk to and fine the culprit so that matters would be settled immediately. But now, 'with the modern justice system', it takes weeks, months and even years for a small conflict to be settled. If a cow eats your maize, the wait for justice can be long. The result is growing enmity, anger and frustration.

Another cause of conflict mentioned is 'a kind of disintegration of the Kaguru as a people'. The Kaguru are scattered throughout the country and if someone misbehaves, he or she can flee and escape the consequences. Individuals can thus risk misbehaving because they know that they can escape justice.

Lack of trust, individualism and self-interest were also cited as major causes of conflict. Those who sought political or material power, also fermented conflict when it benefited them.

Question 9:
> *What do you recommend as strategies to promote peace?*

This question provoked heated group discussions. Everyone recognized that the old ways could not be resurrected as such. Yet there was the need to revitalize some of the traditional institutions. The Kaguru had a place where they used to go and pray, especially before and after battle. Custom and tradition which united them as a people had fallen into disrepute even with their chief and clan leaders. These, argued the chief, should be revitalized as a means of binding the Kaguru people. Included among the traditional institutions to be revitalized were Digubi, Dikumbi and Diwiku. The necessity to empower those concerned with tools to promote peace was also mentioned.

Despite their weaknesses, schools are also seen as a possible place for peace training. For that to occur, though, the school must teach not only modern education, but also responsibility as a fundamental component of community ethos.

Extensive efforts should be made to fight poverty, educate women to better look after their lives and teach men about their responsibilities.

In general, women felt that no one really cared and each individual lived as he/she wished. As a result, they seem to be pessimistic about the possibilities of lowering conflict and crises in their community.

Question 10:
> *Who should play the leading role in the promotion of peace and peace education?*

The answer was 'everyone' since 'no one can look into the heart of another'. Everyone should try and 'purify', 'perfect' herself or himself, as everyone needs to live in peace and security.

The government however, can counteract some of the causes of conflict such as the ones related to schools or the local administration. It can also promote economic activities that decrease poverty.

Most importantly however, all individuals have to try to better themselves. The creation of mechanisms where people with different experiences, backgrounds and ethnic affiliations can live and respect each other was cited as another strategy. Knowledge and appreciation of other cultures can help avoid tensions and conflicts. It was pointed out that diminishing conflict between the Kaguru and the Maasai is due, among other things, to a growing respect for each other arising from mutual understanding and appreciation of each other's differences.

Women's role and the challenges outlined by the study

The study underscores the role of women in nurturing and maintaining peace as well as in the processes of conflict prevention. Women receive their peace mandate, first from society to which they owe allegiance and second from themselves as women. How well women accomplish their task of peacekeepers depends on their capacities.

The study has identified some inhibiting factors that constrain the competence of women in this regard. Contemporary Tanzanian society does not endow women with the social and political competence to deal with conflicts and/or the maintenance of peace. The current social organization undermines women's capacity to play important roles in peace processes. For instance, women continue to be marginalized in decision-making processes. In some cases where traditional systems have disappeared, no replacements have been devised that cater to women's participation. Instead of expanding the opportunities where women can play important roles, women's space has narrowed due to the radicalization of patriarchal and/or religious norms. This narrowed space does not provide women with the capacity or potential to play a major role in conflict resolution at the local or national levels. For example, whether Kaguru or not, most Tanzanian women are dominated by men who set the family agenda. Men rather than women are expected to sanction right and wrong, conflict or peace. Women may have valuable negotiation or mediation skills, but sociocultural factors inhibit them from using these abilities.

Violence is another factor inhibiting women from playing a role in peace making and conflict resolution. Poverty, in particular, is the greatest form of violence because it incapacitates and undermines creativity, possibilities and potentials.

As the Kaguru women have indicated, in any poverty-ridden community, women are usually poorer than men. Because of poverty, women are oppressed to such an extent that physical and psychological violence makes them less able to play an effective role in peace building. Women's position in contemporary society is illustrated by the barbaric acts perpetuated against old women in some parts of Tanzania. Under the excuse of witchcraft, women continue to be murdered in parts of the Mara and Shinyanga regions. Economic interests are in fact behind these murders, and their aim is to silence women and spread fear.

This sanctioned violence against women can also be seen in the everyday lives of women where they are threatened by domestic violence. Under such conditions peace is of course difficult to attain and women's abilities to participate in its acquisition and maintenance is questionable. Women cannot rise above house-

hold and family conflicts, and issues of physical survival take precedence over those of social and political security.

The education which women receive does not always prepare them to address issues of conflict and peace. There are few enabling institutions that empower women to fully participate in peace building and peace nurturing.

Although women's role and participation in conflict resolution and peace maintenance are inhibited by a variety of factors, these factors should be seen in terms of challenges to be overcome.

The challenge for women at the individual and societal levels is to understand both their society and their own specificity within society. They can equip themselves with the skills, knowledge and resources that can meet the challenges they face both as a specific group and as individuals. In spite of shortcomings, for example, there are schools, programmes and other institutions which women attend. The challenge is to make these institutions responsive to women's needs, with respect to their role as peace builders.

Although limited, women's organizations are proving to be valuable spaces and opportunities for the expansion of women's skills, knowledge and resources. Women's organizations have been mobilizing, lobbying and campaigning against structural violence, unfair and oppressive laws, poverty, discrimination and domestic violence. These activities have far-reaching potential for peace. Through these activities women are taking a strong stand against wars and violence of all sorts. They are also able to propose means to end wars. The successes of groups such as TAMWA and TGNP are cases in point.

Women as a group are a force and they need to understand how to use their power not only for their personal development but also to fully play their role in the building of a society free of violence.

For women to play their peace building role efficiently, they need an enabling social, political and economic environment. It is clear from the case study that, when conditions and circumstances are favourable, women take full advantage of their position and specificity. They educate and train their children and influence those around them, beginning with their men.

Most women moving into contemporary positions of political and economic power are charting out directions and examples for others to follow. The number of Tanzanian women Members of Parliament is unsatisfactory but it is sufficient to raise the desire to have more and expect the existing few to be more responsive to women and national peace issues. Ambassador Gertrude Mongella who was a Member of Parliament, a Minister and the Under-Secretary General for the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference has been busy mobilizing women for peace and peaceful conflict resolution. More crucial are the inroads that women are making into grass roots and local political struc-

tures. Their concerns for peace and its maintenance inform those structures and their activities.

Because of their role as mothers endowed with the responsibility of children's upbringing, women can cultivate and instil patience and proper conduct into each new generation. Women also possess the ability to communicate appropriately under different circumstances. These skills are extremely valuable in peace processes.

Women tend to understand better and be more sensible to the actual and potential consequences of conflicts and wars. They empathize more with the victims. As we have seen, during the Kaguru-Maasai conflict, Kaguru women hid Maasai women so that they would not be killed or harmed by Kaguru men. This empathy is a crucial element of peace, tolerance and dialogue.

One of the major findings which emerge from the study is the role of the arts in the promotion of peace and prevention as well as resolution of conflicts.

The Kaguru people are not the only ones to use the medium of cultural artistic forms as ways of cultivating peace and harmony. Traditional performances have given issues of peace and conflict a context in which their maintenance or resolution are desired. The performances play both a mediation and pedagogical role. In contemporary society, cultural performances and productions can continue to play such roles. The challenge, however, is to ensure that women claim an important role and use their artistic abilities for the promotion of peace. Where the skills are lacking, efforts should be made by women to acquire them. The activity of groups such as the Bagamoyo women are good examples of how women can be empowered to develop both traditional and contemporary performance skills and to use these to communicate a variety of issues.

The study points out however, that the effective participation of women in peace building and conflict resolution cannot be expected to happen spontaneously. Women must be appropriately educated from childhood and their skills sharpened during adulthood. How can contemporary rural and urban Tanzanian women become competent in playing an effective role in the inculcation of peace within the community? This question is a challenge that needs to be addressed for the sake of sustainable peace.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Kaguru women see peace, not only as the lack of war, but much more as a state of social harmony and human welfare. They also look at peace from a dynamic point of view, that is, the ability of a community to minimize conflict and resolve it amicably and swiftly. They believe that the traditional customs

contained the right mechanisms for dealing with conflict and that these have been eroded by modernity. They view the woman as the lynchpin of peace and harmony within the community, for peace must start within the family where as mothers women play a key role. They decry the apparent incompetence of the modern education system. Like Dzirasah (1995) who describes the traditional conflict resolution practice in Somalia where previous clan leaders resolved conflicts immediately, the Kaguru women see the modern drawn out processes of conflict resolution as a factor engendering greater friction within the community.

However, they also observe that they are caught in a dilemma. While they appreciate the traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution and of training the youths, they understand that they cannot turn back time; hence the need for reinforcing existing systems like the schools and revamping others like the local administration. Above all, they realize that peace cannot be imposed from outside and that only they, beginning from *within*, can address the trials of the peace challenge. This is in agreement with Katunzi (1997) who points out that the Tanzanian traditional approaches to peace via social harmony hold greater promise for a peaceful nation. Some adaptations of the latter therefore, might be in order.

The discussions and interviews cited above point to several recommendations for action.

Poverty alleviation
Women see poverty as a major cause of conflict within households, communities and even nations. Building peace means first and foremost the removal of obstacles to survival. The eradication of poverty should be an area of focus, and women should be encouraged to participate fully. Such programmes could include the training of women in income-generating activities, and the provision of small loans. The Ministry of Agriculture could also advise women on the use of better agricultural methods.

Education and training
The national education system can endow youngsters with skills for peaceful conflict resolution and crisis management. Teaching these skills can be part of civic education. Just as issues of gender and democracy have become a priority in school syllabi, issues of peace and conflict resolution should also be incorporated.

Revitalizing and appreciating older community institutions that dealt with conflict prevention and conflict resolution can also help. In the case of the people of Kilosa, for example, skills in the performance and language of Diwiku

could be revitalized and/or refocused to deal with larger communal issues from which other communities can learn. Women can play a large part in education through specific initiatives. Women and other social groups can organize cultural performances such as theatre as media for education. Women can play important educational roles at:

◆ the communication level. Peace promotion dialogues can be instituted. Women of all levels and ages could meet to discuss issues and design appropriate models for peace and conflict prevention/resolution. For this purpose, there is a need to enhance women's communication abilities. On the other hand, issues of peace and conflict resolution could be propagated through films, live performances and the publication of stories. In all these, the role of women and the challenges of peace, which they face, could be highlighted;

◆ the teaching level. Women have traditionally been very effective teachers in formal and informal education systems. Most of the teachers in primary schools for instance are women and many women also teach in secondary schools. Women can fulfil a major peace task through their teaching and interaction with children. Equally important are women leaders at local levels whose skills and experience can be harnessed to promote peace.

Fair and better education for girls
Action to empower girls through education is needed. Policies that will enable more girls to attend and successfully complete secondary school should be put in place. Programmes that empower girls to be self-confident propagators of a culture of peace should complement this. A programme such as the Education for Democracy Program (Tuseme, meaning let us speak) for secondary school girls, implemented by the Department of Fine and Performing Arts of the University of Dar es Salaaam, is an example which could be emulated. The programme aims at empowering girls to articulate their concerns and problems and to seek solutions to obstacles that stand in the way of their social and academic aspirations.

Enhancing women's pressure groups
Wars affect women more than any other vulnerable group. Consequently, women know that the establishment of a culture of peace is to their advantage. History has shown that women have been able to accomplish a lot when they have organized themselves into active groups. These groups could champion peace within their communities and beyond, and could be part of national or regional associations.

Institutional socialization
In the mid 1960s, Tanzania established a National Military Service. Its objective was to socialize youngsters into members of one nation. The Service also provided the nation with an institution that prepared its youth for national defence and security. The National Military Service has become inactive in recent years. The institution could be revitalized for civic and peace education. It could serve as a modern day Dikumbi and Dugibi whose aim would be to teach the peaceful resolution of conflicts and crises.

Community conflict resolution mechanisms
Women are convinced that the long delays in resolving conflicts play a key role in sustaining and engendering conflict and tensions. Institutionalizing mechanisms through which conflicts can be tackled quickly could limit their scope and prevent their spread. This means enabling communities to reclaim some of their lost powers in the resolution of conflicts of a certain nature. In the same vein, the behaviour and attitudes of administrative authorities, especially those from outside the community, need to be appraised so that they do not become sources of conflict themselves.

Suggestion for further research
More time can be spent with the Kaguru to gain a better understanding of their world. The Kaguru, however, are one of the more than 120 ethnic communities in Tanzania. How do other ethnic groups deal with conflict? How do their women engender a culture of peace? These are interesting questions to explore especially in Tanzania, which, in moving towards a market economy, currently finds itself in the midst of great social change.