

# Cultural Pathways and Peacebuilding

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All cultures experience internal conflicts and they all have tried and proven ways of resolving them. Today, with our global networking, communications and commerce, inter-cultural or “ethnic conflicts” are increasing and it is becoming increasingly important for our global welfare and security to find ways of resolving them. From the cultural perspective, most of Africa’s conflicts can be understood as sets of ethnic values, beliefs, social habits, and expectations—in short, cultural pathways—in conflict. Up until now, neither the formation of Nation States nor the impact of globalization has succeeded in merging these sets of expectations or bridging Africa’s ethnic divisions which only seem to get worse. Diverse ethnic groups continue along their own pathways despite an outward show of national or pan-African unity.

Making things even more difficult for peace building is the fact that our pathway codes are tacit or implicit. We are not usually aware of these codes which control the way we live our lives, are the criteria for our norms and values and direct our perception and experience. As long as Africa’s 1,700 different pathways are not acknowledged, reflected on, or understood, there can never be any real dialogue or reconciliation between conflicting parties.

The first part of the workbook, *A Cobra is in our Granary*, summarizes ethnographic research on conflicting pathways and expectations carried out among chiefly and non-chiefly groups of Northern Ghana in 2001. The research comes up with four overarching themes which can be used to predict opposing values and behaviour of these two mega-groupings. These are:

## Chiefly Groups vs. Non-Chiefly Groups

Hit-Man	Run-Man
Big-Man	Small-Man
God-Man	E.Spirit-Man
Land-Man	Earth-Man

### **Hit-man vs Run-man theme:**

Chiefly groups identify with the “hit-man” in this dual theme of opposition. They are more assertive, confident, pro-active and controlling than the non-chiefly groups. In any given interaction they can be expected to ‘take charge’ and run things. They live in cities and large towns. They are used to people, to organizing and managing them. They have learned to manage power relations through hierarchical systems. Freedom for them is knowing their place in the hierarchy. “Respect” is to act in accordance with this scheme. Their attitude toward conflict is summed up in a Dagomba proverb: “If your brother kicks your leg and you do not kick back, you are weak.” One Dagomba informant said when this applies to wars: “You are more than weak; you are useless; you are made to eat faeces”.

Non-chiefly groups identify with the “run-man” in this dual theme. They are less assertive, seemingly less confident, less pro-active, and eschew any kind of control. The last thing they want is to “take charge”, for that imposes limitations on the freedom of others. Their highest good is freedom—their own and that of others—by which they mean: pursuit of their ends without being hampered in any way by their neighbour. Thus they prefer to live far in the bush, isolated where they stick to subsistence farming. This ideal of freedom even extends to their idea nature itself, their farms and

animals. “The reason the war came was because of our animals,” one Konkomba told me. “We must let them roam about freely. But when there are too many people around this brings trouble.” This is combined with the notion of vendetta. Konkombas are well known for their strict obligation to retaliate, or suffer punishment by the ancestors. Because of this any small problem between different clan members can easily escalate and lead to the obliteration of their two clans. Therefore it is always better simply to move away. Not because they fear their antagonist but because of the terrible consequences for everyone if they don’t.

The problem is in the mutual mis-reading of each others’ (and their own) pathways. Dagombas, for example, will always pursue if someone runs from a fight, because they interpret it as weakness or fear. And their non-chiefly opposites, Konkombas, will always run from a fight in order to preserve their own liberty and the excessive violence of run-away vendetta. The Dagombas pursue and harass until the Konkombas are up against a wall. Then the Konkombas turn and retaliate with full force. This happens again and again, yet neither the Dagombas nor the Konkombas are able to learn anything from it. Dagombas can only interpret this as totally irrational, “mad” behaviour. From their perspective, the Konkombas seem to be over-reacting, attacking for no reason, out of the blue. They do not view their own actions as aggressive for they are only behaving as they always do. Similarly the Konkombas think that the Dagombas should be able to read their respectful intentions and their interest in the overall good, in interpreting their flight. When they finally do take a stand, they expect their antagonists simply to back down; not to go to the slaughter. The Dagombas think they are defending their “rule” while the Konkombas don’t give two cents for any kind of rule. For them there is no such thing as “victory”; there is only retaliation and punishment.

### **Big-man vs small-man theme:**

The chiefly groups organize themselves hierarchically. The goal of every Dagomba is to be a chief of something, to be a ‘big man’, to be one rung up on the hierarchical ladder. In a sense everyone in the hierarchy is both a big-man and a small-man, but they identify with the role of ‘big-man’. They give orders and they are obeyed out of “respect”. All chiefly peoples look upon all non-chiefly peoples as their wards, their “small men” for according to their incorporative policy their “real” identity is the bottom-most rung of their own society.

Among the non-chiefly groups there are no ‘big-men’, no chiefs, and nobody wants to be a chief. Similarly there are no small-men. Nobody can presume to give orders to anyone else. Even the clan elders are not so much authoritarian leaders as cultic and ritual leaders. The only real authority to command is from the spirit world, the ancestors and the spirits of the earth. Although non-chiefly groups would not characterize themselves as “small men”, they do in fact take up this role by default because of the hierarchical schemes that have been imposed upon them.

### **God-man vs. Earth Spirit-man (‘god’ man)**

The chiefly groups identify with “God-man”. They know God, communicate with God (“pray”) and use their relationship with God to exercise control over other spirits, other persons and things. Their world view accents the role of God over that of the lesser spirits of the Earth. They do not fear the lesser spirits. They have a strong tendency toward the religions of the book, especially toward Islam. In fact the two go hand in glove. Islam has been a strong factor in the formation and growth of State systems in West Africa. This is because the idea of hierarchy is implicit in God’s relationship to the rest of creation. The idea of over-rule and chieftaincy is seen as originating in God, as participating in God’s

nature and authority, and usually their authority is confirmed as somehow being intimately connected to God through God's revelation. By the 10<sup>th</sup> C., Islam found a place in sub-Saharan African state systems and expanded this through Raiders, Traders and wandering holy men or "God people" such as Prophets, Marabouts, and Mallams. All are bound only by the sky (God's "sky-stone" or sovereignty), not by any bounds of territoriality, as are the other spirits and the people of the Earth.

The non-chiefly groups identify with the "Spirit of the Earth", the god of their region. They depend on this god for life and procreation, for survival and protection. They are limited to the confines of the territory ruled by their Earth god. They cannot presume to enter the next territory where there is a different god who has no knowledge of them or relationship with them. They have access to and enter into covenants with their own Earth spirit through their ancestors, but not the neighbouring Earth spirits. Earth people know that God has overarching authority over all spirits, but they have no access to God. "Who has knowledge of God?" they say. God is beyond them.

#### **Land-Man vs Earth-Man:**

The Chiefly groups identify with the idea of "land man", the idea of a secular world at man's disposal. They are able to separate the idea of land, earth and territory from its sacred context. In their belief system it becomes something to be merely controlled and manipulated, even as are the people of the Earth. Land man takes charge and seeks to control the earth's resources for his own purposes. He seeks control: control over nature and control over his own destiny and, by doing so, disturbs the order of creation.

The non-chiefly groups identify with the idea of "Earth man" or the concept of the Earth as primarily a sacred entity, a spiritual source of power and sustenance. For his own survival and sustenance man must enter

into relationship with this entity and follow the inherent rules of the relationship. Indeed all of creation is pervaded with spiritual meaning and is following these inherent patterns. One must know these and become a part of them to find oneself and fulfill one's destiny. The earth is "owned" by the spirits; no one can presume to claim or control the earth, to "own" it, to buy or sell it.

#### **Building Compatible Pathways**

These conflicting pathways lead to regular predictable conflicts between these cultures and block true reconciliation. But they can be made more compatible and a deep reconciliation can be attained through a process that includes: exposure, acceptance, dialogue and mutual assistance in learning certain new pathways. The old tacit pathways can be made explicit and exposed through cultural analysis. Then the people can be made aware of them, come to accept them, and even take the first steps toward changing them through a new vehicle called "culture drama".

#### **"Culture Drama and its use in Peacebuilding" (a Press Release: *Daily Graphic*)**

A new kind of workshop based on the techniques used in social-drama and psychodrama has been held at the Catholic Conference centre, Nsawam. The one-week workshop from 10 to 16 February, 2002, sponsored by the Catholic Church, brought together more than twenty Konkombas and Dagombas from Northern Ghana. They discussed, interacted and acted in role-plays as they worked toward building a lasting peace. Their dramatic skills were challenged as they played reverse roles to bring out their feelings on peace, reconciliation and integration. Some of the major performances centred around chieftaincy, the role of the 'earth priests' (*tindamba*) and market scenes.

The workshop was a unique experience for all. One participant explained that the

method of this workshop was something new. “It took us some time to get used to the new approach through acting but it turned out to be much better than just thinking and talking about the issues.” After getting into the act, another reported: “I feel much closer to my Dagomba brothers and sisters now because I can see and feel things that I didn’t see and feel before.” Another one felt that dramatizing reverse roles has helped him to see the issues more clearly. He said, “we could actually feel the sentiments of the other party. The drama helped us to say things we couldn’t have said in ordinary discussions. This has brought us closer together.”

All the participants came to appreciate the role that culture plays in creating conflicts and in healing them. One of them commented, “We could use our own languages and ways of doing things. This made it real. The real issues came up without us thinking about them and the way we interacted let us see a new way through the problem.” In their evaluation, the participants showed their appreciation of this new approach to resolving conflicts. They went back to their places with great enthusiasm for the approach and a new vision for the peace building process.

The lesson learned is that peace building is not just a matter of discussion and negotiations. It is also necessary for each side to experience the feelings and even the cultural pathways of the other side. This calls for a kind of ‘cultural conversion’ experience. Instead of

struggling with each other to score points, participants ended up acting and speaking for each other. What better way to practice the transformation that we envision than confirming each other in this natural give and take. Participants were able to trade places with each other and were able to actually see and feel the sentiments of their brothers and sisters from inside their culture.

The ‘mid-level’ participants, who have already attended many workshops on peace, acknowledged that the use of cross-cultural drama has helped them to move the peace building process a positive step forward. It helped them to finally begin to deal with the emotional issues, the structural issues and the issues raised by their conflicting cultural pathways. Everyone now realizes that it is necessary to deal with these deeper issues before any kind of cultural, and therefore systemic, transformation can take place. But they also realize that this is not easy. This workshop is just a beginning, but there is new hope on the horizon.

Guest speakers included Professor George Hagan, the chairman of the National Commission on Culture; Hon. Nayon Bilijo, the MP of Saboba; and Rt. Rev. Vincent Boi-Nai, the Catholic Bishop of Yendi. The facilitators included the psychodramatists Dr. Gong Shu from Taiwan and the USA, and Ms Renee Oudijk from the Netherlands. Rev. Dr. Jon P. Kirby SVD and Mr. Edward Salifu Mahama from the Tamale Institute of Cross Cultural Studies provided their cultural expertise. Father Kirby organized the event.