

Culture-Drama and Peacebuilding

Jon P. Kirby

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Introduction

As the Dagomba militia boys, bandanas across their heads and bloodied machetes in hand, sauntered down the row of his bus turning here and there looking for the give-away signs—the tribal marks or those special vocalized expressions of surprise or shock that rise unbidden in cruel testimony to one's true identity—the Konkomba traveler slouched low in his seat in a vain attempt to wish his large frame into thin air. Ironically, this very act of denial betrayed him, for in the dreamlike sequence that followed, amid those awful cries, “Konkomba! Konkomba!” he was dragged through the bus, borne away by the mob, and in front of a pile of burning tires that blockaded the road, hacked to death in a melee of flailing cutlasses.

Hundreds of such scenes occurred across northern Ghana in the wake of the infamous “Northern Conflict” in February and March 1994—scenes that, due partly to the overshadowing Rwanda-Burundi affair and partly to a well-orchestrated governmental cover-up, hardly gathered the attention of southern Ghana, let alone the rest of the world. Nonetheless, up to 20,000 people lost their lives and more than 200,000 became refugees (see Katanga 1994a, 1994b; Van der Linde and Naylor 1999; Bogner 2000; Kirby 2003; Pul 2003). Many remain so to this day, and the cities where these dramatic events unfolded are even now more segregated tribally than Johannesburg was racially at the height of apartheid.

Culture-related Conflict in Africa

In recent years the numbers of violent conflicts have risen throughout Africa. Often under the guise of nationalism, ethnicity and religion, complex feuds rooted in long histories of tribal animosity and structural oppression have ferociously re-ignited. An inner life of their own drives them on and draws people in, often against their will and better judgment. Although they are often rooted in greed and vested interests, they gain a foothold through ignorance and suspicion, and are fueled by lies and gossip. They are occasioned by some outburst that is symptomatic of the underlying broken relations, and they are sustained by the sufferings and compounded injustices that are endured and perpetrated by each side. But culture, though not often recognized, is an invisible hand behind all of these factors.

Holistic Peace for Holistic Cultures

Such conflicts are not limited to Africa. With our shrunken globe's 7000-plus cultures now on each others' doorsteps—if not at each other's throats—the chances for conflicts originating in cultural miscommunication have increased dramatically. The role of culture in our understanding of both conflict and peace has largely been overlooked by the political economy-driven West. But in Africa, it is obvious. Culture and ethnicity are more identifiable and explicit. Here the cultural connections between conflict and peace are close at hand. Two understandings stand out in particular. The first is that African cultures are rooted in understandings of a world that is both seen and unseen. Relations in the visible world involve all life, including wildlife and domestic life, flora and fauna, the people and the “Earth,” a concept that involves much more than *terra firma*. It is both physical and spiritual—the ground of all being—involving fertility, abundance, and life itself. Relations with the unseen world connect people with the ancestors, the deities, spirits of the wild, and God; and what happens in one realm affects the others. War not only destroys relations between peoples, it also wreaks havoc in the spirit world. As the people say, “War kills the Earth.” When the Earth dies everything else dies with it. Peace, then, is a state involving the fullness of life extending across the boundaries of the seen/unseen divide. It requires the unity of all things and all relations. It is a total way of life in perfect harmony akin to the Biblical vision of the lion laying down with the lamb and children playing with adders.

The second understanding is that peace, like life itself, is dynamic; it involves a continuous exchange of life and a movement in growth toward greater, more abundant life and more harmonious relations. Thus peace is far more than the mere absence of war. Achieving such a dynamic, life-giving state is a never-ending process of growth toward ever-increasing life. Therefore, when the gun muzzles cool and violence subsides, when the war-mongering and profiteering are checked, when harmony has been restored and the demands for retribution have faded, and when justice once again covers the land, we may call it peace in the West, but in Africa it is not yet the living, growing harmonious state of a cooled Earth. An African peace is dynamic and transformative; a way of living in peace; in a peace culture that aims at ever greater and more abundant life.

Limits to the African Peace Culture

An African peace culture does indeed seek a new creation, a complete reordering of our world. And the communitarian nature of African family and village life are, in many ways, a genuine response to this. The interdependence and solidarity, the communal sharing of resources, of burdens and responsibilities are often held up by Christians as models similar to the early Christian communities. But idyllic as this communal emphasis is, it is not yet the “Kingdom of God” or even a true African peace culture. In Ghana and in other African worlds, the reality is more limited. Cultures of Peace do occur and do indeed restore harmonious relations, but only within the limits of tribal or ethnic boundaries. It does not extend to those beyond the boundaries—to one's enemies. Rather the opposite applies: loving one's own is usually demonstrated by hating one's enemies.

Africa's ethnic boundaries have for eons seemed fixed and immutable, determined by the very rules of nature. The Akan people of Ghana say, “A crab can never give birth to a bird.” We are what we are. Each belongs to his/her own culture group and cannot—must not—go beyond it. One frequently hears it said, “Friends of friends are friends.” But its corollary is also is also implied: “Friends of enemies are enemies.” Loving one's enemies amounts to a traitorous act,

and more. Conflating friend and foe seems to countermand nature itself. It says we belong to the enemy. Even today, regardless of scientific advancement, the evidence of the human genome, and the unifying rhetoric of nationalism, this bio-social determinism continues to grip African worlds. Attitudes toward different foods, ideas of beauty, and relations with the spirit world all reflect and confirm this exclusivity. The standard refrain of West Africans when asked to try foreign foods is: “I don’t know how to eat that; my mother didn’t teach me.” The ancestors themselves might intervene if we do not maintain these divisions.

Thus Jesus’ peace, which is based on loving one’s enemies, is one that the African world does not fully know. Although the directive to “love your enemies” (Mt 5: 43-44; Lk 6:26-28) may not be widely practiced in the secularized West, almost 2000 years of Christian culture has made the notion commonplace. It seems to have lost its strangeness and is taken for granted. It is no longer the astounding reversal of an accepted, not to say obvious, truth that still holds sway in Africa—namely, that difference is something fearful and other cultures are the enemy!

The Barrier of Ethnicity

The African peace vision is narrowed by the blinders of ethnicity. Due to ethnocentrism, Africa’s overarching inclusive and holistic vision of peace stops short of its goal. Western-inspired conflict analysis and management/resolution styles offer little assistance for they ignore Africa’s more holistic and spiritual needs which makes it even more vulnerable to ethnic conflict. How then, we might ask, can Africa move beyond this narrowed vision and begin to nurture an authentic culture of peace?

Although Africa is nearly 50% Christian, Christ’s intercultural vision of peace has had less than three generations to permeate the cultures. Cultures resist change. Old rules, supported by the weight of tradition, remain in force for generations. The cultural changes set in motion by 1st century Christian communities bridging slave and freeman, Jew and gentile have yet to fully permeate and restructure the Western world, let alone Africa. A key factor here is that tacit cultural pathways are silent, unseen directives, not easily accessed. We need something to bring them to the surface. A new kind of vehicle is needed to speed up the process of intercultural communication, one which can reach deep down to the core of cultural differences by exposing hidden expectations and by building the bridges needed for true intercultural dialogue.

The Aim of this Paper

This paper introduces such a vehicle, a new process of healing peoples and restoring justice through a socially therapeutic enactment genre called “culture-drama,” which, by fostering deep cross-cultural understanding through action, provides “a healing and transformative approach to repairing harms and addressing the underlying reasons for any offense” (Hollon 2007). It adapts to local cultural contexts; it empowers by deflating blame and showing how we are all both victims and victimizers, and it exposes hidden cultural pathways making them available and pliable to change. Through intercultural action it makes intercultural cross-boundary growth and understanding possible. Culture-drama enables workshop participants to go beyond their limited cultural horizons and move toward a Biblical peace culture through an intensified process of cultural transformation.

In other places I discuss various aspects of culture-drama, such as the way it is related to psychodrama and sociodrama (Kirby and Gong, 2010, 1993), and its use for community diagnosis and action planning (Kirby, 2004). Elsewhere I describe the ethno-history of Ghana's "Northern Conflict" (Katanga, 1994b, Kirby, 2003), which was the occasion for the "Nsawam workshop," the first major culture-drama workshop for peacebuilding. In the *Culture-Drama Workbook* (Kirby, 2002) I describe this workshop and its importance for peacebuilding. Here I will concentrate on the dynamics of culture-drama.

Structure

In the first part of this paper I wish to create a feeling for culture-drama by using scenes from a workshop involving members of religious communities. The cultural dynamics in these scenes will be more familiar to Western readers and will provide a useful entre into the major cultural differences in expectations that can hide behind the everyday actions, places and things that surround us, such as "greetings," "sitting rooms," and "fridges," and how different understandings of these can lead to serious conflict. We also start here because, as we shall see, these particular items are part of the African cultural complex of hospitality, which offers an important way to overcome ethnocentrism, the main block to trans-cultural peacebuilding.

In the second part of the paper I summarize the various stages, including warm-up, action, sharing and processing that occurred in a culture-drama workshop at Nsawam in Ghana. The warm-up is a "desert island" scene, which, besides preparing them for action, is meant to help participants to be spontaneous and to highlight some of the underlying divisions separating them. The action part of the workshop is comprised of a number of scenes or movements including the "bus" scene of the opening paragraph, which brings the participants face to face with the violence and terror that result when the divisions are ignored, the "chieftaincy" scene, which uncovers the cultural themes of hierarchy and authority, the "market" scene, which focuses on the cultural themes of freedom and autonomy, the "Earth shrine" scene, which exposes the way the divisions extend to the unseen world, and the "re-integration" scene, in which they cooperate in building a new relationship and life together. The sharing part of the workshop involves a re-enactment of the "desert island" scene, which shows how far the participants have progressed in reducing the divisions and building a peace culture together. Using the words of the participants, the paper concludes by emphasizing the effectiveness and usefulness of culture-drama as a bridge between cultures and as a vehicle for moving toward a genuine peace culture.

Culture-Drama with Religious Communities

In 1989 the annual meeting of the Major Religious Superiors of Men in Ghana was devoted to discussions about how to deal with the many conflicts that were cropping up in their religious communities. The indigenization of the Catholic Church had made great strides through the 1970s and '80s, and the numbers of Ghanaians in many religious communities had by this time risen to equal to the number of expatriates. The superiors invited two psychologists from the United States, who were well-known for their work with Catholic priests and religious.

One of them was Gong, Shu, a Chinese American psychodramatist, who in the course of several workshops with these troubled communities, became convinced that their problems were not psychological but cultural. Soon she became acquainted with the author in Tamale, N. Ghana¹, whose skills as an anthropologist helped her to interpret the African imagery and behavior that

she was not able to understand. We began working together and gradually our sessions with these communities developed into a therapeutic process that was quite unique. In order to distinguish it from sociodrama, we gave it the name “culture-drama.” In the ensuing years we performed a number of demonstration dramas and workshops including one at a faculty seminar at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, and another at the 1992 annual meeting of the American Society of Group Psychology and Psychodrama in New York (Gong and Kirby, 1992). But the opportunity to offer a major workshop in Ghana did not arise until we did the “Nsawam Workshop” in 2002.

The Cultural Meaning of “Fridges”

While working on ethnic conflicts in religious communities in Ghana, it was clear that, although individuals had their differences and problems, here it was the collectivities, the opposing cultural pathways, and not the individual personality differences, that brought them into conflict. We kept hearing the same complaints. The Europeans complained that the Ghanaians were not behaving like “good religious.” The Ghanaians were even more vocal, complaining that the Europeans “were not even good human beings!” But neither group was able to pinpoint what they meant by these accusations. It was at this point that we usually asked them to stop talking and begin acting. The scene described below is typical.

The Common Room Scene

The setting is the “common room” of a religious community composed of Ghanaians and Europeans. It is the very room where we are running the culture-drama session. The actors, two from each group, move some of the furniture around to set the scene. The first scene is an enactment of the arrival of a visitor who is the friend of one of the Ghanaians. Action begins with a knock at the door. The Ghanaian brother who is expecting the visitor gets up to answer. A long litany of greetings in the local language ensues with interspersed laughter. Before the greetings are over we ask them to reverse roles: the Ghanaians take the European parts and the Europeans the Ghanaian parts.

We explain the rules in more detail. “If you see or hear anything that doesn’t sound or look right, say so and we will have someone who knows the culture slip into that role to demonstrate what should be said or done.” This is a reverse back. Hesitantly they begin to reverse their roles. But they are hardly a few steps into the scene when someone intervenes.

“We don’t do it like that; it is not how we would do it,” says the Ghanaian to his European counterpart (who has been acting the part of the Ghanaian). “Look at your friend through the window. You should wave to him as you approach the door. Begin to welcome him and show him that you mean it.”

Next, one of the Europeans addresses the Ghanaian (who is playing the part of a European sitting down reading the newspaper with a scowl). “Why do you have such a grim look on your face?” he says. “Is that supposed to be me? I don’t behave like that do I?”

Here the Ghanaian is mirroring back to the European the way he comes across. “Yes, that is the way you act,” the Ghanaians respond in unison.

There is a pause. He thinks it over and responds, “Well if we do behave that way it must be for a good reason.”

“Show us, don’t talk about it,” we insist.

The scene continues and over the course of two more interruptions, concerning proper greeting etiquette, they gradually work their way across the threshold to the common room where they are now seated and a new scene begins.

Action begins with a round of introductions. “Welcome to our home,” says the Ghanaian (played by a European).

Immediately the Ghanaians interrupt. “You must offer water before any official welcome or introductions.” “Show us what this is like,” we direct. Then the Ghanaians reverse back into their real roles and show the Europeans how they welcome someone.”

They reverse again and action resumes with the European, acting in role as a Ghanaian, going to the fridge for water. He opens the fridge to find it full of food but no water.

Once again, the Ghanaians intervene. “Um-humm! You see, there is no water. You have been doing this always. Every time we put water in the fridge you remove it and replace it with your cheese. When you do that we can’t welcome our friends properly. That is why we remove the food and put the water back.” A light of understanding appears in the face of the European.

Cultural Analysis

Culture-drama enables the participants to concretize and bring to the surface their unarticulated, implicit pathways and, through the enactments, quickly get to the root of the problem. The meanings are conveyed by the use of space, objects, actions and timing better than can ever be done with words. This is the psycho-therapeutic principle of “action insight.” The “community room” space, the objects of fridge and cold water, the actions of greeting and welcoming, the structure and timing of the scenes—the meeting at the door, the offering of the drink and then the welcome, are all essential parts of an action chain of “welcoming.” These in turn are part of a broader central cultural theme of hospitality.

The objects, fridge and water, give us the clues we need. Here the fridge is in center focus. In Ghana, and in other parts of Africa it is quite normal to find fridges full of water, or other drinks like ‘minerals’ and beer. In Europe or North America they are used mostly for food—especially perishable foods and leftovers. The different cultural meanings rest partly on the different uses of food and drink in each place and partly on the symbolic meanings. In Africa, much more than in America and Europe, food and drink are symbols of hospitality and coolness is associated with peace. Here we are dealing with a central cultural theme which cannot easily be changed.

Social Contexts and Symbolic Contents of Hospitality

Throughout Ghana, and indeed all of Africa, water is the symbol of hospitality. Hospitality begins with water. It must be offered before any formal introductions or discussions. Food is the consummate mark of hospitality, but it can be offered only after the relations have been initiated

through drink. Rituals follow the same logic. Libations precede the sacrificial food, and one is always sent on one's final journey to the next life with a drink of water—the presentation of food comes later at the burial.

Cool water brings cool or peaceful relations. Long before the advent of fridges, “welcome water,” as it is sometimes called in Ghana, was kept cool in clay pots. Food, unlike drink, is never cold. It is always freshly prepared and hot. The sharing also requires a longer time, involving a “sit-down” meal with all the social trappings including an overnight stay. The word, “food,” refers to the starchy staple which spoils quickly, even if refrigerated, and therefore needs to be entirely eaten at a sitting. No leftovers! It is, therefore, not associated with fridges in the same way as drink.

Besides timing, space is also important. Fridges are located where people meet and hospitality is offered rather than in the cooking space. Usually this is in the dining-room or “sitting room,” not the kitchen. The connection becomes clearer when we consider the ubiquitous fridge in the African boss's office, located within easy reach of the desk in order to welcome the continuous flow of visitors, clients and associates, whom he is required to entertain. Thus, hospitality and the objects associated with it are built into the meaning of communal space where welcoming rituals are performed.

“Welcome water” can never be refused. It always demands a response. If this give and take is not exercised, the action chain is broken and the relationship cannot move forward. Peoples' unfulfilled expectations will lead to confusion, disorder, fear, as the anthropologist Edward Hall (1966) has shown, leading to flight or conflict. Water is needed in forming and sustaining relationships, and relationships are needed to sustain life.

Trans-cultural Importance of Hospitality

Westerners tend to conflate hospitality with charity. But hospitality is not a virtue; it is a moral necessity—the most basic recognition of the other as a fellow human being. The spiritual link is implicit for God is manifested in the other. As the Ghanaians say, “The stranger is God!” Westerners sometimes forget about this more basic universal response to our common identity. Jesus harkens back to these basics in such scriptural passages as, “If you offer a cup of cold water in my name . . .” (Mt 10:42), and in his encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (Jn 4:5-7). Hospitality is a natural law and needs to be offered regardless of our cultural differences or how we may feel toward the person. Rain falls on the good and bad alike! It is done whether the guest is an enemy or a friend, a Jew or Samaritan, whether the harbinger of good news or bad.

Spiritual power is unleashed by hospitality. If water and fridges are repositories and conduits of life; if they signify and confer spiritual energy, they are holy. Here the seen connects with the unseen; the material and spiritual worlds are one. The hospitality ritual extends to all relations including those with the unseen world of ancestors, divinities and God. Because hospitality binds all, even enemies, at the most basic level of our common identity, it bridges the cultural divide and over-rides ethnocentrism by tapping into “God's culture.” This trans-cultural base is of great importance for building and maintaining harmonious relations.

Cultural Expectations in Conflict

Most of the conflicts in Ghanaian religious communities were rooted in different cultural expectations which occurred in everyday places like the common room, everyday objects like water and fridges, and in everyday contexts like welcoming guests. From the more holistic, African cultural orientation, these everyday elements are sacred. It is, therefore, quite logical for the African members of the religious congregations to wonder how their European brothers and sisters, who are often called “holy religious,” can actually be “holy” if they behave in ways that seem to ignore or reject the naturally sacred.

The European cultural meanings are constructed around quite different codes. For example, the Europeans thought it was inappropriate to admit “outsiders” to their common room, especially the African friends of their African religious brothers. Their “common room” is a cloistered inner sanctum reserved for its members, not the open meeting room at the entrance of African compounds. Only members of the religious order or other clerics and intimate associates are allowed entry. Here too breaking the code signals the person is not a “holy religious.”

For the African religious this is extremely abhorrent. It runs contrary to God’s inclusivity and denies them the minimum recognition of their humanness. Thus, it led some to say: “They are not even human!” Others interpreted this as “selfishness,” which, in the African context, is the greatest offence—suggestive even of witchcraft—and still others interpreted it as “racist.”

Uncovering the Cultural Meanings

In the sections above I have tried to show how the silent presuppositions of the participating groups were uncovered in the culture-drama enactments. At first, the participants were unable to express themselves very clearly. They felt like the other group was not behaving well. When the Africans referred to the Europeans as “inhuman,” their meaning was buried deep inside their cultural pathways and linked to the meanings of water, fridge, and the use of communal space. Culture-drama exposed these connections and helped participants learn more about themselves and the other culture. But culture-drama goes much further. It also helps participants to begin to accept each others’ behavior and values, it sets the baseline for negotiating how much each is able to adjust or change these, and it provides a risk-free environment to try out new more harmonious pathways. To experience how it does this we will now turn to the Nsawam workshop.

The Northern Conflict

Now that we have a better understanding of the dynamics of culture-drama exemplified by the sessions in religious communities, we are ready to examine how culture-drama works to help resolve large scale ethnic conflict. We will begin with some background to Ghana’s “Northern Conflict.”

by serving as a vehicle that can help participants adjust their views, beliefs and behavior in a safe environment, leading to the evolution of a new peace culture.

Much has been written about the history of the “Northern Conflict” and its consequences (Kirby 2007, 2010), so I will limit myself to the basics. Many of the political analysts, including the most vociferous and influential in government circles, interpreted the conflict as one over scarce

resources between two groups—the Konkomba, who were pictured as violent and “wild invaders” from neighboring countries, and the better known Dagomba, who were generally regarded as the cultured leaders of the North (see Mahama 1989). The partisan press made light of the conflict, referring to it as the “guinea-fowl war” because the spark that ignited the blaze was a quarrel between a Konkomba and a Dagomba over the market price of this fowl. But there was nothing “light” about it. It covered most of the North and involved most of its peoples. By March 1994 it had reached the proportions of a full-scale civil war.

Its history was long and complex. The peoples of northern Ghana, like those of other countries stretching across the West African Savannah, are of two major political types. The first type is that of traditional state societies (Eyre-Smith 1933; Goody 1954, 1967, 1971; Wilks 1961, 1971; Staniland 1975). These are governed by a chief and comprise a bureaucracy that extends hierarchically over not only their own clans and lineages but also over subordinate peoples with different customs and languages. The second type are peoples without rulers, or any formal structures of governance outside the extended family system (see Tait 1958; Kirby 1986). Although these non-chiefly or “acephalous” groups are often called “the minorities,” in Ghana they outnumber the “state system” peoples three to one. They are of “minority” status, however, when it comes to political and economic control, which is the result of the systemic oppression they have endured for centuries.

Chiefly Versus Non-Chiefly Peoples

These two bodies of peoples—the highly structured and unstructured—have been at loggerheads from the time that peoples of the Western Sudan discovered the concept of state in ancient 5th century Gana. Such traditional states depended for their existence and livelihood on the usurped wealth, labor, production and reproduction of the smaller, unorganized and defenseless groups without chiefs (Middleton and Tait 1953). The Mole-Dagbon groups, of which the Dagomba are a subgroup, entered the area that is now northern Ghana in the 12th century as raiding break-away factions of other state groups further to the north (see Wilks 1971), and they conquered and assimilated the peoples they met along the way (Stevens 1955).

Increasingly, the state groups came to be associated with literate Muslim clerics, and gradually the Muslim calendar, clothing, art, customs and beliefs became a highly visible part of their culture (see Seidu 1989; Levtzion 1968). The concept of state spread south and from the 17th to the turn of the 20th century, the powerful Asante empire, which was centered in Kumasi, southern Ghana, arose and began to coerce the older northern state societies to capture and deliver foodstuffs, slaves and livestock, which they gathered from among their neighboring northern non-chiefly peoples. Soon their relationship toward their neighbors, the indigenous population, turned predatory—moving from assimilation, to separation, to annihilation.

In the early 20th century, the British conquered the Asante empire and, having little means to control its vast new holdings, put the three main northern chiefly groups in charge of the 40-50 non-chiefly groups, thus making official and normalizing this predatory relationship (see Tait 1963; Ferguson and Wilks 1970). After Ghana’s independence under Nkrumah this relationship continued, for Nkrumah wished to make good use of the one-sided political structures established by the British in order to maintain a strong grip on the North as a bulwark against his powerful Asante rivals in the South (see Staniland 1975; Ladouceur 1979).

The Religious Dimension

Under the British administration, the northern chiefs' sons were educated to provide the colonial system with clerks and administrators. But beginning in 1950, when the British opened the North to missionaries, this began to change. Soon mission schools, hospitals and other services were offered for the first time to the non-chiefly groups. These services continued and expanded after Independence throughout the '60s and '70s. Although the missionaries offered their services to all the peoples of the North, including the partially Islamized chiefly groups, the non-chiefly groups were more needy and more open to their services. By the mid-'70s these groups could boast a higher literacy rate than the chiefly groups, and by the end of the '70s awareness of their repressed political and economic rights had led to overt political opposition. This gave a religious hue to the conflicts. By the 1990s, under political and economic pressure, the chiefly groups had largely taken on a Muslim identity while the non-chiefly peoples had become associated with Christianity, especially Catholicism.

In 1979, the first of more than 20 ethnic conflicts, involving one or more of the chiefly groups against one or more of the non-chiefly groups, had erupted. These continued, almost on a yearly basis, until December, 1993, when all the non-chiefly groups combined to demand from the local and national government their full and equal rights, their own land (which their forefathers had always occupied) and their own chiefs. The demands were promptly rejected by the three northern chiefly groups, who were the voice for government policy in the north, and within weeks the entire North was engulfed in armed conflict (Katanga 1994b).

The "Northern Conflict" raged for more than a month without any recognition by the government or intervention by the police or military. It was speculated that the powerful Dagomba politicians, who had the commanding voice in the government, had deliberately kept the military out of the picture, giving them full rein to enforce "a final solution." This changed dramatically when, after a month of fighting, everyone realized that the combined chiefly groups had been roundly defeated by the non-chiefly peoples, and everyone feared an imminent attack on the urban centers of Tamale and Yendi. It was then that the army made its appearance, ruthlessly attacking the non-chiefly groups with overwhelming ferocity. Unwilling to fight the government, the non-chiefly forces disappeared into the bush leaving an occupied North under Marshall Law for more than a year.

In the aftermath a number of peacebuilding missions were launched by the government and NGOs (Assefa 2001), but none of them dared to address the core issues behind the conflict (Kirby 1997). Even now, in 2012, eighteen years after the war, the non-chiefly peoples, especially the Konkombas, are not permitted to live in or own property in Dagomba-controlled cities of Tamale or Yendi. This has been actively enforced by the "warlords," the militant youth and through the overwhelming political power that is still wielded by the chiefly peoples over the central government.

The Nsawam Workshop

The festering discontent, the divisions, and the deeper structural issues existing between the chiefly groups (especially the Dagomba) and non-chiefly groups (especially the Konkomba) were addressed in the 2002 culture-drama workshop that was sponsored by Catholic Relief

Services at the Catholic Conference Center in Nsawam. It brought together ten educated local leaders from each group who traveled down from their homelands some 500 miles to the north.

The violent bus scene, described in the opening paragraph, was one of many enactments covering major cultural themes such as hierarchy and authority, land tenure and ownership, freedom and constraint, interdependence and trust. Through their dramatic involvement in reversed roles, the participants aired their feelings, clarified cultural differences, discovered hidden pathways, and began to negotiate and act out new roles for real change. For one intensive week, in complete seclusion, they discussed, interacted, paced through their roles, and worked toward building a lasting peace for themselves and the whole of Northern Ghana (Kirby 2002).

Preparation was essential and I spent over a year choosing and preparing the participants. Although the war had taken place eight years before, their wounds still smarted. The conflict had burned itself into the consciousness and the subconscious of every Northerner, including myself², and it was not one that begged revisiting. This was also the first major workshop of its kind and the participants needed to know what was involved. Although my colleague, Dr. Shu Gong, and I were justifiably apprehensive, our spirits were braced by the knowledge that the logic of action is more powerful than that of the spoken word. In the give-and-take of dialogue the body accurately recounts what eyes and ears fail to recover. Words can easily deceive but actions always speak the truth with directness, vigor and purpose. Confident in the method, we pressed them to engage in the process of full recall and re-enactment—the first steps along the road to a genuine peace.

The Desert Island Warm-up

As in all enactment workshops we started with a warm-up exercise. Ours featured an imaginary shipwreck that left the twenty participants cast up on a desert island where they must learn to live together or perish. A large sheet serves as their island. Their fears and reflections about how to survive are not discussed but painted on the sheet. Even their jostling for space conveys the need to live together in harmony or not at all. Later, everyone stands back to admire our joint artistic effort. The divisions are clear. Creative attempts by some to offer communal services like farming, raising poultry, building schools and training centers are frustrated by segregation. The Konkomba are encamped on one side of the island and the Dagomba on the other. Lack of unity prevents their communal efforts from unfolding. Participants voice their will to unite but the drawings reveal deep structural and emotional barriers—chaotic social and cultural pathways, a dilapidated infrastructure, and stark fear prevents the sharing of ideas and stifles the trust needed for real unity. Their divisions have followed them to this island.

After the island scene we are ready to engage. But there is no script. How do we start? With life itself, with death, with the war. They hesitate. Their confusion is voiced by one of the group: “I don’t know why I agreed to this workshop. It doesn’t do any good to keep going over and over the same thing, bringing up those terrible experiences.” His voice fills the room and the nods of the other participants echo back their agreement. But picking up on their fears, my colleague, Shu, jumps in, cajoling them to name the scene they fear most. “It is the bus scene.” Here is where we begin.

The Bus Scene

Still unconvinced that anything good can come of our encounter, but genuinely committed to building peace, the group begins to construct the scene from their communal memory of this and other atrocities. Eight folding chairs arranged two by two with an aisle between become our bus. The mob brandishes rolled up magazines as their weapons. One adds a touch of realism by reminding the mob to wear the magical amulets used for protection in wartime, while others stoke an imaginary bonfire of discarded tires which are used to block the roadway. They take their places as victims and victimizers and, as they begin to focus on their lines and get into the scene, the mood subtly changes.

The Action

The action begins, but hardly do they launch into their roles than we ask them to reverse roles—the Konkombas are to play the Dagomba mob, and the Dabombas are to play the Konkomba victims. They are to stop the action and reverse back into their own roles to show how it should really be done if they see that anything seems “wrong,” or “out of place.” Some are rebellious. Still murmuring their dissent, they regroup and take up their new roles. But they are only a few minutes into the new scene when a Dagomba interrupts.

“It didn’t happen like that,” he insists, directing his advice to a Konkomba trying to play the role of a Dagomba. “You have to really shout, ‘Konkomba, Konkomba!’ It’s not loud enough, not forceful enough!”

Then another Dagomba intervenes, “No, not that way! Grab him like this! Use all your strength.” An unfulfilled expectation arises: why are these reputedly ferocious Konkombas behaving so meekly?

Next a Konkomba gives his advice to a Dagomba who is playing the role of a victimized Konkomba: “You there, look, this is no joke. They are going to kill you. You are behaving too proudly. You must be helpless and weak, like this.” He shows the Dagomba how to look like a weak and helpless Konkomba. I instruct them to reverse roles and the Dagomba attempts to follow his advice but fails. Then he is encouraged by the other Konkombas.

At this point Shu intervenes explaining the technique of “doubling.” Other doubling techniques are only verbal but hers is also physical: “Don’t just tell him what to do, stand behind him and hold him. Move him along, make his arms your arms, his legs your legs. Move him around as a Konkomba would actually move. Let him feel it. And you, the Dagomba, let yourself be moved by him. After all, he is the real Konkomba. He knows how Konkombas act doesn’t he?”

Incredulous, the Dagomba actor looks around the room scanning the faces of the Konkombas for the slightest indication that this is a farce to make him look silly, or worse, to make all Dagombas look foolish. But their faces show solid agreement. His resistance fades as he begins to trust his Konkomba director to lead him through the role and he takes stock of his feelings which he later shares with the group. They are summarized as follows:

This way of acting is much different than I thought Konkombas would behave. It is not the way I would behave. But is it really the way you Konkombas are? This is something new to me. I feel strangely dependent on you leading me around like this. Yet I trust you.

As I look around I can see that all of you are in agreement. This is not something you could have pre-arranged. It is spontaneous. You are not doing this to make fun of me; you really want me to know the way you feel, the way you act, and see things. You are not against me. You really want to help me understand. For the first time in my life I trust Konkombas.

The Dynamics at Work

They go back again to acting their scenes, but now more tentatively, less confidently, almost expecting to be wrong. They are learning as they go along. Each step becomes a test waiting to be rejected or confirmed by the opposing group—the group whose life experience they are trying to act out, misstep by misstep. Gradually it dawns on the participants that they really do not know each other. They also discover more about themselves as they take time to show the other group the ways they think and act. As they learn more about the other, they also learn about themselves. In the course of the role reversals and explanations in scene after scene it gradually becomes clearer how isolated we really are, how each group is following its separate cultural pathways without ever meeting. How we blithely we move through life, with our biased understanding of the other, of their choices and actions, their values and motivation, their beliefs and worldview, all based on the unchallenged assumptions that relegate these others to lesser or imperfect versions of ourselves. Then, when confronted in reversed roles, the hidden ethnocentric self suddenly leaps out in the open where it can be recognized, named, owned, challenged, and perhaps changed.

As the enactments continue we gradually realize that it is no longer the other that is most to be feared, but rather it is our own blind pathways. Our own hidden expectations lie at the heart of conflict, and it is these silent prejudgments that need to be recognized and compared, addressed and adjusted. In facing this, comes the sudden realization that it is not the tragically limited, but hard-won, compromises over the negotiating table that will finally bring about a livable “peace culture.” It is rather the negotiations that occur at the very heart of our conflicting cultures that matter. After being helped to understand the great divide between ‘my ways’ and the ways of the other, we need to focus on how much we are willing and able to change *our own* cultural pathways so as to accommodate other ways of thinking and believing, valuing and behaving. Each side needs to negotiate with their own cultural expectations before they can begin to accommodate those of the other. And this is the magic of culture-drama: it digs deeply into those darkened areas of our powerful social unconscious, the areas that move us along without a question or thought, and it cracks open the presuppositions about ourselves and the other.

The Chief Scene

It is hard to imagine an institution that is the source of greater opposition for these two groups of peoples than that of chieftaincy. Far more is implied by the terms, “chiefly” versus “non-chiefly,” than first meets the eye. Besides the obvious fact that chiefly groups have chiefs and the others do not, there is a wide range of derivative meanings and implications. For hundreds of years the chiefly peoples have been associated, in the minds of the non-chiefly peoples, with oppression, slavery and different forms of coercion and extortion ranging from discrimination to forcefully taking whatever they want, whether it be women and livestock, foodstuffs or land (Tait 1963). In the minds of the chiefly peoples the non-chiefly groups are there to serve them.

Through a gradual process of assimilation they regard them no longer as a separate people with their own customs and cultural ways, but as merely the lowest rank of their own society.

In the chief scene, the Ya Na (king of Dagbon) was played in reversed role by a Konkomba. His eyes widened in a look of pleased disbelief as the Dagombas placed the chief's hat, the final touch of the Dagomba regal attire, on his head. No Konkomba could possibly know the many taboos, the refined postures and forms of etiquette that go with being king of Dagbon. Therefore, a long and descriptive preparation was needed. Through my contacts, I was able to procure the actual chiefly regalia for the scene. This was a very delicate business. The regalia of the chief is so important, and hemmed about by so many restrictions and taboos, that its presence had a tremendous effect on both parties. There was something more than playacting here.

The Konkombas acting in reversed roles as Dagombas intently watched the faces of the real Dagombas for their reactions. They thought the Dagombas would look down on them and consider them beneath their dignity, unfit to rule, unable to be chiefly. But what they saw and experienced made their fears of rejection vanish. The way the Dagombas readily assisted the Konkomba, who played the role of the Dagomba king, the Ya Na, to wear the regal attire, and the way they tutored them on how to look regal and act kingly, when to sit or stand, how to direct the courtiers and move about, immediately dispelled their greatest fears. Their fears dissipated even further as the Dagombas vied with each other to help the Konkomba actor to be a "proper" Ya Na. This was powerfully reinforced by the fact that one of the Dagomba participants was a very important chief, next in the line to the Ya Na. At the same time it also became clear to the Dagombas that the Konkombas did not hate the Dagombas, or even the idea of chieftaincy, as they had thought. They too could be moved by its power and dignity. If they looked upon the most sacred institution of the Dagombas with awe and respect, then they too were worthy of respect.

These powerful currents of trust-building continue as the 'chief scene' changes. A marriage case is brought before the chief. Konkombas, like other non-chiefly peoples, have long been forced to submit to the judgments of Dagomba chiefs in cases of dispute-settlement. Most of these involve quarrels between Konkomba families over their claims to women, livestock or land. It is not unusual for the chief to settle such disputes by punishing both families with a fine and taking the woman for himself.

The Action

The scene is set and action begins. A sturdy table serves as the king's dais. He sits above a throng of buzzing advisors as the disputing party is led into the makeshift court room.

"This man stole my wife and hasn't given me any compensation," says a Dagomba in the reversed role of the Konkomba plaintiff.

Then some Konkombas intervene and action stops. "It is not simply a question of compensation. You Dagombas don't have the bridewealth system but we Konkombas do."

"We Dagombas don't 'sell' our women," interjects a Dagomba.

“Neither do we,” say the Konkombas in quick response. “In order to acquire a wife a man must work on his in-law’s farm for a good seven years. This strengthens relations between the two families. If she is stolen by another man everyone gets upset. A simple compensation does not cover the husband’s time and trouble. Nor will it win him a new wife. But the main problem is the bad relations it creates among the three families. The ancestors themselves will demand vengeance for this and, in the vendetta that ensues, many lives will be lost.”

Better informed about the heavy weight of his loss, the Dagomba acting the part of the jilted Konkomba says, “Please chief, my wife has been stolen and our families have suffered a great loss.” This is translated to the chief by the Dagomba “linguist” or spokesman of the court, who is played by a Konkomba. The chief calls in the defendant. “Let the other Konkomba man come in to speak.” They bring in the other Konkomba (played by a Dagomba). But before he can utter a word some Konkombas intervene. “No, he wouldn’t act like that. We Konkombas do not know all the proper etiquette used in the presence of a chief and we would be embarrassed.” We have him assume the role to show us how a real Konkomba would behave. Everyone laughs at the spectacle. “Now you see,” says another Konkomba, “we are at a disadvantage in your courts; we are out of place. You Dagombas don’t know our customs and your laws don’t help us.”

The action continues. The Ya Na (played by a Konkomba) is urged to pass judgment but finds it difficult. The real Dagombas advise him on what to say and do: “After consulting with my elders this is what I am going to do: I am giving you both a fine of one sheep to pay. As for the woman, take her away to my house where she will not cause any further trouble.”

All laugh at the cleverness of this Ya Na. But some Dagombas express a different viewpoint:

It would not be as simple as that. The Ya Na would first discuss the matter with his elders who are sitting there in front. He would then call the woman and ask for her view.

Finally, he could fine them for causing trouble and for ignoring the woman’s view. And he could take the woman as his wife. But this is not out of selfishness or lechery. It is important for each village that is under a chief’s power to send him a wife. By taking her as his wife he establishes special links with her family and village. She becomes an unofficial advocate for her family and village. Eventually her village will have a stake in chieftaincy and her sons may even rise to the level of chieftaincy held by their father.

The Konkomba playing the role of the Ya Na then explains his hesitancy,

We Konkombas do not tell others what to do. Every man is to be free as God created him. I cannot presume to tell another what to do. And if I do he will certainly resist and take it as a wicked attempt to take away his freedom. If he doesn’t resist, the ancestors themselves will rise up to assert the principle of independence and punish him.

With the differences in perspectives clarified the facilitators call for action: “But now you are in the role of a Dagomba chief. You are not a Konkomba. Do what you must do.”

The Konkomba in role as the Ya Na pronounces judgment and all agree to it, even the Konkombas. Great relief, and a hint of pride shows in his face. It is a wonderful thing to have power! The real Dagombas in the group give him a round of applause and the Konkombas are thinking: “We too could do that; we too could be chiefs. It would be a good thing.”

A Learning Process

Culture-drama offers a door to discovery. Both sides learn more about themselves and one another. In the ‘chief scene’ both parties learn an important lesson about their understandings of freedom, authority and “respect.” Konkombas learn that chiefs are not as bad as they thought. By taking on the role of a chief, their confidence is strengthened. They learn that they *could* actually do it. The ‘chief scene’ makes it clear that the Konkombas are not equipped to make use of the benefits of appeal and support that the institution of chieftaincy provides, and they discover that many of their grievances are not so much against the system itself as against its abuses. The Dagombas, in turn, learn the consequences of the unfair judgments made by some of their chiefs. These realizations press hard on them, but they learn to trust each other more.

They also learn about the importance of difference. Both groups value “respect” (*jirima*), but it is understood differently by each. The chief gains honor, prestige and power by honoring and supporting his people. A Dagomba proverb articulates this: “The chief’s guinea fowl is the one in the bush.” By the end of the day, it is expected that a good chief would have given out so many guinea fowls to guests that he would have none left for his own supper. Clients gain honor and respect by honoring their chief and adhering to the customs. Much of the anger and animosity that Dagombas have toward Konkombas is based on the perception that Konkombas do not honor or respect the chiefs. The chief scene taught both sides that their presuppositions were off target. Each is “respectful” but in different ways.

The Market Scene

There were two women on the workshop, one from each group. They chose the rural market place as the locus of their conflict, for markets are controlled by women. The Konkombas are mostly subsistence farmers living in rural areas. Men produce the starchy staples like yams, sorghum and rice, while the women produce the vegetables used in making the “soup” that is a condiment for their starchy meal. Konkomba women bring in their fresh produce from the surrounding villages on market day. Some of it is traded to other Konkombas but the bulk is bought by Dagomba women for resale in the cities.

The women quickly set up the market scene. Market items such as tomatoes, okra, dried fish, rice, sorghum and beans are situated around the room. A few of the men are recruited as market women to sell various commodities. The action begins.

The Action

A Dagomba woman trader (played by a Konkomba) starts off: “Greetings to you and the market! I hope you are fine. I like your tomatoes. How much?” The Konkomba seller (played by a Dagomba) responds, “They are five for five hundred Cedis.” “Here, take your money,” responds the buyer (played by a Konkomba).

The Konkombas intervene saying: “It wouldn’t be like that in real life. Rather the Konkomba seller would be more generous saying: “They are five for three hundred cedis, and if you buy some I’ll reduce the price and give you some extra.”

The Dagombas also criticize the enactment saying: “Real Dagomba traders would immediately press for a better bargain. They would say, ‘How can you do this to me your regular customer! Don’t disgrace yourself. There are plenty of tomato sellers; I can go to another. Give me a good price and I will buy from you next time. Here take two hundred cedis. Give me ten tomatoes.’ Then she would snatch up the tomatoes along with some extras adding them to her basin. Finally she would say, ‘Take these to the truck for me. I’m going to see the rice sellers.’”

The Dagomba buyer (acted by a Konkomba) tries to follow the instructions but she can’t bring herself to speak or act in this way. She finds it impossible to snatch up the extra tomatoes. The Dagombas urge her on saying, “go ahead and do it.” She says, “I can’t! I just can’t.” The Dagombas are amazed. “Why can’t you do this? It is not difficult.” No response.

Then the Konkomba seller (acted by a Dagomba) puts her hands on her hips and says, “Carry the tomatoes back to the truck yourself and give me back those extras or you’ll be sorry you ever came here.” At this all the Konkombas immediately intervene to correct her: “No, we would never say that! Do as she says. Give all of them to her and take them to the truck.”

The Konkomba seller (played by a Dagomba) is dumbfounded. “What do you mean? I won’t do that,” she objects. Then a Konkomba woman demonstrates the seller’s role for her, showing the Dagombas how a Konkomba woman seller actually behaves. Then the Konkomba seller (played by a Dagomba) responds, “How can you do that? Don’t you respect yourself?” The real Konkombas says in reply, “This is the way we respect ourselves. If the buyer wants it so much give it to her. You shouldn’t try to stop her. If she behaves like that, it is on her own head. You must allow her to be free.”

The Need for Role-Training

This remark is challenged by one of the Dagombas who points out that sometimes the Konkombas suddenly “lash out” at them when they, the Dagombas, “are only doing what they always have done.” He insists that the real reason is because Konkombas are weak and unable to resist. Shu confronts the person by pushing him back, again and again, until his back is against the wall. “How does this make you feel?” she asks. Finally, overcoming his shock, he pushes back. “Ahaa!” says Shu. “Now you know how it feels to be pushed against a wall like the Konkombas have felt for centuries.”

At certain points in these scenes both groups found it extremely difficult to act out the role of the other, not because they didn’t see or understand what was being asked of them, but because the particular actions or behavior was unthinkable or dishonorable in their own culture. Their accustomed cultural pathways literally prevented them from doing those things. These require extensive role training.

Ritual versus Political Authority

The continent of Africa today is divided into 54 independent countries. Following more natural boundaries, it is even more finely divided. There are approximately 1700 ethnic or linguistic groups. At a more basic level it can be further divided into thousands of territorial parcels, demarcated by rivers, mountains and forests which are each presided over by a particular earth spirit (Earth) that is responsible for the fertility and well-being of all life under its jurisdiction.

Both the Dagombas and Konkombas share a proverb describing the relationship between the Earth spirit and the people within its domain: “The people know the Earth and the Earth knows its master.”

Although non-chiefly peoples, like the Konkombas, do not have chiefs, they do have spiritual leaders who are the link between the Earth and the people (see Froelich 1954). They intervene on behalf of the people to secure plentiful rains, good harvests, the fertility of humans and beasts, and everything that sustains and promotes life. The office of Earth priest can be traced back to the original family of settlers who “made peace with the Earth” before establishing a settlement. The Earth, therefore, is an essential part of their identity (Tengan 1991). People feel safe and at home in their own place because it is the land of their ancestors. It is where they belong.

When, in the 12th century, the forerunners of the Dagombas entered what is now the Dagomba Kingdom (Dagbon) as raiding parties from territories further north, they recognized the importance of such earth shrine custodians, and quickly usurped their office and subordinated ritual authority to the political authority of the chiefs (Cardinall 1920). This occurred in Western Dagbon, where, even to this day, the chief is both a political and ritual leader. But later, during the slavery era, the 17th-20th century, in Eastern Dagbon, where the Northern Conflict ignited and the divisions are still the deepest, the Dagomba raiders drove the Konkomba peoples off their hereditary lands, thus alienating them not only from their land and livelihood but also from the Earth and their ancestors, their spiritual source of life and identity.

Therefore, at the very heart of this conflict, running in opposition to the African ideal of a holistic life, is the fact that for centuries Konkombas have been separated from their lands by Dagombas who have no legitimate claim to the source of life, the Earth. They dare not claim ritual authority for, “the Earth knows its master.” The “master” is the office of Konkomba Earth priests. As the Earth shrine scene begins, both groups are very much aware that their mutual ongoing life and fertility is endangered by this separation.

The Earth Shrine Scene

Both groups work together to set up an authentic scene. One locates a stone that serves as the shrine’s altar, where sacrifices are made and various objects associated with the Earth shrine, such as a clay pot and iron bells to call the spirits, are brought forward. The roles of the Konkomba Earth shrine custodian and his elders are played in reversed roles by Dagombas, while Dagombas, who are forced by drought to go to the Earth priest to have him appeal to the shrine for rain are played by Konkombas. The action begins with the Dagombas going before the Konkomba elders asking for help—something that reverses the power relations that they are used to.

The Action

The Dagomba chief and his elders (played by Konkombas) approach the house of the Earth shrine custodian. “Ko, ko, ko! Knocking, knocking!” “Who is it?” asks the Konkomba custodian (played by a Dagomba). “It is Suleman, the chief of Damon” (played by a Konkomba). “Oh, come in chief.” The chief is offered water and asked his mission. “I am here to ask for rain for our lands. All our crops are failing. We don’t know what to do. Can’t you intercede for us with the Earth shrine?” The Earth priest (acted by a Dagomba) responds to the request, “Ok, I will

help you. Bring me a black goat and a white fowl.” He is obviously ill at ease, sitting on a smooth flat stone with his back against the wall of his imaginary crumbling mud hut and wearing the tattered old smock of an Earth shrine custodian. It is laughable in comparison to the beautiful Dagomba smock he would normally wear. But he slowly realizes that, in spite of these pitiable exteriors, he holds power over life and death because of his relationship to the Earth.

The Konkombas are first to react to the scene: “As the Earth shrine custodian you must first assess the extent of the problem. You must send three men to visit the diviners to find out exactly what is blocking the rain. It could be something simple requiring only a small sacrifice. But it could also be something very serious like “spoiled Earth.” Both sides understand its meaning: a condition of intense disjuncture that shatters the harmony and fruitfulness of the land leading to the death of the Earth, and eventually of all things. In its wake nothing will grow and only misfortune will follow. It is caused by a number of perversions, but especially the spilling of human blood on the earth through war or extreme violence (see Kirby 1999).

All realize that no authentic ritual healing has occurred in Eastern Dagbon since the war but no Dagomba dares talk about it because to do so would admit that the non-chiefly peoples have power—ritual power. All is not well in Eastern Dagbon. At the beginning of every rainy season since the war, worried eyes turn to the east looking for rain. Many suspect that the Earth remains “spoiled” and hope that something can be done to renew it.

Diviners reveal that the Earth is spoiled, and the next scene is set. The Earth priest (played by a Dagomba) calls the Dagomba chief (played by a Konkomba) to hear the results. “As you know, we sent to hear from the diviners. They tell us that the problem is spoiled Earth. This is very serious. It will require a special sacrifice.” “What should we do? We are willing to do anything,” say the Dagomba chief and his elders. The Earth priest (played by a Dagomba) is silent. He doesn’t know what to do next.

The Burying of the Blood

Then the Konkombas intervene telling the Earth priest what he should say. “We all must gather at the shrine and perform the ‘burying of the blood’ ceremony.” They show the Dagombas how to take on the role of Earth priest and elders. They must offer some chickens and a black goat as a sacrifice, and each party in the conflict must bring some of the weapons, like the bows and arrows, that were used in the war. A hole is dug and the blood of the sacrifices goes into the hole along with the broken weapons. Finally the sacrificed animals will be buried in the hole and it will be covered up. One of the Konkombas explains:

This will renew the Earth and put an end to the barren state that has caused so much suffering in the land. Then the people will be able to come together as one, and no one will be permitted ever to mention the war again. It will be as if it never happened. Life can begin anew. The earth will be fertile and rains abundant, and there will be no more sorrow in our land.

Step by step the Earth priest and his elders (played by Dagombas) enact the ritual as it has been described and demonstrated to them. As these Dagombas are led through the process they gain a deeper insight into the Konkomba world and into the ways they are connected to each other by

the Earth. The Konkombas take an active part in directing the scene, for example making a representative of each side hold the goat while it is being slaughtered. The Dagombas are full of questions which the Konkombas eagerly answer. By the end of the ceremony all are relieved. They feel that they actually worked together to solve their common problem. It was not the result of carefully chosen words and calculated diplomacy but of honest, inter-dependent action. The body doesn't lie. It opens up the true feelings, attitudes, biases and expectations within the scene which then become available for honest questioning and answering.

The Re-integration of Yendi

This essay, like the workshop that it describes, would not be complete without the rebuilding scene. The night before the last day of the workshop a great euphoria filled the air. Quite spontaneously the participants expressed the need to "do something." One of them spoke for all when he said, "We have been suffering too long. Let us break down the walls that separate us. Let us re-integrate Yendi." Yendi is an important market center and the capital of the Dagomba kingdom. Since the war no Konkomba has been allowed to live there. This has caused great hardship for each group. Fear has kept them apart. Now that fear has been dispersed, they eagerly seek to remove this block together. Up until this point culture-drama has been helping them to get to the roots of their conflict; now it becomes a vehicle for building a peace culture.

The Action

The scene is set and the two groups switch sides. The part of the Konkomba leaders is played by the more vocal Dagombas. They start the scene by gathering all the clan heads and major household heads for a meeting in the main Konkomba town of Saboba. One of them stands up to speak: "We have all been suffering because we cannot go to Yendi to sell our goods or to come and go as we please like we used to do before the war. Let us go to the Ya Na and speak with him."

There is an immediate response from the Konkombas. "No you can't just call a meeting like that. Nobody would come. All the elders are independent of one another. For someone to call such a meeting would be an unacceptable presumption of power."

The Dagombas, who are playing the parts of the Konkomba elders, are shocked into realizing that a simple meeting, something they find extremely easy to arrange and had always presumed the Konkombas could easily do, is almost impossible for the Konkombas. All suddenly realize that the first initiative must come from the Dagombas. "Why didn't we see this before?" they ask.

The next scene is at the "palace" of the Ya Na, the Dagomba king. The king (played by a Konkomba) speaks to his elders. "You are wondering why I have called you today. It is because I want to have your advice about the Konkombas. It has been twelve years since the war. Don't you think it is time to bring the Konkombas back to Yendi?"

The Dagombas interrupt. They explain to the Konkombas the intricacies of Dagomba diplomacy. "No, the Ya Na wouldn't do this. It must come from his elders and they must put pressure on him. He must feel that there is no opposition from them before he will come out with his view."

And so on it goes. Each group enacts its roles while the other group interjects, comments, corrects and directs. Gradually a way through the maze of unknowns comes clear. It is a way that navigates the intricacies of the Dagomba chief's court, a way that organizes the Konkomba elders, that holds at bay those destructive political agendas from Accra, that prevents the youth of both sides from causing trouble, and that builds up a healthy anticipation among all the people. In the final scene they enact the reintegration of Yendi. Everyone plays a part. It is no longer "acting" but "real life." In the world they have created together over the course of the week they have indeed integrated Yendi. All the workshop participants are happy. They have worked their way through the maze and have succeeded where diplomats, politicians and NGOs have failed. One of them verifies this:

If we participants had the authority to do so we could integrate Yendi right now. We know exactly what we need to do. We have looked at every angle, every potential and real danger. There were many problems we could not have anticipated but, by working together, we have gotten to know about them and have overcome them right here in this room. The government is powerless. They really do not know what to do. But we know.

The Return to the Desert Island

The workshop is almost over but, before departure, a final scene is required. It is time to go back to the desert island to see how far we have come. Once again, they are asked to paint their desert island and what it needs. They go to work with their brushes and after an hour we stand back to observe the results. Their new masterpiece is a collage of unity. They are no longer separate—Konkombas on one side of the island and Dagombas on the other. Not only are they mixed geographically but there is also a harmony of colors, of brush-strokes, and there is a flowing movement between the various activities and services that was not there before. Even as they found the way to unify Yendi, they have given symbolic expression to the new unified peace culture that exists among them. In this room, on this tableau, the Northern Conflict has been resolved and the two peoples reconciled.

Culture-Drama and Change

Culture is knowledge. It is the meanings people give to their world of persons, places and things. It is organized, learned and passed on to the next generation. Different culture groups assign different meanings to their worlds. When peoples of different cultures live in close proximity to each other and interact with one another on a constant basis, as is happening with astonishing rapidity in our global age, peoples' expectations come into conflict. If we do not make some provision for this, our inaccurate readings of each others' actions and intentions will ultimately lead to chaos. Our so-called "culture wars" are an example of this, as are the increased ethnic and religious tensions around the world. Culture-drama offers a way to deal with this.

Culture-drama uses many of the techniques of psychodrama and follows the same process toward integration (see Vargiu 1977) but it is not concerned with individuals or even societies of themselves. It is rather concerned with interacting culture groups, with interpreting a cultural group to itself and to the other, and, in the process, discovering points of conflicting expectation. It is precisely this discovery of conflicting expectations (e.g., expecting that fridges are used for water as opposed to food) that can open a culture group to the possibility of discovery that different groups have different, but equally valid, meanings. This can lead to further discoveries

(e.g., expecting that water must be given to guests) until a whole range of cultural understandings or a “cultural theme” becomes clear, and can be summed up in a proverb or pithy phrase like, “The stranger is God.” When these clusters of meanings become accessible, cultural change becomes possible and conflicts can be transformed.

Culture-drama offers therapy, not for the individuals in a society but for collectivities and for different cultures in relation to one another. It offers peoples of different culture groups a vehicle for transforming cultural patterns in response to the changing times and circumstances of our global age.

Culture-Drama’s Effectiveness

In their evaluation, the participants showed their appreciation for this new approach to resolving conflicts, and they went back to their homes with new insights into their own culture and that of the other, with great enthusiasm for the method, with renewed hope for a “peace culture,” and with a keen understanding of how we need each other to get there. They also came to appreciate the important role culture plays in their lives. The enactments pushed them to address the core issues beneath their feelings of enmity, helped them to resolve these issues and begin a new way of living together. Success was insured by the fact that enactments are concrete and accessible. 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.” The enactments helped the participants learn that working toward a peace culture is not merely a matter of discussion and negotiation. It is necessary for each side to have a first-hand experience of their cultural pathways in real contexts.

Culture-drama also helped participants to move past the superficial to deep understanding and compassion. When they reversed roles they experienced what it was like to “walk in the shoes” of the other³. They were able to feel the sentiments of their brothers and sisters from inside their culture; they were enabled to make sense of the world through the cultural lenses of the other, and the discussions that followed each scene helped them to deepen this understanding. The dialogue of action, like the dynamics of culture, brings about a kind of “conversion” to the perspective and world of the other. One becomes a guest in that world and is led around to view its beauty and grandeur, its meaning and its good sense. This works to transform the systemic historical, social and cultural structures at the heart of conflicts (see Lederach 1997). Instead of each side struggling with the other to score points, participants end up acting and speaking for each other. This leads to compassion and commiseration; to feeling along with the other. And this, in turn, leads to positive action for change. By confirming each other in a natural give and take, they are able to build new pathways and, in some limited but authentic ways, they are able to put those transformations into practice.

The importance of culture-drama is evident in six ways:

- It is a method for discovery: discovery of one’s own culture and that of the other.
- Through “action insight” and reverse role-playing, it builds a new foundation of trust and confidence in the other group and in one’s own group.
- It opens possibilities for learning about and “trying out” new pathways in a safe environment.
- It builds empathy, compassion and care for the other.

- It offers a hope-filled vision of a new cultural integration.
- It offers a vehicle to carry the process along enabling them to build their new “peace culture” together.

Culture-drama works in the space between worldviews. It presumes and honors the fact that each group has its own very different cultural pathways and biases, and it sets itself to uncovering and addressing the unspoken presuppositions buried deep within these. But besides acting as a bridge between socially constructed worlds, culture-drama acts as a temporary structure or a scaffold for building the new structures that were envisioned in the workshop. In this way it speeds up and intensifies the peacebuilding process.

Moving toward a “Peace Culture”

The Nsawam workshop developed slowly. As the participants began to experience its integrating effects, the enthusiasm of the group increased. One participant confessed: “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.” Integration at the emotional level was particularly important as another participant acknowledged: “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 felt that dramatizing reversed roles helped her to experience the issues which made them real. She said, “We could actually feel the sentiments of the other party. The drama helped us to say and do things we couldn’t have said or done back at home. This has brought us closer together.”

In this essay we have tried to go beyond simple explanations and to offer the reader some sense of the dynamism of culture-drama. We wished to pass on the experience of workshop participants: their discoveries of new worlds and new possibilities, their reflections, decision-making and action toward building a new peace culture together. We believe it is an experience that our world needs.

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About the Author

Jon P. Kirby SVD
E-mail: zanyeya@gmail.com

Professor Kirby is a Catholic priest, social anthropologist, missionary, scholar, author and the former Finian Kirwen Chair of Mission and Cross-Cultural Studies at Washington Theological Union. He served as a missionary in Ghana for 36 years where he worked in primary evangelization, human development and peacebuilding, among four different ethnic groups whose languages and cultures he learned well. He founded and directed the Tamale Institute of Cross-Cultural Studies www.ticcs.org, a research and teaching institute in northern Ghana, which assists missionaries and other "culture-crossers" to learn languages and cultures, and to take an insider's perspective for doing culturally appropriate ministry and rural development. Since 1989 he has been using "culture-drama" as a vehicle for peacebuilding where ever cultures come into conflict.

¹ At Tamale Institute of Cross-Cultural Studies where the author was director from 1983-2008.

² The author was resident in Ghana for 36 years and speaks four Ghanaian languages.

³ This is the experience of “action insight” or insights of a holistic nature that can only be produced through action.