

Decolonizing Reconciliation: Changing the narrative to the indigenous museums of peace in Kenya and South Sudan

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Abstract

In this presentation I focus on the indigenous arts and aesthetics of reconciliation. Often the indigenous arts are collective cultural productions of the village square. These performances carry social, political, environmental and spiritual meanings as agencies that influence the body and therefore the language of reconciliation. In 1994, I used indigenous arts to create museums of peace¹ during the volatile decade in eastern Africa. Today, the peace museums are meeting spaces for community-based civil societies in the villages. Together, they solicit common paths toward the closure of conflicts at different levels of society by drawing from local heritages: oral histories, arts and their collective memories.

The imposing posture of Western reconciliation methodologies dispossesses the body, and through that, the communal arts and languages of reconciliation. Evidently, Western methods of

reconciliation applied at grassroots African conflict situations are inappropriate, being the products of Euro-American cultures and histories of domination. Consequently, the modern liberal, social and political peace-making practices differ from what is understood by traditional Africa holding a vast diversity of changing and creative approaches to conflict resolution.

My paper is based upon varied indigenous body-centred and design-based methods.ⁱⁱ I describe indigenous reconciliation under five categorises: (1) Embodied Arts of Reconciliation, (2) Embodied Linguistic Heritages, (3) Nature as Embodiment of Beauty and Peace, (4) Material Culture of Reconciliation, and (5) Making of the Peace Museums.

Keywords: Decolonization, Reconciliation, Dialogue, Indigenous Aesthetics and Arts, Conflicts, Peace Museums.

Embodied Arts of Reconciliation

Among the indigenous peoples of eastern Africa such as the Maasai, Pokot and Turkana, the arts of reconciliation are centered upon the body. Often, the body is adorned to express beauty to enter and close the reconciliation process. The body-focused expressions of beauty speak to the spiritual, communal and ancestral presence. They also speak to the land and nature. Steven Leuthold echoes this several times in *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art Media and Identity* (1998) stressing that:

A connectedness of art, ritual, nature and daily life, rooted in ancient spiritual traditions, is also the keynote of Hopi: Song of the Fourth World (1983), the director called Pat Ferrero Ferrero (Leuthold: 1998, page 147)ⁱⁱⁱ

The important point that Steven Leuthold makes throughout his book is that community-based arts of the First Nations do not fall into the Western academy's paradigm. To know indigenous aesthetic creations is to understand the social, spiritual and natural environments of their being. In fact, he further emphasizes that:

Indigenous aesthetic systems, then, create an awareness of the aesthetic dimension in all aspects of life. (Leuthold: 1998, page 202).

I would apply the same notion to Makonde (e.g. *ujamaa* and *spirit art*) wood carvings and a large corpus of paintings (e.g. *Tingatinga*) that developed in East Africa from the post-independence era in the early 1960s. Though the compositions addressed the growing Western market, they often referred to myths, the community, nature, the spirit-world and folk stories.^{iv}

In the cultural production of the indigenous communities, beauty is often thought of as communal for ethnic identification, peace, well-being and happiness. These are the values represented by *utu*, the Swahili word for humanity and the principle for reconciliation.^v

There is a common saying among the pastoralists of eastern Africa: ‘Where there is beauty, there is peace’. Thus, peace is celebrated by wearing of colourful beads, dancing and singing that show beauty. For example, among the Maasai, the movements of the beaded ornaments such as the multiple ringed shoulder ornament called the *emankeeki*, augment the rhythm of the body rising and falling with breath while dancing. The *emankeeki* accompanies body gesturing, singing and footsteps that compose an aesthetic recital. The oral, visual and gesticulating arts are relational and often thought of and expressed as one. An illustration that signifies the relationality of the song, dance and vocabulary is how the Maasai use the word *a-rany*. *A-rany* means to sing and it also means to dance. (Mol:1978 page 51)^{vi} The Maasai would also say, ‘He who sings, sings into the body’^{vii} showing that the arts are thought of bodily both as emotions (mental) and sensed feelings (physical) that come from outside like temperature - cold and hot. The singing, dancing and adornments reach a climax to create an aesthetic state called *esikar*. *Esikar* in Maa, the language spoken by the Maasai, means adornment, joy and splendour. It can be spoken to mean all the three aspects the word connotes together or separately to refer to a beautiful object by itself, the feeling of happiness it gives and as abstract beauty. *Esikar* is a body-centred physical and mental state that can also describe reaching an art’s horizon as the height of beauty and peace. The closest English translation of *esikar* may be ecstasy that seizes the body in a trance. But, *esikar* means more. *Esikar* also means freedom. It’s the freedom from bodily felt troubles and anxieties. And that is peace in the meditative sense. (Mol:1996 page 370)^{viii}

In *Embodying All Our Relations*, indigenous scholars, Alannah Young Leon and Denise Nadeau write:

We include dance, story and theatre, song, drumming, and ceremony, in all of which the embodied self is part. These share a purpose of transmitting histories, teachings, and cultural

values. It is this purpose of transmitting values and restoring a felt sense of interconnection with all our relations that is a critical aspect of our embodied inquiry. (Leon et al: page 73).^{ix}

When a person's body is broken by war, it follows that he (generic) is disengaged from the society's values, customs and beliefs that had rooted and nourished him, given him an identity and most importantly the dignity of being i.e. of *mtu* (Swahili for human). Not only is the person broken mentally and physically, he is also severed from the spirit world, automatically disconnecting him from his ancestors and, consequently, his bloodline, the clan and community. He loses the collective identity of which he is a part. He is perceived as the Other by his own people. Consequently, he becomes socially dysfunctional. Celucien L. Joseph writes:

Apart from their community, African people are not fully persons. A person's personality and individuality are guaranteed only insofar as the individual is integrated into the community. On the other hand, the community serves and strengthens the individual. So, the individual does everything in view of assuring the whole community's health and survival. (Celucien L. Joseph: 2018, pages 16-20).^x

During the traditional reconciliation ceremony, called *Mato Oput*, among the Acholi of northern Uganda and southern South Sudan, those who commit crimes, hurt individuals or go against the customs, undergo a body-centred sacrament in order to be accepted back into the physical and spiritual life of the village. (Onen: 2019, pages 4-5)^{xi} The ritual is mentally and physically taxing. His/her arms that held the weapons are tied behind the back to show submission; his/her arrogant head is forcefully lowered as a gesture of humiliation and made to drink like an animal. The mouth that abused and spoke foul language, is filled with the bitter stuff of a specially prepared mixture. The tongue, gullet and stomach find this mixture so repulsive to swallow that many throw up which is seen as cleansing from the inside. Simultaneously, the ritual masters fill the ears that did not previously listen to the elders with reprimand and words of tribal wisdom. *Mato Oput* is a severe test of endurance for the restoration of the body: physical, mental, spiritual and social. This reconciliation reflects on the belief in the blood of kinship as communal that comes from a common ancestor. The ceremony is witnessed by the community thus making it open, participatory and public. After the elders accept the first stage of the body's restitution to the community's collective being and ancestry, the course of re-orientating and re-socializing of the affected person begins. The whole community then has the communal responsibility to bring

back the socially disabled body into the Acholi cosmology in a collective act of duty and compassion.

In fact, *Mato Oput* signifies the *Community Peace Museum of the African Child Soldier* (Okech: 2019 pages 3-4).^{xiii} as a site for reunion of those whose physical, communal and spirit-ual beings were (and are) dislocated from the tribe's life forces (i.e. the ancestors, clans, families, nature, elders and spirituality). A graphic image of the rite of *Mato Oput*, depicting two men whose hands are tied behind their backs, lowering their heads in submission to drink the bitter water from a calabash, is the logo of the *Community Peace Museum of the African Child Soldier* at Magwi in South Sudan.

Malidoma Patrice Somé in his biographical ethnography, *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*^{xiii} explains in detail the processes of how the body becomes debilitated from its roots when colonized. He describes the rites to rehabilitate the body back into the Dagara culture of Bukani Faso, where he was born but abducted at a young age by Jesuit missionaries to be trained as a priest and spread the Gospel in Africa. After escaping the monastery at the age of 17, he returns to his village where he undergoes arduous embodied rituals for restoration of his spirit and being, the *mtu* (human being) in him. Only then could he lay a claim to his ancestral heritage, the land, his identity and be included in the Dagara community. There are parallels of the Dagara reconciliation process with *Mato Oput* and other indigenous reconciliation processes in Africa such as *Gacaca* in Rwanda.

Gacaca is an existing indigenous court for reconciliation. Soon after the Rwandan genocide when over 800,000 people were killed in one of the most tragic mass genocides in recent history, there was an avalanche of Western aid-money that poured into the region to promote reconciliation and healing. Numerous NGOs were set up and hundreds of Peace-Reconciliation-Dialogue workshops were conducted at all levels from government officials to community leaders and students. However, none of these have been as successful at the grassroots as the traditional *Gacaca*. *Gacaca* exists as community-centred and witnessed reconciliation practice in a country with an overwhelming Catholic population. This is despite criticism when compared to the Western judicial court. It may be noted that the drive to revert to tradition came from the people because the Western courts were tedious, lasting a lifetime to achieve closure and, most importantly, did not offer reconciliation as understood by the affected cultures.^{xiv}

Displacing reconciliation outside of the African village empties a heritage of any communal transformative potential, obscures its legacy while putting the stability of the society in control of foreign hands. Such a displacement of Africa-based knowledge and methodologies amounts to a denial of their existence, isolation and exclusion. Most importantly, it bars the prospects from significant opportunities for continent-based connectivity based on similarly shared practices.

Embodied Linguistic Heritages

Indigenous linguistic heritages embody verbal arts of reconciliation. The verbal arts, being rich in metaphors, rhythm and rhymes, carry sensual sound and emotional knowledge for the negotiators. During the reconciliation processes, which are often engrossing speech and listening events calculated to win over the other side, the negotiators would employ storytelling, poetry and figurative language. Metaphors, rhythms and rhymes reach home to the hearts of the native speakers sharpening their sense-awareness (visual, tactile and aural) through captivating poetry and narratives. The ethnicities in conflict often share allegoric references to the land, local history and customs as idioms in different languages. Figurative language has the power to evoke kinships with the homeland, sacred geographies, ancestors, community identities and the universality of humanity.^{xv} Speech and sound arts create pictures of the mind from legends and fables – the most treasured inheritances of ancestral wisdom for the preservation of peace and continuity of identities in oral societies. These linguistic arts are displayed at their best during the rituals of reconciliation where emotions often run high. A citation from the UNESCO declaration on safeguarding the Maasai intangible heritage of *Enkipaata*, *Eunoto* and *Olng'esherr*, the three graduation ceremonies for the males, accurately précises the communal effect of the rites:

The rites involve the whole community and feature songs, folktales, proverbs, riddles and events, thus providing the Maasai community with a sense of cultural identity and continuity.^{xvi}

A skilled storyteller-negotiator uses his linguistic heritage to compose a range of cultural and sensual information to evoke emotions bringing pride in one's identity and of being *mtu* or human. The language of oral literature is persuasive, and it draws the listeners to reflect on the

conflicts, justice and shared living. It brings the listener to the narrator's point of view and the beauty of the arts (beauty is thought of as peace in several indigenous societies).

Furthermore, speaking in the vernacular makes a difference because words as symbols of speech carry local meanings. Lera Boroditsky, professor of psychology, neuroscience, and symbolic systems at Stanford University writes:

We have collected data around the world: from China, Greece, Chile, Indonesia, Russia, and Aboriginal Australia. What we have learned is that people who speak different languages do indeed think differently, and that even flukes of grammar can profoundly affect how we see the world.^{xvii}

Allow me to illustrate this with an example from Swahili. If I were speaking in Swahili to you now - *Kama nigeli sema kwa Kiswahili na nyinyi sasa*, what I say would be listened to differently by you - *mungeli sikia nilio sema tafauti*, even you would understand me differently - *na ata mugeli fahamu mimi tafauti*. My words would not have been tempered by my Western education and translation into a language with foreign roots and cultural suggestions. When you hear differently, you think, and more importantly, feel differently what reconciliation is in vernacular cultures. Are you listening - *wasikia?*

When I say *wasikia* in Swahili, (are you listening), I also mean, are you feeling.

To listen to my story, you must feel the words in your body

Like how you listen to the smell in Swahili

Wasikia harufu? Do you hear the smell?

Or listening to how the cold enters your body

Wasikia baridi? Do you hear the cold?

Or even listening to joy in your heart you say

Wasikia raha? Do you hear happiness?

To feel the pain in Swahili is to listen to the pain

Wasikia uchungu? Do you hear pain?

When you listen to my story in your body

And it smells and you feel the heat and cold

*Joy and the pain like how you hear a song
I know then you are listening
When I ask Wasikia? Are you listening?
I also mean, are you feeling?
(Somjee:2012 page 142) ^{xviii}*

Listening to the senses collectively centering on the handed-down verbal arts in an act of *wasikia* is also an act of feeling. In other words, it's an embodied art of listening. It's a performance about being, that is about being *mtu*, the human in oneself. *Utu* is carried in the personhood expressed by the feelings held in the physical and mental wellbeing of body and community.

Utu is a Swahili word that comes from *mtu* (human being) and it stands for a set of humanistic and health values. Though the word itself has a Bantu base, the concept of *utu* is embodied in many non-Bantu symbols and vernaculars. Over many generations, *utu* has come to be rooted in Swahili, the most widely spoken connecting language 'without borders' South of the Sahara with influences from African and Asian languages as well as European. Thus, Human values are ingrained in the fabric of Swahili as much as they are in ethnic languages sustaining peace metaphors, songs and stories. They are also read in peace symbols in material culture and nature – trees, rocks and animals^{xix} comprising an ensemble of expressions of wisdom for societal welfare and steadiness. *Utu* has come to mean a collection of values that Archbishop Tutu calls *ubuntu* and has been a key concept in the post-apartheid hearings of Truth and Reconciliation commissions in South Africa across racial and tribal divides.

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, 'Yu, u nobunto'; 'Hey so-and-so has ubuntu.' Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, 'My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life.^{xx}

The quotation above shows that *ubuntu* or *utu* pervades all aspects of human relationships and is widespread in the African languages from the Equator to the tropic of Capricorn. For example, it is *umntu* in Xhosa of South Africa and *unhu* in Shona of Zimbabwe. Sometimes *utu* is explained philosophically as 'I am because you are'. The idea of human relationships and inter-

connectedness of people is intoned in a five-sided referent to peace. This is contained in the presence of the Supreme Being, the Land and Nature, Ancestors, Elders and Community.^{xxi}

Nature as Embodiment of Beauty and Peace

The patterns of the *emankeeki*, the Maasai ornament that's worn around the neck but sits on the shoulder, is created with closely linked rings of tiny beads called *saen*. Two of the rings called *keri* and *enkoiteeko* are explained as patterns of nature from the mountains, sky and feral animals.

Keri are a set of colours arranged in lines of high contrast. It's a combination of black and white or black and yellow or black or red beads. It's a pattern knitted with oval shaped beads that often close the *emankeeki* in the outer rim.

When one sees white glaciers on Mt Kenya contrasting with dark valleys, one says it's *keri*. In fact, Mt Kenya is known as Ol Donyo Keri. The mountain of the colours of *keri*. The colours of *keri* are said to be like moods in the body. Sometimes we are happy, and sometimes sad. Sometimes filled with hope and sometimes with despair. *Keri* is day and night. The leopard is called *ol keri*, he of the pattern *keri*. Similarly, there are geographical areas that are named after the colours of feral animals, trees, soil and rock. The town of Narok takes its name as the place of black earth, while Nanyuki means brown.

Enkoiteeko is the zebra pattern seen in the formation of clouds, and the shadows of the clouds on the savannah. There is a song and dance that infers the relationality of indigenous aesthetics:

God beads the rainbow on zebra's neck

Emankeeki of the sky

Ti-ti-ti drops the rain

Stripe-stripe-stripe falls the rain

Dot-dot-dot each drop a bead

From emankeeki on zebra's neck

(Somjee: 2012 page 263)^{xxii}

The pattern *enkoiteeko* is beaded into adornments for the body, it is sung about and danced. The material culture heritage of the Maasai, as exemplified by *engoiteego* ornaments, relates to the linguistic heritage in verbal-visual performative consonance. Writing about the traditional Akan society, English and Steele -Hamme explain that:

One of the most distinctive characteristics of royal regalia, and virtually all traditions of Akan arts, was the presentation of symbols, objects and scenes directly related to traditional sayings and proverbs. Indeed, the relationship between art motifs and their verbal equivalents is often cited as one of the cornerstones of Akan aesthetics.

(English and Steele -Hamme: 1998 pages 405 - 406) ^{xxiii}.

Land is one of the five agencies affecting community life, one's beliefs and the being. There are two ways that the land affects the being. One is through sacred sites. In ethnic territories, there are sacred lands, and there are sacred trees, rocks and waters. In the Maasai land, there is the *Forest of the Lost Child* on the Loita Highlands, which is the spiritual abode of the nation. Sacred geography holds beauty where rituals of peace may be performed. Their presence connects the people to the ancestors who own and reside in the ground and anchors the community to the land, to their origin and ethnicity. These sites are approached during troubled times — such as during droughts and war—and during the annual rituals for celebration of peace and rites of passage. At these performances, there is an acknowledgement of the geography, communities' identities and the continuity of stages in life through the passages marking the aging process. At the sacred places, the senses are awakened to the meaning of peace. In other words, peace needs to be felt bodily. It needs to be heard – *wasikia*? The sacred places are endowed with combined traditions of natural, spiritual, and cultural meanings and aesthetic mindfulness. At these sites, the rituals heighten the meaning and continuity of building relations, and it is often here that reconciliation takes place. The locations may be under a peace tree such as the *Ol-orien*, the beautiful African Wild Olive with shiny and smooth deep green leaves. *Ol-orien* is a sacred tree of the pre-European Christian Church in Ethiopia and the indigenous religions of southern savannahs. The peace rituals are also performed on a sacred mountain such as Mt Kenya and Ol Donyo Lengai in the Great African Rift Valley in Tanzania. The name means the Mountain of God that the Maasai hold sacred.

Dawn is when prayers are offered. In some parts it is the time when reconciliation is done. Dawn is the most peaceful, reflective and beautiful time of the day. There is a version of a Turkana prayer said to the dawn with cupped palms facing the golden orb wearing colours of beads as people do on their bodies:

I receive Earth colours to my body

I receive sky colours on my body

I speak into Your colours

You are the beautiful, the multicoloured One

I ask to be a ray in your colours

(Somjee: unpublished manuscript) ^{xxiv}

Carl Jung writes about the meaning of the beauty and spirituality of the dawn to the indigenous people at the Kenya-Uganda border:

The old man said that this was the true religion of all peoples, that all Kavirondos, all Buganda, all tribes from as far as the eye could see from the mountain and endlessly farther, worshipped adh'itsa – that is, the sun at the moment of rising. Only then was the sun mungu, God. The first delicate golden crescent of the new moon in the purple of the western sky was also God. But only at that time; otherwise not. (ed Jaffe:1989 page 267) ^{xxv}

Carl Jung was so overwhelmed by the sunrise during his travels in Africa, that, in his biography he says:

I felt I were inside a temple. It was the most scared hour of the day. I drank in this glory with insatiable delight, or rather, in a timeless ecstasy. (ed Jaffe:1989 page 268). ^{xxvi}

Material Culture of Reconciliation

Olkila is a Maasai women's leather shoulder cape or a skirt. When young warriors are marching to go fight against the wishes of their mothers or the community, the women put their *olkila* across their paths. That's a call for reconciliation, and the warriors will not step over the *olkila*

out of respect for motherhood. Women's attires worn over the stomach are sacred as the womb is respected as the symbol for life.

The Maasai word for the umbilical cord is *osotua*. As a metaphor, it is said to mean social relationship which has the resounding echo of the first relationship that nature (or God) tied man (generic for humans) to his mother. Thus, it implies that all men are born out of a human relationship that is sacred and is meant to be maintained as sacred among the people as it has been in the womb nourished by the mother's body. Earth is a mother, too, for she nourishes all beings and is revered as a giver of life. At birth, the umbilical cord is buried in the Earth where life came from. Sometimes, the Earth is referred to as mother, too. At death, many would wish to be buried where their umbilical cords are buried. *Osotua*, the umbilical cord in Maa, the language spoken by the Maasai, has also come to mean peace. Greetings of peace like *salaam* and *shalom* are exchanged simply by saying the word *osotua*. This infers that building human relationships is equal to building peace.

An example from another cultural group in Kenya is the *leketyo*. *Leketyo* is a beaded leather belt that is used to support pregnancy. It is considered sacred because it saves the unborn child. *Leketyo* also represents motherhood. It signifies nurturing of life and is used as a symbol of reconciliation. When a fight flares up, calls of *Leketyo! Leketyo!* are made to calm down the heated bodies. When the *leketyo* is placed between two persons or groups hostile to each other, the fight ends immediately.

Like the *olkila* and *leketyo*, there are other handed-down items of indigenous material culture that speak to the memory of reconciliation and the peace heritage in metaphors and images. For example, walking sticks made from the African hardwood may be used by elders to stop quarrels and fights. Often these sticks come from the peace trees. One example is the *muthegi*, elders' walking stick, among the Kikuyu, the majority ethnic group in Kenya. In fact, the word Kikuyu itself is from a peace tree called *mukuyu*.

Among the Akamba of Kenya, *ndata kimbu*, the peace staff, is named after the chameleon. The chameleon is a peace animal among the Akamba. Chameleons retreat or conceal themselves and don't hurt the aggressor.

Making of the Peace Museums

In 1994 Community Museums of Peace ^{xxvii} were initiated in order to sustain and promote the long-held diversity that is imbedded in material culture, oral traditions, the arts and memories. These are community-recognized knowledge bases for reconciliation. It was a volatile decade of conflict raging in the East African region, from Rwanda to Somalia and many other parts of Africa.

The Museums of Peace are independent Grassroots Civil Society Organizations not funded or supported in any way by the government. They connect each community's heritage of *utu* (humanity) creating safe spaces for ethnicities to learn about each other's peace traditions through Talking Circles, performances and exhibitions of material culture. The Talking Circles are storytelling events in ethnic languages and in Swahili. They elicit feelings and memories of *utu* using songs, metaphors and proverbs. Timothy Gachanga explains peace culture, *utu* and the peace museums:

The peace culture as a system of symbols embraces material culture, indigenous languages and nature that includes sacred rocks, waters and peace trees where life giving communion is performed. Just as the home is not a narrow-walled shelter but an open homestead linked with other homesteads in the vicinity, and in some instances, with the ancestral groves and burial sites where the dead reside as living members of the family, the Peace Museum embraces all aspects of such a living culture of peace. The peace museum is defined by the concept of Utu. (Gachanga: 2008 pages 158 – 168) ^{xxviii}

Twenty-five years later, there are 16 ethnic museums of peace out of the 44 ethnicities in Kenya that work on projects when funds are available. The Talking Circles enquire about information from the past and present with an awareness of the body-focused relationality of the arts (body paintings, material culture, songs, dances, beadwork) for cultural production.

The on-going project of the Community Peace Museums of Kenya (2015-2018) is called 2Bonge and it focuses on conflicts arising from discrimination relating to gender and the minorities. (Munuve: 2019 pages 7-8). ^{xxix} One example of the 2Bonge exhibit is called, 'Through Man's Eyes: Two Faces of Woman'. Using mixed media of paint and beads, director Munuve Mutisya, who is also the curator of Akamba Peace Museum, uses the image of the

feminine face to show male preconceptions of genders. One side of the face is beautiful, and the other is grossly distorted. Male eyes see the woman as beautiful but at the same time not quite a human who is equal to him.

2Bonge in Sheng, the language spoken by the slum youth in Kenya, means “Let’s Talk Together”. The project creates and connects Talking Circles around the country and youth of different class backgrounds. In August this year, 750 youths in a mixed group from the slums and universities, participated in viewing the exhibition, performances and Talking Circles. The exhibit also travelled to ethnic regions, extending Talking Circles within diverse cultural settings.^{xxx}

Finally, I would like to elaborate on the peace museums in conflict zones with an example of the *Community Peace Museum of the African Child Soldier*^{xxxii} in South Sudan. For more than two decades, the Acholi of South Sudan have been terrorized by rebel and government forces. (Odongyoo: 2019 pages 5-6)^{xxxii} Hundreds have died or disappeared, and more than a million remain displaced. As has been the history in other parts of the world where long-term wars separated the people, and in some cases created two nations from one country, the Acholi are a divided people. They have now turned family to family, clan to clan and people to people reunions using their inheritance of knowledge and methods. (Odongyoo: 2019 pages 5-6).^{xxxiii} The *Community Peace Museum of the African Child Soldier* is a space to tell stories about the 20 years of wars. It is also a safe place for those who had voluntarily joined the rebels without the blessings of the elders, or had been abducted or pressed into insurgent servitude, to ask to be accepted back into the community through the arduous rituals of *Mato Oput*. (Atim: pages 4-5).^{xxxiv}

Conclusion

In this presentation, I describe the role of aesthetics in reconciliation meetings among the indigenous cultures in eastern Africa. Communication through aesthetics is represented by Indigenous arts that are relational - wearing of colourful beads, body painting, singing and dancing. I refer to Africa’s rich linguistic heritages for sustaining community stability and the

presence of nature as the embodiment of peace and beauty at reconciliations. I explain the role of material culture in stopping conflicts and traditions of embodied reconciliation rituals such as *Mato Oput* as practiced in Uganda and South Sudan. Finally, I show how the culture of sustaining peace and the balance with the elements (natural, spiritual, physical) within the community, and for its wellbeing known as *utu*. The origin of the peace museums in eastern Africa was to give visibility to *utu* through diverse cultural perspectives.

The belief in *utu*, or humanity, recalls the living presence of the Supreme One, nature and ancestors as agencies that guard community welfare. The elders are the mediators as bearers of wisdom, and the people are the collective and enduring witnesses. However, we live on a conflicted continent where previous colonization, and present modernization under nationalist governments marginalize the indigenous communities and tend to overlook people-based knowledge in its rich diversity.

There are the two main unresolved paradoxes affecting conflicts in Africa:

1. Africa has enormous resources yet there is enormous poverty which often leads to conflicts.
2. Africa has rich peace, conflict resolution and mediation traditions yet there are wars.

Both the management of resources and reconciliation for the maintenance of peace come under the administration of the nationalist governments. Robin Faisst's study of the elite driven reconciliation meetings at the African Union (AU) points out that they are neither 'sufficiently rooted in African thinking' nor are they 'people-centred' or even 'people-relevant'.

Consequently, such mediation practices are unlikely to succeed.^{xxxv} One example of this is from South Sudan. Since independence in 2011 and the subsequent civil war, the government and the rebel leaders have been hopping from one peace conference to another. They have signed numerous peace accords. However, on the ground violence continues unabated.

There are reasons for this. African leaders lack confidence in their people's approaches to conflict resolution that would help to develop African thinking towards a closure of the decades-long wars. Implicitly, the situation reflects on lack of belief among the leaders in their abilities to perform as Africans drawing on their historical and cultural experiences. Such experiences are evidently required to mediate ethnicity-based conflicts. The missing trust reflects on an inherited

colonial complex that the negotiators take to the table. Thus literally, it is convenient for them to use handbooks prepared for Africa by Western institutions as substitutes for local knowledge:

While most African societies historically relied on mediation to resolve conflicts, there is a lack of confidence in African approaches to conflict resolution which is rooted in colonial thinking. This partly explains the tendency of some of the African Union (AU) mechanisms to reflect knowledge taken from conflict resolution theories from the Global North—as well as international organizations like the United Nations (UN), World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)—which is apparent in the AU’s Mediation Support Handbook. The AU’s Standard Operating Procedures for Mediation Support includes a list of lessons learned from the UN instead of lessons learned from its own practices, experiences, and African thinking. (Faisst: 2019).

The result is perpetual dependence on the thinking, historical experiences and knowledge from the old imperial North to resolve today’s problems at home. Faisst’s study points to the need to decolonize the African elite-propelled mediation cultures and structures. This may not happen easily without decolonizing the minds of the ruling classes and ending corruption within its kinship power cliques and the military. Corruption may possibly be a factor in dealings over resources and arms with corporate businesses operating in the South. ^{xxxvi}

The gist of the argument is that the ruling elites exclude people’s participation to end violence. Instead, in some cases, the regimes have been complicit in flaring up ethnic violence.^{xxxvii} The result is devastating, as we have seen from the unremitting post-independence chaos, looting of the national resources, environmental devastation and killings in the eastern African region – Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and the Congo, since 1960. As recently as in 2017 Human Rights Watch reported that:

Kenya’s presidential election on August 8, 2017 was marred by serious human rights violations, including unlawful killings and beatings by police during protests and house-to-house operations in western Kenya, Human Rights Watch said today. At least 12 people were killed and over 100 badly injured. (Kenya Human Rights Report 2017) ^{xxxviii}

Obviously, Western-style reconciliation that’s being adopted by the nationalist governments has not worked. Such a reconciliation is not about restoring the balance in the community and its

guardians as understood by the beliefs of the ethnicities in conflict. One evidence of the failure of Western style reconciliation comes from streams of refugees that continue to flow into camps in the eastern African region. Daadab in Kenya already has a population of 235,268 registered refugees and asylum seekers. (UNHCR Report 2018).^{xxxix} Kakuma — also in Kenya — has 147,168 registered refugees and asylum-seekers. (UNHCR Report 2018).^{xl} In fact, Western methodologies in general become obstructive to supporting the continuity of sustaining indigenous traditions related to inter-ethnic peaceful relationships. Consequently, conflicts continue and so does the business as usual in arms and resources.

Africa in conflict with itself makes a good business partner. In the long term, such a business model carries risks to permanently exclude voices of continent-based community thinkers, activists, artists and intellectuals and their crucial contributions to peace and *utu*. The dire eventuality is that the younger generations in their formative years, who can come up with creative alternatives to peace and governance, are kept away from an intellectual inheritance converted into other impotent, primitive, obsolete and banal custom of the tribal past.

In other words, the diversity of native-grown and body-centered points of view derived through the dynamic relationality of the arts – material culture, dance, song and the affective linguistic heritages – are undervalued in favour of the imported. The indigenous-foreign dichotomy has altered the social character of the vibrant rural communities and generated a new set of values laden with problems due to restricted access to critical communal dialogues, thinking and continuity of intellectual traditions from one generation to another leading to the deprivation in the value of ancestral memories. The community peace museums were started to harvest the memories of ancestral wisdom and salvage fragments of the living arts of reconciliation for upholding social equity and communal wellbeing. The peace museums present an alternative to the ‘peace-conflict resolution and dialogue’ institutions that have proliferated through the numerous NGOs in the eastern African region especially after the Rwandan massacre in 1994. So effective have the foreign backed organizations been that the variety of time-tested ethnic reconciliation approaches are subsumed beneath the uniformity and formulaic methods offered by the colonial academy. Consequently, within a few decades, centuries of traditions and bodily arts-based human expressions and knowledge, which link an array of continental heritages sustaining peace, have been rapidly declining.

The decline has sadly diminished the cultural lexicon that carries vast verbal and visual images derived from working the land and supporting the balance of the physical and spirit worlds as revered in the local belief systems. It continues to weaken the culturally appropriate ways of seeing, saying and hearing, and thus reasoning for the closure of conflicts in a way acceptable to the majority. It cleanses the native in oneself to be the modern other. The corpus of Western canons engages in appropriating and managing, if not actually denigrating the African narrative at the grassroots while continuing to build the colonial academy. I use the word denigrating intentionally. The root of the word is from the Latin *denigrare*, which means to blacken, and is very telling.

In the words of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o:

The body (as the source of culture) is the capital that colonial power seeks to own, control and dominate... As if knowledge begins elsewhere, from where the colonizer comes from. No wonder, we receive, (re)learn, discuss and justify the knowledge we receive from elsewhere to explain ourselves as much as the world^{xli}

For far too long we have been looking elsewhere to learn, discuss and justify reconciliation among us based on the knowledge we receive from elsewhere. African conflict resolution knowledge does not originate from elsewhere, but from ourselves. It does not require to be justified “to explain ourselves as much as the world outside”.

The writer is an ethnographer and author. In 1985 he introduced the teaching of indigenous art through material culture in the Kenyan school curriculum. In 1995 he started the museums of peace during the volatile decade in eastern Africa. These museums have now spread to Uganda and South Sudan through people to people efforts. In 2001 the United Nations recognized Sultan Somjee as one of the twelve *Unsung Heroes of Dialogue Among Civilizations* globally.

ⁱ An indigenous community peace museum is a grassroots cultural space for the civil society to meet. Here arts – songs, dance, body paintings and body adornment, story telling, material culture and rituals – are displayed and performed with specific themes. These themes include awareness of ethnic peace heritages, values of communal aesthetics, education in indigenous knowledge, and the arts of reconciliation at various social and political levels. An outdoor extension of the arts arena connects to the various community rituals that relate to nature's peace symbols such as the peace trees, animals and sites. Awareness of social justice, inhumanity, gender imparity and Human Rights have deep intoned meanings in the displays and performances.

ⁱⁱ I use varied indigenous body-centred and design-based methods. The latter helped me to compile my ethnographies and documentation of material culture from late 1960. I also build on what I, myself, experienced bodily working with and listening to the makers and users of material culture. Inevitably, I developed my own sense and emotion-based ways of knowing from objects, oral traditions and participatory conversations. Over the three decades, I was fortunate to have had the opportunities to live and work among various ethnicities of Kenya. To test my bodily sourced knowledge, I created my own works of art using a design-based approach that I found useful in analysing material culture and in which I was trained. Hence, this presentation carries an aspect of my subjectivity and perspective as an artist. The examples I use are from my field-drawings and notes on the material culture collections that I made while at the University of Nairobi and the National Museums of Kenya, and from memory. The Talking Circles with my filed assistants, students and the community elders, often around their material culture, from 1970 to 2003, widened my participatory learning skills through tactile, visual and emotional ways of knowing. The Talking Circles especially helped me to reflect on my observations, field drawings and notes from the point of view of various cultural perspectives. Later, in 1994, what I had learned from both my fieldwork and the Talking Circles, led me to create museums of peace in Kenya. The ethno-autobiographies by indigenous writers and artists, and non-indigenous writers living among the tribal groups for considerable periods of time, some for a life time (see the bibliography below), helped me to construct a narrative voice of my own when I was searching for the medium to express my bodily-felt knowledge. I also refer to my three ethnographic story books that are semi-autobiographical and reflective writings on my interactions with the various ethnicities of Kenya and their material culture.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leuthold, Steven *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art Media and Identity*, University of Texas Press, Austin, USA, (1998).

^{iv} The development of the enormous market for African ethnographic objects bordering on Western imagination and desire to possess 'primitive' art continues today. The trend may have started in the late 1960s as fantasy and fetish artefacts that's described by Carl Hoffman in *Savage Harvest: A Tale of Cannibals, Colonialism, and Michael Rockefeller's Tragic Quest for Primitive Art*, Harper Collins, Canada 2014.

^v Somjee, Sultan *Utu and peace sustaining heritage of Africa South of the Sahara* in the Oxford International Encyclopaedia of Peace, editor Nigel Young, Oxford University Press 2010.

^{vi} Mol, Frans, *Maa: A Dictionary of Maasai Language and Folklore* English-Maasai, Marketing and Publishing Ltd, Nairobi, 1978.

^{vii} Conversations with my Maasai field assistants from 1994, and in particular with Lemeiloi ole Sakuda, curator of Seu Seu Community Peace Museum in Olesho Oibor, Ngong District, Kenya.

^{viii} Mol, Frans, *Maasai Language and Culture Dictionary*, Maasai Centre Lemek, Kenya 1996.
- Lemeiloi ole Sakuda, Olesho Oibor, OI, September 2018.

^{ix} Leon, Alannah Young and Nadeau, Denise *Embodying All Our Relations* in *Alter Native* volume 10, number 1, 2014.

^x Joseph, Celucien L. *Toward a Black African Theological Anthropology and Ubuntu Ethics* in *Journal of Religion and Theology* Volume 2, Issue 1, 2018.

^{xi} Onen, Atim, Keeper of the Indigenous Knowledge, Community Museum of Peace of the African Child Soldier, *International Museums of Peace Newspaper*, No 25 January 2019.

^{xii} Okech, Lomudak, Director of the Community Peace Museum of the African Child Soldier, in the *International Museums of Peace Newspaper*, No 25 January 2019.

^{xiii} Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*, J P Putnam's Sons, 1994, USA.

^{xiv} Clark, Phil, *The Gacaca Courts, Post-Genocide Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda: Justice without Lawyers*, Cambridge University Press 2010.

- Ingelaere, Bert, *Inside Rwanda's Gacaca Courts: Seeking Justice after Genocide (Critical Human Rights)*, University of Wisconsin Press 2016.

^{xv} Elders speaking at peace conference in Nyeri, Kenya, *Peace Trees* video by Bruno Sorrentino 2001.

^{xvi} UNESCO, Culture 'Intangible Heritage' 2018, *Safeguarding of Enkipaata, Eunoto and Olng'esherr, three male rites of passage of the Maasai community*.

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/assistances/safeguarding-of-enkipaata-eunoto-and-olng-esherr-three-male-rites-of-passage-of-the-maasai-community-00888>

^{xvii} Boroditsky, Lera *How does our language shape the way we think? In Edge* 2009
https://www.edge.org/conversation/lera_boroditsky-how-does-our-language-shape-the-way-we-think

^{xviii} Somjee, S Bead Bai CreateSpcae, Charleston USA, 2012.

^{xx} Archbishop Desmond Tutu speaking about the Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation
<http://www.tutufoundationusa.org/2015/10/06/striving-for-ubuntu/>

xxi Somjee, Sultan *Utu and peace sustaining heritage of Africa South of the Sahara* in the Oxford International Encyclopaedia of Peace, ed in chief, Nigel Young 2010.

xxii Somjee, Sultan Bead Bai, CreateSpace, Charleston USA, 2012.

xxiii English, Parker and Steele -Hamme, Nancy *Morality, art and African philosophy: A response to Wiredu* in The African Philosophy Reader, ed P.H.Coetze and A.P.J. Roux, Routledge 1998.

xxiv Somjee, S, One Who Dreams is Called a Prophet, (unpublished manuscript).

xxv Ed Jaffe, Aiela, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* by C.G.Jung, Vintage Books Edition 1989.

xxvi Ibid.

xxvii The peace museums project was financially supported by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) from 1994 to 2003.

xxviii Gachanga, Timothy, *How do Africans view Peace Museums?* in for Peace: Past, Present and Future, Ed Anzai et al, Kyoto 2008.

xxix Munuve Mutisya, *2Bonge Breaks Ground for Partnership of Peace Museums Between North and South* in INMP Newsletter No 25, 2019.

xxx ibid

xxxi Okech, Lomudak 2018 *Making Community Museums of Peace of African Child Soldier – A Personal Story* in INMP Newsletter No 25, 2019.

xxxii Odonoyoo, F 2018, *Origins of Gulu Peace Museum* in INMP Newsletter No 25, 2019.

xxxiii ibid

xxxiv Onen, Atim *Indigenous Knowledge at an African Peace Museum* in INMP Newsletter No 25, 2019.

xxxv Faisst, Robin *Decolonizing Mediation: Exploring Question of Knowledge and Power Shaping African Mediation* in Kujenga Amani, January 29th, 2019. <https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2019/01/29/decolonizing-mediation-exploring-questions-of-knowledge-and-power-shaping-african-mediation/>

xxxvi This is amply evidenced by Wikileaks and struggles of the indigenous people internationally against their governments and corporations over resources.

xxxvii After the 2015 massacres both the President of Kenya and the Vice President were charged by the International Court of Justice in the Hague for leading the violence.

xxxviii Kenya Human Rights Watch Report 2017 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/27/kenya-post-election-killings-abuse>

xxxix UNHCR Report 2018. <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/dadaab-refugee-complex>.

^{xi} UNHCR Report 2018. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/64664>.

^{xli} Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Re-Owning of the Body*, Stein Auditorium, Habitat Centre, New Delhi, India, February 23, 2018.

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