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## **Communication and the Culture of Peace in Africa**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the nature and consequences of armed conflicts in Africa, and the responsibility of communication scholars and practitioners in building the culture and infrastructure of peace in the continent. It argues that they have taken sides on matters concerning ethnic and religious differences, reporting “episodes rather than the entire process of a conflict,” and seriously eroding professional ethics with their “new concept of embedded journalism and instant reporting of warfare.” The paper calls on media practitioners to concentrate on investigating trends, processes, and fundamental factors connected with conflict situations and focus on how to resolve them.

### **Résumé**

Cette contribution étudie la nature et les conséquences des conflits armés en Afrique, ainsi que la responsabilité des universitaires et des experts en communication dans la construction d’une culture et d’une infrastructure de paix au niveau du continent. Cette présentation soutient que ces derniers ont manifesté un comportement partial, à propos de questions liées aux différences ethniques et religieuses, en relatant les « épisodes plutôt que tout le processus d’un conflit », mais également en malmenant l’éthique professionnelle avec leur « nouveau concept de journalisme intégré et de reportage instantané sur les guerres ». Cette contribution lance un appel aux praticiens des médias, pour que ceux-ci dirigent leur attention vers les tendances et processus en matière d’enquête, vers les facteurs fondamentaux liés aux situations de conflit, et qu’ils s’intéressent aux moyens de résolution de celles-ci.

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## **Introduction**

No nation or continent is ever truly free from conflict. Similarly, no epoch in human history can be said to be totally free of conflicts. Every continent and every epoch has had a period of stability as well as instability. Whether in Europe, Asia, America or Africa, there have been wars and conflicts between and among communities, peoples and empires. In Africa, for example, there have been the rise and fall of the Songhai, Mali, Borno and other empires; wars instigated and assisted by foreigners which led to the trans-Atlantic slave trade; the colonial wars, the liberation struggles; disputes over boundaries inherited from the colonialists; inter-ethnic and communal upheavals within many countries and so many other forms of conflict.

The questions that arise are, among others:

- 1) Does Africa have the political will to install and maintain a culture of peace?
- 2) Does Africa have the sophistication to manage the complex conflict situations in the continent?
- 3) Can Africa overcome the problems caused by colonial legacy?

While one should leave it to this conference to produce answers to these and other questions, it is pertinent to mention that, through the OAU and the AU, Africa has been endeavoring to resolve its many conflicts and has set up conflict management machinery, using some of its elder statesmen. In recent times, Nigeria's former Head of State, Gen Abdusalami Abubakar, President Nelson Mandela of South Africa and President Quett Masire of Botswana have undertaken conflict resolution missions in Liberia, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo respectively.

At any point, conflicts of various types are taking place in at least one-third of the countries of Africa. Their consequences are well-known to us: deaths of thousands or millions of men, women and children – most of them innocent; maiming and traumatization of even greater numbers of people; destruction of property; displacement and forced migration of millions leading to their becoming refugees; disruption of agriculture and other economic activities; retardation of economic development; environmental degradation; rape; epidemics; child soldiers; a culture of violence; and social/political instability.

Why are there so many conflicts and wars in Africa in view of the obvious devastating consequences? Some of the immediate and remote causes are: inequity, poverty, repression, discontent, greedy and corrupt leadership, undemocratic regimes, contested leadership, and failure of

conflict management efforts. This situation must change. What is currently needed in Africa is a culture of peace which recognizes that, unless Africa manages its conflicts wisely, it will perpetually remain far behind other continents. We know that Africa cannot develop without peace. We also know that peace, justice, equity and development are all intertwined and can only be achieved through the deliberate efforts of men and women. As UNESCO observed in its constitution: “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men and women that the defenses of peace must be constructed.”

The year 2000 was observed as the ‘International Year for the Culture of Peace’ and the period 2001–2010 has been declared ‘The International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence’. The search for peace must be a continuous and permanent mission of all, and UNESCO has provided a road map for it by identifying its basic elements. According to it, “the culture of peace is based on the principles established in the Charter of the United Nations and on respect for human rights, democracy and tolerance, the promotion of development, education for peace, the free flow of information and the wider participation of women as an integral approach to preventing violence and conflicts, and efforts aimed at the creation of conditions for peace and its consolidation.” (A/Res/52/13, January 1998).

### **Communication and conflicts**

Since wars and the solution to them begin in the minds of men and women, the use of communication between and among people can be a means of moving the world towards a culture of peace. It is clear that many of the conflicts and wars in Africa, as in other parts of the world, can be traced to ignorance, prejudice, misunderstanding and misinformation. These are issues which are directly linked to communication or lack of it. The connection between conflict resolution and communication has been buttressed by UNESCO which has identified “the free flow of information” as a key element of the desired culture of peace.

The media, in particular, plays a vital role, for good or bad, in all conflict situations. In the way it reports, analyzes and editorializes on social, economic, political and other conflict situations between individuals, groups and countries, the media sets the agenda for war or peace. In many of the conflicts in Africa, the media, in particular, the radio, has been used to fan the flames of war. One can remember the use of the radio for propaganda during the Nigerian civil war in the late 60s and the recent genocidal war in Rwanda. The media has been known to take sides in conflict situations;

it has given voice to belligerents; it has tended to concentrate on sensational incidents; it has reported episodes rather than the entire process of a conflict; television has glamorized warfare; and with the new concept of “embedded journalism” and instant reporting of warfare, professional ethics are being seriously eroded. All these can contribute to the worsening of conflict situations.

On the other hand, the media can be a catalyst for peace and help to build a culture of peace by providing full, fair and balanced reporting of conflict situations; by drawing attention to potential threats to the peace; by promoting dialogue and negotiation; by de-glamorizing warfare; by refraining from sensationalism; and by educating leaders and their followers on the consequences of war. The media in Africa, in particular, should make it one of its missions to promote the development of a culture of peace on the continent. It can help to develop an infrastructure of peace by promoting the emergence of a leadership that is committed to equity, justice, accountability, transparency, democracy and sustainable development. It should also use its immense power and influence to encourage the people to imbibe the ideals of tolerance, compassion, empathy, and love of country, self and one’s neighbors; preach the message of ‘faith, hope and charity’; and to promote gender equality and equity and education for all.

It must be admitted that for the media to be able to perform any meaningful role in the building of a culture of peace, African governments must recognize and support the important role of the media in the promotion of such a culture. They must ensure freedom of the press and freedom of information and communication. They must endeavor to make effective use of the media for advocacy and dissemination of information on a culture of peace; and they must promote mass communication that enables communities to express their needs and participate in decision-making. A culture of peace can only thrive in a democratic environment. Fortunately, the African continent as a whole has decided to follow the path of democracy. African countries must, therefore, set in motion a full range of actions to promote democratic principles and practices. They must also place special emphasis on democratic principles and practices at all levels of formal, informal and non-formal education. In addition, they must establish national institutions and processes that promote and sustain democracy and strengthen democratic participation through the conduct of fair and free elections.

### **The media and conflict management in Nigeria**

Issues of ethnic and social differences and their management underlie some of the major challenges of nation-building and governance in African countries generally and in Nigeria, in particular. We have had ethnic, communal and religious tensions and conflicts from time to time, as our people try to assert themselves, exercise or protect their rights and test the limits of the new democratic dispensation.

Coping with this situation has also presented the media with some of their major challenges in recent times. In trying to reflect the tensions as well as the positive developments of their country in the past decade, the media in Nigeria have been perceived as either part of the problem or part of the solution. Sometimes, some sections of the media have appeared to be fanning the flames of ethnic, religious or other forms of social tension and contributing to conflict. At other times, the media have been commended for helping to douse the fires. Media self-perception seems to hover between these two poles, but usually tends towards the position of the 'principled and innocent', objective and independent bystander, or responsible 'participant observer' anxious to provide solutions.

Whatever the perceptions, the reality is that ethnicity and religious differences are important ingredients of the daily life in this country, and inescapable in any attempt to understand the transformation which the Nigerian society is undergoing. The media cannot avoid reporting them. In fact, it has a duty to do so. It also has an important part to play in creating a culture of peace and an enabling environment for peaceful resolution of conflicts in this country.

There is an obvious need for media practitioners to examine themselves on how they have performed in the past, and how they will deal with matters concerning ethnic and religious relations in the future. They need to know what is required to enhance media understanding of underlying issues so as to sharpen their reporting and make their editorializing more meaningful in future. The media need to search their hearts and ask themselves if they can afford to be 'neutral' or pretend to be unconcerned on such issues; whether it is enough for them to merely report the events and forget about them when the tension subsides; whether they have a responsibility to seek solutions to these problems; and how they can do so and remain credible. Obviously, this is a matter which will be thoroughly dealt with at another workshop or a conference bringing together the Nigerian media and other stakeholders.

**Challenge to African communicators and scholars**

The Nigerian situation is not very different from what obtains in other African countries. I would therefore like to challenge all the communicators and scholars at this conference to ask themselves the following questions: Do we glamorize violence and engage in sensational reporting of conflicts? Do we take sides in our reporting and editorializing? Do we close our eyes to corruption in high and low places? Do we glorify iniquity and irresponsibility? If we do all these, then we are not yet ready to participate in the building of a culture of peace. Africa needs honest, courageous, competent and committed communication practitioners and scholars to lead the struggle for the establishment of a culture of peace in our countries. In the effort to build this culture, both the message and the messenger should be considered as playing pivotal roles. They must promote understanding and consideration for the view of others.

African communicators must push for a shift from military solutions to dialogue and peace-building. They must de-emphasize the sensational, spectacular and violent passing events and investigate and study the trends, processes and the fundamental factors connected with conflict situations. They must strive to improve their knowledge and understanding of the underlying and related issues and enhance their professional skills in order to be able to cope effectively with the challenging task of playing the very important role that is theirs by right in the efforts to build a culture of peace in Africa.