

Using Culture Drama¹ for Community Diagnosis and Action Planning

Published in *Compas* , September, No. 8: 40, 2004.

Abstract

In our post cold-war, global era ethnic conflicts have dramatically increased. Tensions that have been bottled up for generations are now bursting forth. Despite the rhetoric of globalization, tribalism and sectarianism of all sorts seem to be on the upswing and Western-styled confrontative and negotiative diplomacy do not get to the heart of the matter. This article introduces a way of resolving the conflicting cultural pathways that undergird most ethnic conflicts by means of a new enactment genre called "culture-drama". Where psychodrama integrates the human personality culture-drama integrates two or more conflicting cultural pathways. Culture-drama enables the communities to heal themselves by first recognizing, then accepting and finally changing their own implicit, hidden pathways within a workshop format which makes use of this enactment method.

Introduction

A very promising new form of enactment genre has found its way into the plethora of approaches to conflict management and peacebuilding. It is endogenous, it starts from where the people are, it uses their terms for the problem, it engages their diagnosis, and precipitates their forms of action. It is called "culture-drama." What is it all about? Here is what participants say about it²:

It is a method for discovery:

- o "The acting made things more open and clear." (KKba)
- o "The moment we started to enact the roles, all our fears vanished." (DGMba)
- o "This method is very different but I encourage this way of doing workshops in the future. It is far better than what we did before with only discussion." (DGMba).
- o "We have all been able to express ourselves so freely . . ." (KKba)
- o "We should have more of these workshops . . . closer to home." (DGMba)

It builds trust:

- o "I felt for the first time that the chiefly customs of the Dagombas are good [I have seen their usefulness]. I now see that they are not a block to our coming together . . ." (KKba)
- o "I was greatly relieved. This let me see that the Dagomba system can work for us. It is not against us." (KKba)
- o "I saw clearly that the Dagombas really do want us to live peacefully among them as we did before . . . they really did give us their full support." (KKba)
- o "At first I feared that it would only open up old wounds but when we got into it all the fear vanished." (DGMba)
- o "In the enactments we were all able to express ourselves without it being threatening like it is in other workshops that focus on negotiation." (KKba)

It offers hope for future:

The workshop gave participants the hope that peace is within their grasp and the enactments gave them a glimpse of a 'peace culture'. It showed them that peace was a *process of discovery*, that negotiation was not with the other but *with one's own culture*, and that *the other is not the 'enemy' but a guide and mentor* assisting the process.

Even though the war was 10 years ago there is still no integration in the two largest cities of the Region. Here is what the participants had to say about the 'integration' issue:

'We Konkomba were very worried about the outcome of the [integration] scene, but when the Ya Na [the Dagomba chief played by a Konkomba] said we could come back [to Yendi] we were very happy. We knew that this could really happen because all the 'real' Dagombas in the workshop scene also supported it and found it quite natural.' (KKba)

'The Konkomba [who acted the Ya Na] . . . was very good. It was actually what the real Ya Na would have done trying to find the best way out of the problem [of reinstating the Konkombas in Yendi and Tamale] . . . This is a real start. The house of Chiefs [a major block to integration] wouldn't go against the Ya Na . . . ' (DGMba)

It is about discovering ourselves:

'They [culture-drama enactments] really did help us to see our cultural differences.' (DGMba)

'Things came out that we would never have discussed . . . automatically and naturally, without fear.' (KKba)

'We could use our own language and express ourselves freely.' (KKba)

'In all the other workshops . . . we have never gotten very far with the problem of integration. But here we have actually worked it out. We have really accomplished something new . . . Now we see that it is really possible and how to do it . . . We already have a start with St. Charles in Tamale [where Konkombas attend secondary school]. . . We must continue with this.' (KKba)

It is about discovering the other:

'When the Konkombas were acting the role of the Dagomba chiefs, it was as if a plea for help. It urged the Dagombas to support them and teach them [how to be chiefly] . . . and the Dagombas responded by actually teaching them. In this way . . . the solutions are already there in the enactments.' (DGMba)

It is about building peace together:

'Culture-drama has helped us to share the process [of building peace] and take ownership of it together.' (DGMba)

'It is something that we never thought would happen. We actually acted out how we would bring about the re-integration of Konkombas into Yendi. The Dagombas showed us how it could be possible. Now I know that we can do it' and I have actually seen how it can be done. We only need to carry it forward.' (KKba)

'I have been in many kinds of workshops but I have never seen anything like this. We are really learning about each other and about ourselves in the

process. This method gives me real hope that through it we can rebuild our lives together.ö (DGMba)

These are a sampling of the sentiments that were voiced by the participants in a culture-drama workshop that took place in Ghana in March 2002 (Kirby 2002: 100-106). Their remarks are at the heart of community diagnosis and action planning.

Culture-drama

∓Culture-drama∓ is a new culturally therapeutic enactment genre where the primary focus is on resolving two or more conflictual cultural pathways. Within a drama format protagonists enact various cultural scenes in which each group follows out their own prescribed and encoded pathways, which very soon come into conflict. By assuming reverse roles, the actors become aware of certain anomalies, their own cultural blind spots and those of the opposing culture. It is in the clash itself that the differences in expectations become apparent and can be acknowledged and challenged in terms of more appropriate pathways. By further enactment they can be helped to work through these until they arrive at a cultural integration. As the cultures become less neurotic and more ∓integral∓ the potential for conflict lessens, binding relationships increase and they begin to interact more positively, thereby creating a synthesis or a ∓peace culture∓ right in the workshop.

How can it be applied to development?

The genre can be applied to any problematic issue involving cultural pathways. It can focus on conflicting ecological, healthcare, gender, racial and religious issues and expectations arising from different values, beliefs and practices in different cultures or sub-cultures. It has been used to help resolve conflicting cultural expectations in Catholic Religious communities made up of Ghanaians and expatriates³ and it has been demonstrated as an effective tool to help resolve such thorny African problems as bush-burning, women∓ emancipation⁴ and, most recently, ethnic conflict in Northern Ghana.

If it is applied to developmental issues like bush-burning and gender relations the conflicting cultural codes and pathways are usually Western vs. Traditional. The main traditional actors such as the ∓bush spirits∓, the ∓earth spirit∓, the ∓ancestors∓, the elders, the chief, the hunters, the farmers, the women are pitted against the non-traditional forces for change: the churches, schools, the development agencies, NGOs, the World Bank, the police and the government ministries⁵. Beneath these cultural roles, and linking them together, the two (or more) cultures themselves are the main *dramatis personae*.

Why Culture Drama?

The philosophical rationale for culture-drama lies in the fact that in group-centred (as opposed to individual-centred) societies people act as a group and hence any process for social change must deal primarily with social and cultural pathways (and not simply with individuals), and in the fact that our cultural pathways are implicit or hidden from us. Thus in culture-drama the primary focus is always on the conflicting cultural pathways themselves rather than on the actual scene of the conflict or on the individuals undergoing the traumatic experience.

A Vehicle for Peacebuilding

A vehicle is needed to carry peacebuilding through the structural level. John Paul Lederach (1996) divides peacebuilding efforts into four stages. Each stage is a prerequisite for the next. Yet each stage needs to anticipate the final objective, or have a unified vision of peace, in order to attain its own limited goals. The vision of peace is the fourth stage. The first is the crisis stage. It involves management of the immediate crisis, disarmament and political negotiation. It is where we see most of the attention, money and effort at present. The second is the "relationship" stage: getting the parties to live together, to rebuild their physical structures, their trusting relations and their lives. It aims at reconciling relationships. This takes longer to achieve and, if reached at all, usually spells the end of outside intervention and of all organized efforts to build peace. Due to some inherent biases⁶ it is considered an appropriate time to redirect the money and efforts to some new trouble spot. But there is still a long way to go if we are to avoid further outbreaks and regression. The third or "systemic" stage is the longest and most difficult. It addresses the history, the social structures and the institutions of injustice that sustain conflict and it aims at social and cultural transformation. For this it needs a set of holistic objectives, a goal, a vision of a "peace system". But most of all, a vehicle is needed to carry the process through to this vision. Part of the difficulty in moving forward is the need for such a vehicle.

How does it work?

At one level culture-drama brings together the dynamics of psychodrama and the cultural dimension. At another culture-drama is a vehicle for taking conflict-resolution to the structural level. The enactments raise our hidden pathways to the surface. They become apparent in the clash itself. Once in the open these can be discussed and changed. It assists the envisioning of a new way of living, a "peace culture". Then it helps rebuild the conflicting cultures from the inside. The techniques of culture drama make possible the mutual "cultural conversion" of the participating cultures. Each side guides the other as they learn the new paths toward peace. The dynamics borrowed from psychodrama make it possible to actually practice the appropriate changes. Of course, all of this already presumes a cessation of hostilities and some basic interaction and relations.

How is it related to psychodrama?

Culture-drama is a new discipline entirely. Although indebted to psychodrama, it is unlike it in that it focuses on transforming cultural pathways rather than integrating the individual human personality. It is unlike socio-drama because it is cross-cultural and comparative. It works with two or more cultural pathways within the conflicted social nexus. It is also indebted to cultural anthropology, especially for cultural analysis. Culture-drama is to cultural analysis as socio-drama is to social analysis.

What is its special contribution to the peacebuilding process?

Culture-drama is especially useful in dealing with what J.P. Lederach calls "the third and fourth stages of peacebuilding, the systemic and envisioning levels". These have been the most neglected in peacebuilding. Why? The short reason is that it takes a long-range commitment and it is the most difficult to direct and coordinate. There are many blocks but perhaps the biggest impediment of all is that, up until now, there has been no reliable method, no plan of action or serviceable vehicle to "envision" the pathway and to carry it along. Creating and sustaining a group vision for a "peace culture" is a creative act of inspiration, a prophetic leap into the beyond.

Culture-drama is a creative vehicle for envisioning the peace culture and for learning the transformations that are needed to achieve the vision. Our research and work in culture-drama as a vehicle for peacebuilding has demonstrated that we can both envision a "peace culture" and begin building it using this new method.

Culture-drama is most effective where there are conflictual relations between closely related ethnic groups, especially those bound by a socio-cultural symbiosis (such as chiefly and non-chiefly peoples), culture-drama can engage the actors in ways that in real life, or in workshops constrained by formal discussion, would be taboo because of their sensitivity. Furthermore, because one culture is often structurally opposed to the other, they are mutually interdependent and thus the two cultures tend to offer the antidote to each other's problems. In the enactment format they are literally able to "teach" each other the new structures and activities that are most needed for harmonious interaction.

Training Culture-Drama Facilitators

The importance of having a corps of skilled culture-drama facilitators to pilot this new vehicle is amply demonstrated in the workbook. The last chapter introduces a preliminary plan for training culture-drama facilitators for peacebuilding. The training of facilitators involves theory and practice, lectures and fieldwork, demonstrations and supervisions. It requires special training in cultural analysis, culture drama and in workshop facilitation, and is best divided into three distinct parts: basic training, follow-up training and the finishing or final touches. It could be done in 17 weeks which could be spread over a period of two years. Following each part of the training, the trainees would go back to their regular peacebuilding activities and try to put into practice what they have learned.

For More about Culture-Drama (or to order the Workbook)

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¹ The author is indebted to Catholic Relief Services Ghana for sponsoring the 12-month period of research on "Indigenous Peacebuilding in Africa" and for sponsoring the first Peacebuilding Workshop in which Culture-drama was used and finally for the Culture-drama and Peacebuilding Workbook entitled *A Cobra is in our Granary: a Culture-Drama Workbook*, which is a direct result of both the research and the Workshop. The book describes a way of transforming conflictive cultural pathways into a harmonious give and take for modern life. It does this not just theoretically but in terms of what happens in an actual workshop. I call this vehicle for transforming pathways "Culture-Drama".

² The workshop consisted of 20 "mid-level" participants: 10 Konkombas and 10 Dagombas. These were the two major groups that were engaged in the 1994 ethnic conflict that shook Northern Ghana to its foundations. Some estimate that as many as 20,000 lost their lives and more than 250,000 were made homeless. Now the tensions have eased and the relations are better but the deeper issues have not been touched. Konkombas (the main non-chiefly group) are afraid to return to the large towns of the Northern Region, including the northern capital, Tamale, which is controlled by the Dagombas (the

main chiefly group). The participants were all at the mid-range level socially (educated, influential, non-partisan, neither high profile politically nor the average villager, and strong proponents of peace).

³ In 1989 psychologist and psychodramatist, Dr. Gong Shu was invited by the Major Religious Superiors of Men in Ghana to hold therapeutic sessions with various communities experiencing conflict across Ghana. After experiencing a number of these she found that those involved were "healthy personalities" but living in multi-cultural contexts where cultural pathways and expectations were continually coming into conflict. At this point she discovered TICCS and the work of the author. Both got together and started to deal with the problems, each contributing from their own disciplines (cultural analysis and psychodrama), and "culture-drama" was born.

⁴ Bushburning and women's emancipation were themes presented by Drs. Gong Shu and Kirby at the annual meeting of the American Association of Group Psychologists and Psychotherapists in New York 1992.

⁵ It makes no difference whether these agents are Ghanaian or Expatriates. For example, all are referred to as "Nasalanie" (from *Nasara* meaning "Nazareth") among the Anufo of N. Ghana and among the Dagomba as "Siliminsi" (from *Salaminga*, the follower of the "Nazarene").

⁶ Reasons for this include the "General European" cultural systems bias underlying all modern "civilization" the institutional bias, or the fact that the present Western-dominated expectations about conflict-management, reconciliation and peacebuilding have been institutionalized to relate only to the first two stages, and as a result of this, the short-term and crisis management vision of granting bodies, the paucity of anthropological researchers in the peacebuilding arena, and the fact that the cultural dimension is "hidden" and the benefits of cultural analysis are not well understood. Because of these the necessary research into the historical and cultural background of conflicts tends to get left out of peacebuilding agendas. Because of these we can never envision a true "peace culture". We need to address these biases and unblock movement into the third stage.